

BEHIND THE NUMBERS

by Rabbi Berel Wein

In 1950, according to the census of the Jewish Federations in North America at that time, the Jewish population of North America was approximately six million people. That meant that there were six million people in North America who identified themselves as Jews. According to the natural increase in population as exhibited in the general population in North America there should now be at least fifteen million people in North America who identify themselves as Jews. In stark reality, however, there are barely five million people in North America who do so. That means that there are ten million people who have disappeared as potential Jews in the last half-century, and their absence is out of personal choice and not external enmity. That statistic is certainly one of the saddest ones for Jews in this doleful century of ours that is now coming to a close. Sixty years ago, there were nineteen million Jews in the world. Today, there are approximately thirteen million Jews in the world. A half-century after the Holocaust, we have not made good the numbers that the Germans and their cohorts killed. This ugly and sad fact only intensifies the tragedy of the Holocaust in the current Jewish world.

In the three countings of the Jewish people in the desert, one of which is the main theme of the Torah reading of Bamidbar, there is also no noticeable increase anywhere or any time in the numbers of the Jewish people during their forty-year stay in the desert of Sinai. For the missing ten million American Jews there are many reasons that can be marshaled to explain the disaster. Assimilation, an astronomical rate of intermarriage, late marriages, feminist careerism, zero population growth and in fact minus population growth in the Jewish community, and the ravages of modern American society, all can be cited as reasons for the shrinkage of the North American Jewish community. But what are the reasons for the static population of the Jewish people in the Sinai desert? None of the reasons cited above as applying to North America were valid as regarding the generation of the Exodus from Egypt.

The Torah itself has an attitude towards Jewish numbers and population. The Jews were told explicitly by G-d: "I have not chosen you because of your great numbers; rather, you are to be the smallest of all nations." There seems to be some sort of Divine brake upon Jewish population explosion after the Exodus from Egypt. We are commanded to be numerous, to enlarge the Jewish people and its spiritual influence in the world. Nevertheless, we are to be aware that our numbers will somehow always be limited and that we will never achieve great numbers relative to other great populations in the world. Pogrom and forced conversions have decreased our numbers over the centuries, and we have been decimated by assimilation and intermarriage and by voluntary spiritual

surrender, and by terrible living conditions of poverty, poor sanitation and the pressures of being a persecuted minority. Thus, in my opinion, the miracle of the fact that there are still millions of Jews in the world - proud Jews, Jews by choice and faith - is a far more important point of attention than the sad reality of the fact that there are so few Jews, relatively speaking, in the world.

The fact that there are so few Jews in the world places a great responsibility on the Jews that do exist. The world is preserved by the few, the righteous, the moral and the kind. Our father, Avraham, and our mother, Sarah, built the civilized world by education and example, even though they were a lonely couple in their world. The few are the ones that lead and guide the many, for good or for better. The realization of the importance of the individual is one of the cardinal principles of Jewish belief and behavior. In fact, the source of much of Jewish self-pride and positive stubbornness over the ages was the realization that I belong to the few and therefore I am special and unique - and the basic attitude of Judaism and its reason for its survival is that of being special and unique. So, the numbers of Bamidbar teach us an ancillary lesson, which is as important as the direct count and numbers of Israel itself.

Shabat Shalom.

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