

DRASH ON BAMIDBAR (not Beha'alotcha)

June 22, 2024

Sometimes, in the world of volunteering for drashes, you select a particular parshah that you want to talk about. And sometimes, you pick a date that works for your calendar and then develop a drash for that particular parshah. And sometimes, as happened to me this year, the parshah you want to talk about and the week that works for your calendar simply do not coincide. So, in the longstanding Fabrangen tradition of breaking traditions, I am taking the liberty today of giving a drash based on Parashat Bamidbar, which we read 2 weeks ago.

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Let me start by reading the very beginning of Bamidbar:

Bamidbar Chapter 1, Verse 1 - 19

On the first day of the second month, in the second year following the exodus from the land of Egypt, G-d spoke to Moses in the wilderness of Sinai in the Tent of Meeting, saying:

Take a census of the whole Israeli company by the clans of its ancestral houses, listing the names, every male, head by head.

You and Aaron shall record them by their groups, from the age of twenty years up, all those in Israel who are able to bear arms.

Associated with you shall be a participant from each tribe, each of the head of his ancestral house. ...

... As G-d had commanded Moses, so he recorded them in the wilderness of Sinai.

While this may not have been the first census in human civilization, it is certainly an early one. Like other ancient censuses, the census proscribed in the Torah is for military purposes. For centuries, there were 2 primary purposes for taking a census – MILITARY and TAXATION.

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Let us skip a couple millennium and I am now going to read to you about the birth of a modern census in the United States in 1787. Thomas Jefferson successfully argued that the decennial census should be part of the Constitution – and that it was so important that it is upfront in the document in Article 1, Section 2.

US Constitution: Article 1, Section 2, Clause 3. Known as the Enumeration Clause of the Census Clause.

Representatives and direct Taxes shall be apportioned among the several States which may be included within this Union, according to their respective Numbers, which shall be determined by adding to the whole Number of free Persons, including those bound to Service for a Term of Years, and excluding Indians not taxed, three-fifths of all other Persons. The actual Enumeration shall be made within three Years after the first Meeting of the Congress of the United States, and within every subsequent Term of ten Years, in such Manner as they by Law direct. The Number of Representatives shall not exceed one for every thirty Thousand, but each State shall have at Least one Representative; and until such enumeration shall be made ... listing of states and # of representatives.

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What is the purpose of the census mandated in the U.S. Constitution? For Jefferson, the census was not a tool of the government for military or tax purposes. Rather, it was intended as a means of empowering people. Being counted meant not that you were eligible to be drafted for military purposes or a subject of the ruler eligible for taxation. This census was designed to count people to ensure representation in their government.

Today, in addition to determining political apportionment and representation, the is used for several other purposes:

- (1) The distribution of government resources. The most recent census shaped the distribution of more than \$2.1 TRILLION in Federal fund to states
- (2) For drawing political boundaries – both national and local, including school districts, water districts, and voting precincts.
- (3) Providing the foundation for decision-making at all levels of government from determining service delivery needs to public safety decisions to enforcement of civil rights laws. and
- (4) For helping us understand who we are as a nation.

As anyone who has followed some of the controversies about recent censuses, particularly the 2020 census that was conducted during the covid pandemic, you are well aware of many of the issues raised in developing, conducting, and analyzing a census.

- What questions are asked?
- How are they asked?
- In what language are they asked? I recently learned that the recent census was prepared in 50 different languages.
- Who gets counted?

- Who doesn't get counted?
- What are the implications of not getting counted? For example, it is estimated that because of the undercount in Texas in 2020, the state gained 2 Congressional seats instead of 3, and likely lost over \$19 billion in federal funding.

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These are all important questions – and well worth discussing – but I am going to pivot now to and talk about a census that is more local and more personal – the Greater Washington Jewish Community Demographic Study.

Which brings me to the explanation as to why I wanted to talk about Bamidbar. In 2006, I gave the drash on Bamidbar and talked about the history of the Jewish community in the DMV and the results of the Jewish Community Study conducted in 2003. I want to use today's drash to update the information based on a survey completed in 2017. While I realize that this data is now 7 years old, it is the most recent data available – and reflects a lot of changes in the DMV in the 14 years between 2003 and 2017.

The 2017 study was conducted by the Cohen Center for Modern Jewish Studies and the Steinhardt Social Research Institute of Brandeis University in collaboration with the Jewish Federation of Greater Washington. Interviews with over 6,600 Jewish households residing in the DMV form the basis of the report. The study was **“developed to provide communal leaders, planners, and members with actionable information ... to be used to enhance the quality of life in the community and increase Jewish engagement.”**

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I would like to share some of the key findings of the report and compare them to the 2003 study. And, if you will indulge me, I would like to try to do this in a way that engages the community this morning – both those in person and those on Zoom. Here's how ...

... As a way of presenting some of the key data, I will ask 9 questions of the community and provide 2 responses. If you agree with the first answer, please either stand or raise your hand. I encourage those on Zoom to turn on your video and stand so that we in the room can see your response. If you agree with the second answer, stay seated and do not raise your hand.

To start, I encourage you to accept the data at face value – and refrain from asking about the survey methodology, definitions of Jewish, etc. Got it?

Let's start.

#1 In 2017, what was the approximate number of Jewish community members in the DMV?

About 200,000 Please stand or raise your hand

About 300,000 Stay seated with no hand raised

In 2017, there were about 295,000 Jews and 155,000 Jewish households. This reflects growth of 37% since the 2003 study when there were about 217,000 Jews and 110,000 Jewish households.

#2 In terms of geographic distribution, where do the most Jews live?

Maryland Please stand or raise your hand

Virginia Stay seated with no hand raised

In 2017, 41% of the Jews in the DMV lived in Virginia, 39% in Maryland, and 19% in the District. This is a significant shift from 2003, when Maryland had the highest percentage of Jews. In 2003, 56% of the Jews in the DMV lived in Maryland, 30% in Virginia, and 14% in DC. This is a significant shift s

#3 Are Jews in the DMV younger or older that the national Jewish population?

Younger Please stand or raise your hand

Older Stay seated with no hand raised

The median age of DMV Jewish adults is 45, which is younger than the national median age of 50. Compared to the national average, the Washington-area Jewish community has proportionally more adults ages 30-39 and few who are ages 40-64.

#4 In terms of diversity, what percentage of Jewish adults identify as LGBTQ and what percentage as a person of color?

Less than 5% Stand or raise your hand

More than 5% Stay seated with no hand raised

According to the survey, 7% of Jewish adults identify as LGBTQ. 7% of Jewish adults identify as a person of color or Hispanic/Latino. I do not have comparable data for 2003.

#5 What percentage of DMV Jews identify as Democrats?

- Less than 75% Stand or raise your hand
- More than 75% Stay seated with no hand raised

72% of DMV Jews identify as Democrats, 6% as Republicans, 23% as Independents or other. Nationally, 54% of Jewish adults identify as Democrats, 14% as Republican, and 32% as independent or other party affiliation. In 2003, about the same percentage (69%) identified as Democrat in the DMV, while the national average was 61%.

#6 Are DMV Jews more or less likely to identify with a specific denomination?

- More likely Stand or raise your hand
- Less likely Stay seated with no hand raised

39% of Metro DC Jews indicate that they have no denomination, compared to 30% of all US Jews.

#7 What percentage of the Metro area Jewish community belongs to a synagogue or another Jewish worship community of some type?

- More than 50% Stand or raise your hand
- Less than 50% Stay seated with no hand raised

26% of Jewish households – 31% of Jewish adults -- belong to a synagogue or another Jewish worship community – lower than the national figure of 39%. Of this total, 18% are dues-paying members of local “brick-and-mortar” synagogues and 8% belong to independent minyanim, Chabad, non-local congregations, or consider themselves members of brick-and-mortar synagogues but do not pay dues.

#8 **How many DMV Jews have been to Israel?**

More than 50% Stand or raise your hand

Less than 50% Stay seated with no hand raised

The answer to this question is surprising, at least to me. *About 2/3 of DMV Jews (68%) have been to Israel. Of the 68%,*

30% have been to Israel once

31% have been to Israel more than once

7% have lived there at some point

4% are Israeli

This is significantly higher than the national figure of 43% (based on 2013 data).

#9 Last question – **What percentage of Jewish adults made a charitable contribution in the last year?**

More than 50% Stand or raise your hand

Less than 50% Stay seated with your hand down

A whopping 87% of Jewish adults made a charitable contribution in the past year. About 3/5ths donated to at least one Jewish organization. I do not have comparable data for 2003.

A few other interesting findings:

- Overall, 85% of children in Jewish households are being raised Jewish in some way. Among children with intermarried parents, 61% are being raised exclusively Jewish – 19% being raised Jewish by religion and 42% being raised culturally Jewish
- 40% of Jewish children in grades K-12 are enrolled in Jewish part-time school or Jewish day school.
- Economic security may be a concern for Jewish households. 13% of Jewish households do not have enough savings to cover three months of expenses. I want to note that nationally, this figure is generally close to 50%. In the financial category, 5% of households reported that at some point in the prior year they were unable to participate in Jewish life because of financial constraints.
- An estimated 18% of Jewish households include someone with a health limitation – impairment, disability, chronic physical problem, or mental health issue.

So, while all these statistics may be interesting, where does this leave us? What does it mean?

Earlier, I mentioned that one of the purposes of a census is to help us understand who we are as a community – and how we relate to and connect with the broader community both as individuals and as Fabrangen. I was thinking about this issue earlier this week at a meeting of the Fabrangen Cemetery Committee. As you know, we have purchased plots at the Garden of Remembrance cemetery – Fabrangen’s first “real estate holdings.” We now have 66 members who have purchased plots. I learned this week that Garden of Remembrance now has 31 member Congregations, of which we are one. This made me feel proud of Fabrangen that we are a partner in this community endeavor.

I conclude with the following questions:

1. What did you learn today that was the most surprising to you about the Metro area Jewish community?
2. Since many/most of us did not grow up in the DMV, when (if ever) and how did you begin to feel connected to the Metro DC Jewish community as an individual? What underlies your connection? How has this changed over time?
3. As a member of Fabrangen, how do you feel the connection of our community to the broader Jewish community?