

Parashat Bamidbar
June 5, 2005
Rabbi Lisa Edwards
D'var Torah before book reading

Book reading on "Secret Service" by Zsa Zsa Gershick Co-sponsored by Progressive Jewish Alliance (PJA) & BCC Special guest, Aaron Belkin, Director of the Center for the Study of Sexual Minorities in the Military UC Santa Barbara

Tracy's and my friend, Tess Catalano, may her memory be for a blessing, who wrote that song "Soldier Girls" that we just heard, had a lot of great analyses of things. Back in the mid 80s, when couples were just beginning to whisper about marriage, Tess didn't hesitate to offer her opinion. "Why would you want to get married?" she would ask, "marriage is just straight people registering with the state." To Tess, ever a revolutionary, registering with the state was just counterintuitive. Why make it any easier for them to find you when they come looking? Not that she was closeted or anything - far from it - but really, why invite them in when you didn't have to? Who needs it?

I was reminded of that of course when I got out Tess's song for us to hear today. But also because - with the narrow defeat of the marriage equality bill in the State Assembly last week, and with the release of Zsa Zsa's book - I've been thinking lately about what it means to "register," to be counted.

Yesterday in synagogues around the world Jews were studying the first portion of the book of Bemidbar, known in English as the Book of Numbers. They called it Numbers because it begins with counting, taking a census of the Israelites in their 13th month since leaving Egypt, in the wilderness of Sinai (bemidbar si-nai).

But while it at first appears the whole community of Israel is to be counted - kol adat b'nai yisrael - the later details reveal that this special census will really count only the men from the age of 20 up, and even more specifically - every man going out to the army in Israel: you shall count them by name and by noggin in their army units [1:2,3,17-20], as instructed by God through Moses. I'm personally not too keen on the military, or the idea of sending people off to war. But even as far back as Torah (farther back than that really) it was pretty clear who counted - who counted were the ones who literally did the counting, as well as the ones able to bear arms. As the Israelites prepared to cross the wilderness to the Promised Land, the ones who counted were the ones who could clear the way - who could fight.

The elite status of the soldier was established long ago, and it remains, despite the fact that few of us - Jews in particular - have much interest in soldiering for a job or a living or a career. But whether we want in or not, the fact that we are being kept out, or being forced to be closeted if we insist on being in, demands a heavy price. There is no question that women in Torah are second class citizens - anyone who couldn't be a witness or a

soldier certainly was deemed to be of a lesser status.

The total number counted in that census in the wilderness was an unbelievable 603,550, not counting women or children, the feeble or the sick or the elderly. A midrash says the ones counted were like God's precious gems, every once in a while God likes to take them out and count them, separate them from other, less valued possessions (Numbers Rabbah 4:2). Any question who counts? Who are the valued jewels?

But I take some hope in that very first instruction given for counting in the Book of Numbers. *S'u et rosh*, reads the Hebrew, literally "lift up the head" kol adat b'nai yisrael of all the community of Israel. Lifting up the head is different from just counting heads, or listing names. For one, to lift someone's head takes physical contact, and doing so invites eye contact as well. The counter and the counted must pause at least for moment, touch hand to chin, look into each other's eyes. Jewish tradition says that if you look into another person's eyes you can see there the divine spark that lies within.

As it happens, the Torah portion we begin today - Naso - contains the most famous prayer in Torah - the priestly benediction, the *Yiverechecha* blessing that Aaron and his sons are to recite to all the people Israel. *Yiverechecha v'yismerecha*, it begins, "may God bless you and protect you," and it ends *Yisa Adonai panav ailecha v'yasem lecha shalom* - May God's face lift toward you and bring peace upon you.

There it is again - lifting up one's face, this time God's own face. Can there be any doubt that looking into the eyes of another makes them less of an "other." And that's precisely what "Secret Service," and the Center for the Study of Sexual Minorities in the Military, and Mark Leno's Marriage Equality bill and synagogues like BCC and organizations like the Progressive Jewish Alliance are about: their purpose is to invite individuals to lift up their heads and look into each other's eyes, thus enabling us to acknowledge not only the humanness of each other, but also the presence of God in each other. And when all human beings can do that, then *v'yasem lecha shalom*, then God will bring peace to us, so that we might lay down our weapons, reveal our secrets, and serve - not fight - one another and God.

Thank you, Zsa Zsa and Aaron for your tireless efforts to help humanize the issues, and for inviting us to let our divine sparks shine forth.