

Shabbat Shalom!

I want to start by saying how appreciative I am to give this drash today. I consider the knowledgeable and talented members of Netivot Shalom as my teachers. This includes our youth, who demonstrate that the people of Israel live on with every b'nai mitzvah, friendship cultivated, gaga game, and Jewish thought. We have great freedom in this country, but we choose to be here together in community making connections spiritually and intellectually. What better way to celebrate Jewish American Heritage Month. We are in many ways living the Jewish American dream.

Now for the parsha. This week we begin reading the 4th book of the Torah, Bamidbar or Numbers. This book describes events from 40 years of the Israelite wanderings in the desert wilderness, beginning with a census. It ends by listing places the Israelites traveled and delineating Israel's boundaries. As much as I enjoy geography, I'm sticking with the numbers today and will save any interpretation of Israel's borders for another Netivotnik to tackle.

As a civil engineer, I can appreciate numbers, particularly when applied for practical purpose. Counting the Israelites was important to affirm their value, prepare for military action if needed, and organize the camp for the journey to the promised land. The Torah uses the phrase *naso et rosh* ("lift the head") to describe the counting, suggesting each person was honored, cherished, and acknowledged by G-d, not merely reduced to a statistic.

Okay, so let's get to the numbers.

According to the first chapter of Numbers, all the Israelite men aged 20-years and over and able to bear arms came to 603,550. That would mean the total # of Israelites was ~2 to 3 million. For context, at this time, 1311 BCE, the global population was ~30 to 50 million. Meaning the Israelites were ~5 to 10 % of all humans on earth. Not a bad slice of the pie. Apologies for reducing to a statistic.

Today Jews number ~ 16 million, ~7-1/2 million in Israel, ~6-1/2 million in the US, and ~2 million everywhere else. That represents only 0.2% of the ~8 billion global population. Clearly Jews are failing with this whole world domination thing if we look at the numbers. How is it that over 3300 years the world's population has increased ~200 fold but the people of Israel have only increased by ~5 times? To explore this question, provided is an infographic showing a timeline of Jewish History and Heritage. As a student of Edward Tufte, let's take a minute to ourselves to absorb some of the information...

What do people notice about the infographic?

Here are some highlights I notice as they relate to numbers of the people of Israel:

- First off, there were 70 members of Jacob's household, including his 12 sons, who settled in Egypt in ~1523 BCE.
- There was growth in Egypt under the pharaohs. The Israelite population was ~2-3M when census occurred in 1311 BCE.
- There was growth with the kingdom of David and Solomon, leading to the 1st temple being built. Population was ~5M in 957 BCE.
- Then there was a drop in population with the division of the Kingdom of Israel and Judah, then exile by Assyria, and destruction of the 1st temple by Babylon. The population went all the way down to ~300k by 500 BCE.
- After the rise of the Maccabees in 164 BCE, the population grew in Israel and Middle East up to 4.4M.
- But then drops with destruction and dispersal by Rome in 70 CE.
- There was struggle in the diaspora over the next 1700 years with multitudes of setbacks, expulsions, and massacres. Population stagnated around 1M during this time.
- Then there was growth in Europe with the 2nd agricultural revolution, industrial revolution, and major Jewish enlightenments and movements. But not without pogroms and persecution of the 1800s. Can't forget about the pogroms!
- Which led to mass migration to America between 1840 and 1920. My family came to the new world during this time, like many of yours may have. "There were no cats in America and the streets were made of cheese", until the US isolated and closed its borders.
- The Jewish population was up to 16.6M at its height in 1939.
- Then WWII and the Holocaust decimated Europe and world Jewry. The Jewish population dropped to ~11M in 6 short years.

Which brings us to 1948 and the state of Israel's founding. There are many reasons for why Israel needs to exist in this world. One of which is rooted in our numbers and history. It is very important that our kids know the numbers and our history. Adults should be reminded too. Knowing your history can be a superpower. So based on the history, in the context of our numbers, what is the case for Israel to exist?

Historically, about 90% of the Jewish Israeli population are descended from refugees from around the world who had no other place to go following pogroms, the Holocaust, forced exile, and persecution. No country would accept these desperate people, our people, even the US at times. After WWII the world understood this and the State of Israel was born, out of desperate necessity of

refugees, not colonial conquest. After 2,000-years, Jews returned to their historic homeland, not only to live as Jews, but simply to escape and live at all.

Despite Israel being a democracy that exists with a diverse population of 10 million (including over 20% non-Jews), the founding and growth of Israel had real consequences to non-Jewish communities established in Palestine. Sharing the land with a foreign people understandably led to a sense of invasion, and even reality of displacement. The wars and aftermath are tragic to many arab muslims on so many levels. But two truths can exist at the same time. This does not change the fact that: Israel's existence is fundamental to the safety of the Jewish people, and many others who call it home. This has been demonstrated by 3500 years of history and lackluster numbers without a Jewish homeland. It was demonstrated by October 7th and its antisemitic aftermath. Israel has a right to defend itself when attacked, just as any other nation.

Healthy criticism of a particular government is one thing, but calling for the end of a sovereign state and its people is another, and must not be tolerated. This is precisely what many antizionists are trying to do. If antizionists truly want to diminish the power and need for Israel, then they should make more places in this world welcoming to Jews, not less.

I do not pretend to be a well trained educator, but I see no need to apologize for our connection to Israel. Netivot's previous rabbi, Menachem Creditor, recently wrote in a Times of Israel article that, "If we normalize views that undermine Israel, even in the minority, they risk rupturing the very foundations of Jewish existence." These are strong words, and we can surely debate them. But it is no accident that one of the values of Netivot Shalom is "Belonging" – we nurture connectedness with each other, with the broader community, and with Israel. We nurture connection with Israel. This is not a typo on our website.

So kids and fellow Netivotniks. Fact is that the Jewish people, the people of Israel, have not grown in number nearly to the level of the rest of the world, but it is a miracle we are here at all. Numbers and facts are not everything, storytelling apparently is more important right now, but they do still matter. The history and numbers demonstrate the need for Israel. Particularly as antizionism heats up, knowing your history is a superpower. Just as Arab, Muslim, and Palestine are not bad words, Jew, Zionist, and Israel are not bad words either. Our kids and our community should not be getting the message that it is. As our numbers finally surpass those of 90 years ago, let's make sure this message is clear.

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