

“Censuses and Statistics Are Important but the Most Vital Finding Is Self”
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Last week the Philadelphia Jewish Population study was released. In some instances the findings were remarkable, and although there is still much to be learned there is also a tremendous amount of analysis to be done. There are immediate markers that stand out. While I recognize that everyone who reads the study will be drawn to different components, there are a number of disturbing facts that came out. One in particular caught my attention. When asked about the importance of being part of the Jewish community, only 46% of those who married within our faith responded that it was very important to them. That means that a disheartening 54%, or more than half of the respondents, felt that being part of the Jewish community was not one of their greatest priorities. When we go to the far end of the spectrum, 7% of those who married Jews said it is not important for them to be part of the Jewish community. If we factor in those who have inter-married, the rate of those who want to be part of the Jewish community drops even further.

I guess I already knew this because all the markers of commitment to the Jewish community are dropping. Affiliation in synagogues is down. Donations to Jewish causes are down. Support for Israel is down, and I am overwhelmingly sad. I am sad because we just don't care. As William Osler, the Canadian Physician of the previous century, once said, “By far the most dangerous foe we have to fight is apathy – indifference from whatever cause, not from a lack of knowledge, but from carelessness, from absorption in other pursuits, from a contempt bred of self-satisfaction.”

Fellow Jews, my heart is heavy because we just don't care. We must do something to wake ourselves up. We must continue to value being a part of this great entity we call our *kehillah kedosha*, our holy community. However, we are stubborn people and not easily convinced of anything. In fact, in this section of the Torah, it is the main reason God punishes the Egyptians with “Ten Plagues.” It is not to convince Egypt of the power of our God, *melech malchei ha'mlachim*, the King of Kings. It is to teach the Jews to become part of something bigger than themselves. This nationhood requires belief and it requires their opting *in*. With each plague, the Israelites are shown that they are different and that they are unaffected by the difficulties that face the Egyptians. There is a benefit to being Jewish. I say the same thing to you today. There are benefits to being Jewish. There are benefits to associating with our people. There are benefits to opting in. There are benefits that reach far beyond the modern “fee for service” mentality.

As it is written, every time Pharaoh wants to concede and let us go, God hardens Pharaoh's heart. I reject the idea that God wants to punish the Egyptians further. God hardens Pharaoh's heart because *we* don't yet believe. We thought the way of life in Egypt was fine. We didn't want to rock the boat. Rather, we can almost hear the people calling out to Moses, “Stop drawing so much attention to us. Stop with the plagues. We will make do.” Through Moses God responds, “You are a people, you are my nation and you need to be a part of it.” Just as it was in those days, today we need every one of you.

This morning's reading poses a similar challenge and the lesson we learn is invaluable. In fact, the same point is made in one of our commentaries. Let me show you. At the beginning of this week's reading, we have watched the Egyptians endure seven of the ten plagues. In a moment of audacity, Moses and Aaron once again approach Pharaoh and ask him to permit the Israelites to leave in order to worship our God.

In a show of weakness Pharaoh seems to consider the proposal. Please look with me on page 375; verses 8 and 9.

All seems lost to Egypt and the battle is one they can't seem to win. The inevitable seems to be upon them and Moses and Aaron return once again to Pharaoh requesting a leave of absence. Not a full blown exodus, not a complete liberation and not absolute freedom, but a prayer leave. Pharaoh is just about to say yes when he asks for a few details. He doesn't ask, "How many people?" He asks, *Mi Va'Mi holchim?* "Who is going with you?" For someone who is overly concerned with numbers and being overtaken by a people who are quickly outpacing the indigenous population, this is remarkable. This same Pharaoh said, "These people are getting too numerous for us," so he instructs his people to kill all of their male children. This Pharaoh was very paranoid that the Israelites would join with the other enemies of Egypt and rise up against him. So you see, it is bizarre that he now asks, "Who is going?" and not "How many?" It's as if he is asking, "Who's really important to you?"

It's Moses' response that is magnificent. Without thinking and without missing a beat Moses turns to Pharaoh and says to everyone, *B'nareinu U'v'zkeineinu nelech*. "Young and old are going. Sons and daughters are going." The lesson is loud and clear, **everyone** is important. Moses and Aaron agree that there is no real worship and there is no real celebration when someone is missing. *B'nareinu U'vizkeineinu*. We need everyone, and when one group is missing we are diminished. When we forget one segment of the population, we are less. Moses, like God, is speaking more to the Jewish people than he is speaking to Pharaoh. Moses is telling Pharaoh that we need every one, while simultaneously he is pleading with the Jewish people, "We need every one. We need young and old, we need men and women, we need the weak and the strong. That is what it means to be a full people." Ramban points out, *Mitzvah al kulanu lachag l'fanav*, "There is no celebration without everyone. When one is missing we are all diminished. "

Just like the population study released last week evaluating the size and demographics of the Jewish community of Philadelphia, *B'zkaneinu U'vizkeineinu*, the young and old stand out. Dramatically, our younger age group is shrinking and our elderly population is growing. In fact, when compared nationally to other major centers of Jewish communities, we are older and we are not replenishing proportionally. Staggeringly, this points to a future that offers more challenges than solutions. We should listen very carefully to the words of Moshe who reminds us, *B'narienu U'vizkeineinu*, "With our young and our old we go." Thousands of years ago, Moses instructed us to look to the old and the young as markers for a community. Are we taking care of the elderly, are we including the most senior of our population when we are setting our priorities or have we become like the rest of the nation in its desire to simply forget them. We need to act specifically – establishing more long term Jewish living facilities. We need to add to the communal organizations' infrastructure in order to equip them for the growing need of social and medical services of a geriatric population. What are we doing to attract younger families?

We know the higher the income and the higher the education, the fewer children people will have. This study certainly bears that out. Our income is incredibly high when compared nationally, and stunningly, 41% of our people achieve graduate degrees. So it makes sense that our birth rate is shrinking. We must reverse that trend. As much as I hate to say it because it sounds cliché, it takes a village to raise a child. In this scenario, it takes a community to make the case for population growth. It takes a society to support those families doing just that. Let me offer one example.

The study showed that 54% of the people living in the Philadelphia area have lived here for more than 40 years. So, if we are going to increase the number of families with young children, we are going to have to attract them to our area from somewhere else. It's just impossible to convince people to have more children. I happen to be one of those people. We have four children below the age of 18, roughly four times the average rate. However, in order to survive in this area we need help, and because I am the Rabbi I get it. You have babysat for our children, you have invited us to your *sedarim*, to homes for Shabbat dinners, you have invited my kids for play-dates. You have watched my kids when we have gone away. So, I thank you – but it is not enough. We need to do that for every family in this community, whether they are fourth generation Philadelphians or not.

I have read the study and I have already engaged many in discussions about its implications. The Jewish community has grown from 206,000 in 1996 to 214,000 - 227,000 today. Additionally, I know there are many who have forgotten us – but we cannot forget them. Today I say to you what Moses said to the Jewish people of ancient Egypt, “We are all important.” I don't care if you decide to opt out, we will follow you and we will look for you. We will invite you to our Shabbat tables, we will send you mailings asking you to come to class, we will remind you that worship is necessary to your spiritual life and we will wait for you. When we arrive at Passover this year, we will open the door for Elijah and we hope you will walk through. Without you our lives are less.