Shabbat Shalom!

The Israelite community, by the end of the Book of Exodus, has magnificently escaped the clutches of Pharaoh in Egypt and are free, yet living in rough and wild country. Still, they have managed to create a beautiful tabernacle, a mishkan, to not only house their sacred tablets but to commune with their one god as they endeavor to fight their way to the promised land. The third book of Torah, Leviticus, is mainly laws, so the narrative, the story of the Israelite’s wanderings renews in this, the fourth book, known in Hebrew as B’Midbar, or “in the wilderness.”

B’Midbar is also the name of the first parasha in the book and the one we are discussing today. The portion begins after thirteen long months in the desert have passed and the Israelites, instructed by God through Moses, are moved to take an important census. All men over the age of twenty and able to battle, were counted through their ancestral houses. The long lists of names and reckoning give rise to the English name for our book, “Numbers.”

Many count the warriors enrolled as 603,550. Although this figure is often disputed, there is no doubt that the Israelites had a fighting force commensurate with those of the other groups that, according to essayist Hallo, “formed part of a general pattern of massive migrations in the 13th century B.C.E. and swept the whole known world, ushering in the Iron Age.”

The arrangement of the tribes, with their sukkot, flags, and standards, around the mishkan is detailed in epic fashion in the parashah. It is easy to imagine the bustling, vivid scene; think of it the next time we sing: “Mah tovu, ohalec Yaakov, mishk’notecha, Yisrael!” “How fair are your tents, O Jacob, your dwellings, O Israel.”

The tribe tasked with the full care of the Tabernacle is the Levites. They, too, have a census in the book of Numbers. It records boys aged one-month and up. The custom of pidyon ha-ben meant that the firstborn son, of man or beast, was pledged to service of God. Instead of consecration of firstborn to service, Torah commentator Gunther Plaut suggests that “the idea of priestly substitution developed, and a system of redemption began.”

It is obvious that none of the five of us becoming B’not Mitzvah, daughters of the commandments, today would have been included in the Biblical census-taking because of our gender. Rabbi Sheldon Lewis in his book The Torah of Reconciliation acknowledges this by saying, “It is true that this census is limited in scope. From a modernist perspective, it falls short. Inclusivity in the count would be enlarged as the tradition unfolded.”

Which brings us to a personal topic, inclusivity. It is why we are here now. The inclusivity that is a platform of our Reform traditions, has enfolded us today, wrapped us as in the tallit we wear. The first recorded b’at mitzvah at a Reform congregation in America occurred in 1931 but the ritual did not catch on right away. By the 1950s, only one third of Reform congregations conducted them. Since the 1960s, as Reform has placed increasing emphasis on
traditional rituals, b’at mitzvah has grown to near universality in our congregations. The first female to become b’at mitzvah at Congregation Beth Israel was Celia Silberberg in 1967.

But to truly examine the topic of inclusivity we must explore certain ideas.

The obverse of inclusivity is exclusivity and, as we all know, there can be pain when excluded from something we desire. One of our B’not Mitzvah remembers feeling disengaged from the Jewish community she grew up in which offered no path to becoming a b’at mitzvah. Even something as simple as being denied recognition of our contributions can also be painful. The following is a poem inspired by our portion and included in the Women’s Torah Commentary.

**Forgotten**

By Lisa Levine

I wondered
On the day of the counting
Why my husband
And his brothers
And their sons
Were numbered among
The stars of heaven
But my daughters and I
Were not even noticed
Doing the washing
Baking the bread
Raising our children
I wondered
Why I
The womb that held them
Was
Forgotten.

Inclusive communities acknowledge injustice of the past and present, so that they can move forward with the benefits of everyone’s strengths.
Another idea worthy of exploration is that inclusivity is not a homeostatic event. By that we mean inclusion does not have a steady temperature, percolating along naturally at a regular pace. It must constantly be pushed for. The entropy of exclusion will often work to reduce or pervert inclusion. An example of this affecting all of us today is the taking of the 2020 census. Many thousands of years after the writing of Parashat B’Midbar, we, the American people, are also deciding who “counts.”

Across the centuries, in many ways, not a lot is different. Yet in many ways, quite a lot is different. Ability to battle is important to the census in B’Midbar but is not an issue in the modern-day census. The 2020 census counts women as well as men. It counts residents of foreign extraction who are citizens of the U.S.

Today’s census appears to be more egalitarian but in the big picture efforts are made all the time to restrict what information is required or efforts are made to require extraneous information which serves no purpose but to count people for other reasons. Reasons that could help to increase discrimination against select minorities. Again, inclusivity is not a homeostatic event; human rights do not have a tendency toward a relatively stable equilibrium. Inclusion won must not be degraded.

We, as a B’not Mitzvah cohort, were fortunate to have a dedicated teacher and leader in Rabbi Levy who insisted that we have an inclusive environment where each person’s talents were recognized and developed. An environment where people were valued because of, not despite, their differences. Thank you to her and for the assistance of our Hebrew tutor Ellen Sable and Cantorial Soloist Sarah Avner.

Although we encompass a wide range of age and experience, varying family structures and religious backgrounds, we have all found our way to a stronger, renewed relationship with Judaism through our community at CBI. We are grateful to Rabbi Folberg for ensuring that our congregation remains true to its stated purpose of being joyful, diverse, and inclusive. And thank you to all our family and friends who have supported us in this journey to becoming a b’at mitzvah.

According to author Rami Shapiro, “We are shaped by those who came before us. As an acorn is formed by the tree that preceded it, yet gives rise to a tree uniquely its own, so we are formed by our ancestors, yet give rise to a Judaism uniquely ours.”

For the five of us, now truly b’not mitzvah, our Judaism teaches that if one person is excluded, we are all excluded and that our diversity is strength. Like the five daughters of Zelophehad written of in Torah, we stand before you today pleading the just cause of inclusivity, sure in the divine knowledge that everyone counts.

Shabbat Shalom!