

Facts and Faces
Parashat Bamidbar
May 27, 2011

Next month... next month as we slip away for summer, as I prepare to return to Jerusalem in July... next month marks the fifth anniversary of the capture of Israeli soldier Gilad Schalit. Five years without a word from family, without a Red Cross representative, five years held hostage by a group whose demands constantly change, and whose ultimate goals are all too clear.

Gilad Schalit. He's only one man, one name among many who have suffered from this conflict. More soldiers have died in reaction to his capture, more people have been injured... but somehow he is the face for us all. He is everyone's story. He is everyone's son.

Last summer on our second night in Israel there was a rally in downtown Jerusalem, crowds converging from all over the country calling on the government to work harder to free Gilad Schalit. His family spoke, musicians played, the streets were full, the tears flowed freely. "*Gilad Odenu Chai; Gilad still lives!*" read the placards.

And in a corner across a street, a smaller group held up a different poster. "*Lo B'chol Machir,*" their signs read. "Not at any price." Don't pay too high a price to bring him home. Don't release those who will kill again, who will strike again, who will lead directly... to more Gilad Schalits.

And how can we know? How measure the reality in front of us against an uncertain tomorrow?

How do we tally any toll, or make sense out of what is going on around us? There are statistics and studies, analyses and impact statements. But somehow it takes putting a face on a story, putting numbers into a narrative... before it hits us the most.

To change the world takes two things, I think. It takes facts and faces, statistics and a story... the so-called rational “reality” of raw data, and a framework of meaning.. even an emotional one... into which to place that data.

I thought of that confluence of conditions this week, as I both watched television, and studied Torah. This week marks a transition, from Leviticus to Numbers, *Vayikra* to *Bamidbar*. This week we leave law and story behind, to step into census data, and tribal population figures; we focus on the facts on the ground, or we seem to... even if the book is not factual, but that is another issue. This is who we are. This is where we stand. You have to know the now, before you can go forward. You have to take stock of where you are, before you know where to go.

But to get us from here, to there, or anywhere... that depends on the story. To move and be moved... that comes... from the faces we hold before us.

Indeed, out of the raw data, out of the list of tribal leaders one name jumps out... literally. One name has a story which has stayed with us. “*L’y’huda... Nachshon ben Amminadav*; from the tribe of Judah.... Nachshon, the son of Amminadab.”

Who was Nachson? We don't learn this from the written Torah, but from the oral tradition, the Midrash, which teaches that... as the Israelites stood before the sea, trembling in fright as the Egyptian soldiers bore down upon them, crying out and not knowing what to do, one man, alone, stood up and then jumped into the water. Feet first, as it were. Nachshon, the son of Amminadab. From the tribe of Judah. For his courage, the waters parted, and the sea split. For his merit, the ruler of all rulers, David and the descendant of David yet to come, we are told, will come from... the tribe of Judah. One face. One story, swimming up out of a dry list. It matters. It's a big deal.

Martin Buber teaches that there are two ways we have of relating to the world, analytical and personal. There is the world of the I-It, and the world of the I-Thou. One is utilitarian, objective, instrumental. The other is essentialist, subjective, relational.

There is room for both, of course. One cannot live always in the realm of the I-Thou. As I have said elsewhere and here before, when you are checking out from a supermarket, and you've already waited behind four other people, you don't care if the clerk is breaking up with her boyfriend or otherwise having a bad day. She is instrumental in your life; you want to get out of the store and you simply want to use her to do so, and, in that context, well, that's okay.

But other times... many other times... everything depends on the story. On the relationship. Sometimes even... whether it should or not.

I've been thinking a lot about facts and faces, reality and relationships, as I have listened to the words, studied the speeches, read the reactions, and watched the expressions on the faces of Barack Obama and Binyamin Netanyahu this past week or so. Here we have both elements before us: endless analysis of what the words of each man might mean... and at least an equal interest in how they get along.

I don't know what it is about these two, but, personally, I am basically nauseous whenever the two of them are in the same place. On policy grounds I thought that President Obama's State Department speech, which I watched live, seemed fairly pro-Israel on the surface, but that the larger context seemed to be Israel pressed to make concessions at the outset of negotiations, without any sense of sufficient demands made on anyone else. I don't know that President Obama really gets Israel's insecurities and vulnerabilities, although I am equally unsure if Prime Minister Netanyahu actually wants peace at all.

But at some level my sense of discomfort watching these two figures is actually not about policy. A lot of this *is* personal. I do *not* like the way Prime Minister Netanyahu treats our President, nor did I like how he interacted with President Clinton. To me he seems smug, I think he thinks that he is clever enough to use internal American political currents to sail around Democratic presidents... and he talks down to President Obama in ways which strike me as inappropriate. But. But. I also do not like the way that President Obama treats the leader of our Jewish homeland. He acts as if he knows better than

the Israeli electorate, he has surprised him on several occasions, and I don't understand the degree to which this president seems so fond of scolding and lecturing allies while being overly soft on adversaries.

I may well be wrong – I hope that I am -- either about my impressions or about the implications, but the fact that the relationship is sour, that the two men seem to not get along does, actually, matter. Bold steps require basic trust. It requires seeing the human faces around us. Relationships matter.

We know this is true from our own experience. For the heterosexuals among us, think, if you will, if you can remember, to the first friend you knew was gay, or the first family member. For most people – not everyone, but for most of us, this is when worlds changed, and walls fell down. Or what was that play about race, from decades ago, *Guess Who's Coming to Dinner?* When we have a face, when we have a story, when we have a relationship with another person... we see, then, the person first... and everything else falls into place.

This question of “facts on the ground” – it is a favorite phrase of Israelis, it echoes in the Israeli consciousness in several ways. First of all, it refers to the way the country was built, the pioneer commitment to just create, and recognition was follow. Without such a swagger, without such initiative and such an enterprising attitude, clearly, there would be no state of Israel today. Better to ask forgiveness than permission. Secondly, the phrase today refers to the settlement blocs that Israel expects to keep in any final peace agreement.

This is the reality of today's population centers; it cannot be returned, and banking on such an outcome was the *raison d'être* for the founding of many of the settlements in the first place.

But "facts on the ground" cuts the other way as well. Here is the one that has animated my outlook for the past 30 years: Israel is the homeland of the Jewish people, and it is a Jewish and democratic state. I can't imagine it not being Jewish... there is only one place in the world where there is a special relationship between Judaism and the state, whereas there are 22 such Muslim countries, and dozens of Christian ones. But I also can't imagine Israel as anything but a democracy.

And that means, simply, that the status quo *is not* sustainable, that there will *have to be* a two-state solution, because otherwise there will eventually be a non-Jewish majority in the land between the Jordan and the sea... and if that happens it will no longer be the Israel we know.

Believing this to be the case, I therefore also believe that anyone who stands in the way of a two-state solution, that all the name-calling and backstabbing going on in our community, all the Israel-is-always-right purists... that all they are doing is making Israel less secure in the long run. There is a campaign going on to label anyone who has had anything to do with J-Street as a traitor, or to call Rick Jacobs, the rabbi recently selected to be the head of our Reform movement, an anti-Zionist, because he has been associated with J-Street. Well, as it happens, J-Street is too left wing for me, but I shudder to

think of living in a world where the hyperbolic thought-police dictate terms on how we can criticize Israel and choke off dissent completely in the name of enforced unity and an imagined unanimity that simply does not exist. There was someone who wrote a letter in the *Washington Jewish Week* – and God help me but I think I know him – who asserted that all Arabs want to kill all Jews. Well, Hamas does, and they say so in writing. But how can you make such a statement, and not be considered a hate-monger yourself?

Facts on the ground... But... to borrow a phrase from another portion... “*kol damei achicha tzo’akim elei min ha’adamah...* the voice of your brother’s blood cries out to Me from the ground!” That ground has had enough of blood and tears. Time to split not the sea but the land, to share that ground, to find a way to face another day.

What I want, what I need now... is to rearrange the faces in my story. I want Gilad Schalit whole and home. And I want to see the face of the one... who will stand out and stand up, who will jump feet first, who will convey enough love and enough trust so that we can all feel safe... crossing the sea, and coming to the Promised Land together.

Shabbat Shalom.