



## Table Talk

### Table Talk: Bamidbar

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In 1940, according to the U.S. Census, Frank Weiner was a 35-year-old executive at a brassiere factory making \$2,000 a year. He had a wife and a one-year-old daughter, and they lived on Stuyvesant Avenue in Brooklyn.

It doesn't seem like a lot of information, does it?

But think about this: In 1940, most men became parents when they were in their early 20s, not at the age of 34. And, in 1940, the Great Depression was still raging and Frank Weiner had a pretty good job. Consider this, too: In 1941 the United States would enter World War II. How would that affect Frank and his small but growing family?

Suddenly the story gets more interesting, right?

That's the beauty of the census: context. In *parashat* Bamidbar, the start of the book of Numbers, the Israelites are still wandering the desert, on their way to the Promised Land, when God instructs them to take a census.

Why does it matter how many of them are out there? Can't they wait until they get to the Promised Land to take a count?

But consider the context: As slaves in Egypt, they had their basic needs met. Even in the desert God took care of them, supplying all the food they needed and laying down their laws. Now, God's saying get ready for the next phase. Take a census so you'll know how many mouths you'll have to feed and how many soldiers you have if you need to go to war.

Life is about to get real. God's saying use your remaining time in the desert wisely. Think about who you are and what you'll become.

Frank Weiner was a foreman in a bra factory making \$2,000 a year in 1940. Maybe the census helped him take stock and think about where he wanted to be and what he wanted to accomplish the next time the census-taker came around.

At your Shabbat table this week, try these questions:

1. How many children did your grandparents have? If they had a big family, or a little family, what does that tell you about their lives?
2. What did the 2010 Census say about your household and how different do you think it will be in 2020?
3. When God talks about counting the Israelites, God says the people should "pick up the heads" to count. What does this word choice mean?