



Parashat B'midbar

"Queer" Tribes: Finding a Place for Alternative Families [REPRINT]

by Gregg Drinkwater on Friday May 22, 2009

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Numbers 1:1-4:20

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The Book of Numbers opens with the voice of God, commanding Moses to conduct a census of the Israelites “according to their families, according to their fathers’ household” (Numbers 1:2). Thirteen months have passed since the Exodus from Egypt and the “children of Israel” are still wandering in the wilderness of Sinai. The census is to be organized “according to their families,” which is to say, by tribe. Only men over the age of 20 are counted since the census is undertaken, in part, to prepare for war before attempting to enter the land of Israel. The count of each of the 12 tribes is then enumerated, one by one, until Moses and Aaron reach a final tally of 603,550, with another 22,000 Levites counted separately and marked off as a distinct group.

Earlier in the Torah, in Exodus, the Israelites are counted as a whole – as a nation – without tribal distinctions. Here, the focus is on familial lineage as measured through tribal affiliation and descent, “according to their fathers’ household.” Unlike the matrilineal system generally used to define the Jewish people as a nation (under traditional Jewish law a Jew is defined as someone born to a Jewish mother, or one who converts to Judaism), this focus on the line of the fathers marks the “tribe” or family as male space, suggesting that familial ties are primarily measured through men. As a people, Jews are the collective children of the matriarchs – Sarah, Rachel, Rebecca and Leah. But as families – Cohens and Levis, Goldbergs and Greenblatts – Jewish bloodlines are counted through men.

This patrilineal system of marking family and community plays an important role in the legal and cultural system of the Israelites, determining inheritance rights, marriage obligations and a host of other issues. Even today, most of us trace our family names patrilineally, silencing the familial histories of our mothers and grandmothers, most of whom gave up their “maiden” names, and in some cases their very identities, to assimilate themselves into the families of their husbands.



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As one of two gay fathers of a six-month old daughter, I wonder: Where does this leave me? How is my daughter to count her tribe (forgetting, for a moment, that women were not even included in this census in the Book of Numbers)? She has two fathers – two tribes to account for. In the census of Jewish families, does she get counted twice, once for each “tribe”? And to make matters even more complicated, her mother, the woman with whom my husband and I co-parent, offers yet another familial lineage, another “tribal” bond. In our three-parent, two-household, one-child family, where does our daughter fit? How does Hashem count her? What place is there for her in the Jewish community?

I see my daughter’s multiple familial legacies not as a complication but as a blessing. She has eight grandparents (my own parents are divorced and have since remarried, so I offer up half the grandparents in this equation). How great is that? More people to love her, more people to claim her, more people to attend her *Bat Mitzvah*, and more people to bring presents every year on her birthday. Yet, I know that other people’s perceptions of our “non-traditional” family will create complications for her, not the least of which will be the confusion over how to make her count in the Jewish world. As a three-parent queer family we don’t fit the standard Jewish mold, or even the standard queer mold of a same-sex couple raising a child together. What names will be used to call her up for her first Torah reading, when the traditional incantation references only one father and one mother? How will our family be measured in a Jewish world obsessed with family and lineage? On first glance, I found little guidance in this week’s *parasha*. Indeed, my initial reading of *parashat Bamidbar* left me frustrated at what was presented as Hashem’s silencing of women and the exclusive focus on one child, one father, unto the generations. But reading further, I came to the strange line at the beginning of Chapter 3: “These are the offspring of Aaron and Moses on the day Hashem spoke with Moses at Mount Sinai: These are the names of the sons of Aaron...,” followed by a list of Aaron’s sons. Why does the passage refer to the “offspring of Aaron and Moses” and then list only the sons of Aaron?

In the Talmud (Sanhedrin 19b), the sages tell us that although Aaron is indeed the father of his sons, Moses taught Aaron’s sons, so they are, in a sense, Moses’ spiritual children. As it says in the Talmud, “he who teaches Torah to the son of his neighbor, Scripture ascribes it to him as if he had begotten him.” In this same section of the Talmud, the sages offer several examples of children who have “parents” other than just their biological mother and father. They remind us of a reference to a “son of Naomi,” even though the son in question came from Ruth’s womb. “Ruth bore [him] and Naomi brought him up; hence he was called after her [Naomi’s] name.” Through my queer eyes, this reference to Ruth and Naomi offers a perfect prooftext for why BOTH moms in a lesbian family are indeed full and equal moms. Yes, each child of lesbian parents came from only one womb (although, with technology today, some lesbian couples have opted to implant an egg from one mother into the womb of the other), but any other woman who raises that child is a mother. End of story. Likewise in my family. Our daughter



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doesn't have two "real" parents and a stepparent. She has two dads and a mom. Three parents. Period.

The description of family earlier in this *parasha*, as counted via a single father (and back through his father, and his father's father, and so on) suddenly looks less limiting or clear cut. Thanks to Hillary Clinton, we all now know that 'it takes a village' to raise a child, but the Torah shows us that Hillary's idea isn't so new. Expanding our notions of family creates a Jewish space for my queer family, while also creating openings for all other "alternative" families (single parents, blended families, children raised by grandparents, etc.)



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