

PARSHAT BEMIDBAR
MAY 26, 2012
RABBI VERNON KURTZ

This Shabbat we begin the fourth book of the Bible commonly known as the Book of Numbers. In Rabbinic Hebrew it is known as Sefer HaPekudim, the Book of the Census. This is so because the first part of the portion this morning, as well as the first part of the portion for next week, Naso, deals with the taking of a census of the Israelite people by the clans of their ancestral houses for the purpose of enumerating those who are able to bear arms and the Levitical families to know how many individuals are able to assist in the assembling and portage of the Tabernacle.

A number of times during the desert experience and throughout the age of the Kings of Israel a census is taken. For the Ramban, Nachmanides, it is rather a puzzle that Moses and Aaron are asked to take a census at this point. He writes, "I have not understood the reason for this commandment, namely why the Holy One, blessed be He, commanded this census. For while there was a need for them to establish their relationship to the individual tribes because of their division according to four standards, I cannot understand why God commanded that they find out the number of men in each tribe." He then gives his own rationale for the census: "Perhaps it was in order to proclaim God's mercy over them, for it was with 70 persons that their fathers went down into Egypt and now they were as the sand of the sea, so many men above the age of 20, not to even mention the women and children." He continues, "After every epidemic and plague he counts them again in order that they should know that, (quoting a verse from Job), 'He did increase the nations, He exalts nations and then destroys them; He expands nations then leads them away.'"

Rabbi Harold Kushner in our Etz Hayim Humash suggests that this points to the enduring lesson of Jewish history: "We have not succumbed in spite of devastating losses and persecution." Whatever the trials, tribulations and travails of our people have been, whether in the desert or throughout the Middle Ages or even the Holocaust, we have continued to survive and rebuild our numbers over the long span of history.

I have recently been privileged to have been appointed to the Board of JPPI, the Jewish People Policy Institute. This is an independent professional policy think tank based in Jerusalem. The mission of the Institute is to ensure the thriving of the Jewish people and the Jewish civilization by engaging in professional strategic thinking and planning on issues of primary concern to world Jewry. The current co-chairs of the Institute are Ambassador Dennis Ross and Ambassador Stuart Eizenstat. When I am in Israel, towards the end of June, I will attend my first Board meeting. I look forward to being part of this think tank which places special emphasis on identifying critical options and analyzing their potential impact on the Jewish future in Israel and throughout the world.

As a Board member I received a new book authored by Stuart Eizenstat entitled *21st Century Global Forces: Their Impacts on the Jewish People, Israel and the United*

States. Ambassador Eizenstat analyzes the global processes, trends and shifts that are shaping our world and will undoubtedly have an impact upon the State of Israel and the Jewish people as we move further into the 21st century. He concentrates on globalization, the effects of the Arab spring, the rise of Islamic extremism, the challenge of the delegitimization of the State of Israel and the future of the U.S.-Israel relationship. Eizenstat has held a variety of roles in government and is conversant with Jewish tradition as well. He has served as Deputy Secretary of the Treasury where he was the special envoy for property claims in Central/Eastern Europe; Undersecretary of State for Economic Business and Cultural Affairs and as U.S. Representative to the European Union. I know him as well as a committed Conservative Jew.

In his book Ambassador Eizenstat analyzes the trends that currently buffet both the State of Israel and Diaspora Jewry. To his mind: “Numbers matter.” On the one hand, it is the best of times and, on the other hand, it is the worst of times.

“For the Jews of the world, the 20th century was calamitous. We recognize that one-third of our people, 6 million Jews, were killed in the Nazi onslaught.” Yet, he writes, “From this catastrophe a modern miracle has occurred. The center of gravity of the Jewish world shifted from Europe to the United States in the post WWII years, and, now almost unrecognized, has shifted again to the State of Israel, where since 2006 more Jews live than in any other country.” Ambassador Eizenstat informs us that in the United States Jewish success is nothing short of remarkable: “Quotas restricting the access of Jews to higher education and professional careers have long been abandoned, and Jews have taken full advantage of the elimination of discrimination. Today, a remarkable 85% of American Jewish youngsters attend college, twice the national average. Jews are disproportionately represented at the heights of academia, business, finance and politics. Forty-four members of the 111th U.S. Congress that concluded in 2010 were Jewish. In 2004, Fortune magazine reported that nearly 10% of the CEO’s of the leading 100 companies were Jewish.”

He reminds us that while U.S. success is the most substantial, similar success is enjoyed by Jews in most European countries, Canada, Australia and Latin America. While we comprise barely two-tenths of 1% of the world’s population, we represent 54% of the world chess champions, 27% of Nobel physics laureates and 31% of Nobel laureates in medicine. There is hardly a field of endeavor in which Jews are not disproportionately prominent.

According to Eizenstat: “Jews in Israel have achieved something no other people in recorded history have accomplished: the return to an ancient homeland after two millennia of exile through the creation of a sovereign state.” He points out that Israel is a vibrant democracy, has grown at a faster pace than almost every other country that gained independence after WWII, and recently, in 2010, joined the OECD. Eizenstat recognizes that while our numbers are not great, we have achieved far beyond what our numbers should possibly dictate.

Yet, in another part of the book he writes, “There are some threatening possibilities to a bright Jewish future.” He continues, “While the global population is projected to increase from 7 billion people today to more than 10 billion by mid-century, it is difficult to believe that the Jewish people will increase much beyond current numbers. Diaspora Jewry are an ever-smaller percentage of the countries in which they live with the potential for a loss of influence. Numbers matter. In the United States there are around 5 million Jews out of a population of over 300 million, and this tiny percentage, over some 2%, will certainly decline the decades ahead.”

He suggests that this is the same in virtually all Diaspora communities and much of it is the result of assimilation, low birth rates and growing intermarriage rates without non-Jewish spouses converting to Judaism. He also believes that for Israel, there are internal challenges as well. Demographically the Israeli-Jewish birthrates are at healthy levels, but these birthrates are well below the rates for Arab-Israeli citizens. Since the fastest growing segment of the Israeli-Jewish communities is the Ultra-Orthodox Haredi population, simple mathematics shows us that the higher percentage of youngsters entering elementary school this year will be non-Zionist. While Israel must tend to its own demographic issues, Eizenstat believes that the demographic crisis in the Diaspora is a direct consequence of the successful integration of Jewish communities in most countries, affording Jews a sense of security and decreasing their historical sense of alienation. “As a people that thrives an irony,” he writes, “the ultimate irony is that Jews, not external enemies, are threatening Jewish continuity.”

In addition to this, Eizenstat records the concern of Israel and world Jewry of a possible Iranian nuclear bomb, the growing threat of Islamic extremism, and the globalization of the world which allows one YouTube video or one comment on Facebook to set the tone for people around the world and their view of Israel’s policies.

Clearly we are at a critical juncture in Jewish history. What else is new? Simon Rawidowicz, a professor for many years at Brandeis University, wrote an essay entitled *Israel – The Ever Dying People*. This seems to be the lament of Jewish communities throughout history. When one looked at a specific crisis of Jewish life, one wondered how the Jewish people would persevere and continue to exist. Yet, against all odds, we are still here and now, as Eizenstat so movingly states, though we have a number of crises in the offing, “It is clear from a position of strength that Jews both in Israel and the Diaspora confront these daunting global challenges. For the first time in two millennia, Jews are no longer flotsam and jetsam, tossed about by great waves they cannot control. They are no longer alone and subject to the whim and caprice of despotic rulers and violent anti-Jewish populations, well into the 20th century.”

He believes that it is essential for Israel to establish peace with its Palestinian neighbors. It is critical that the world wake-up to the great dangers of Islamic fundamentalism and the Iranian nuclear threat. He implores the Jewish population, both in Israel and in the Diaspora, to be concerned about its demographics and its declining sense of Jewish identity. In his conclusion he states that there are three things which have enabled the Jewish people not only to survive but to thrive during the millennia of

wandering: One was a deep, abiding attachment to the Holy Land. The second was an attachment to the Torah of Moses. And third, is an almost mystical sense of peoplehood, a kindred spirit, which attaches Jews to each other in whatever continent or circumstance they meet. Eizenstat's book is a blueprint for the 21st century and which should be read by all those who are seriously concerned about the Jewish future.

Numbers matter. So we are told in the book that we begin this morning and so we are told in a book published in 2012. Like the Ramban in the Middle Ages, Stuart Eizenstat is ultimately an optimist. We have survived throughout the millennia and will continue to meet the challenges that present themselves to the Jewish people in our present day as well. We must be part of the solution and not part of the problem. We must continue to work for the safety, security and peaceful existence of the State of Israel. We must embellish our Jewish knowledge and our Jewish identity and we must work on behalf of the Jewish people wherever they may reside. If we take those challenges to heart then indeed we will have a bright future.