

This week in the Torah we are reading the opening parasha of the book of Numbers, Bamidbar. It begins with the command to Moses to take a census of all the male Israelites above the age of 20. A numbering of all those who will be able to bear arms as the people marched through the wilderness.

In the Talmud our rabbis noticed a problem:

How can we count the people?

In our portion it is written: **Count the number** of the people of Israel.

And in another place it is written: *and they shall be like the stars in the sky “which **cannot not be numbered.**”*

How to reconcile the contradiction?

There is a counting by quantity and there is a counting by quality.

In regards to quantity, humans may make the accounting.

But in regards to quality, only the Holy One knows the true count, for God sees the righteous ones whose “account” is known only to the Holy One. In terms of quantity, humans can count but in terms of quality, humans cannot count: only the Holy One can number them.

We are here tonight to do a little bit of both kinds of counting. We’ll look at some things that can be counted: our budget, funding our security needs, and hopefully fill some needed positions with some fine people. But it is hard not to be moved to attempt to do the other kind of accounting as well—an accounting of the quality of this congregation, and of all the people who make it up, their goodness and their special qualities.

I know you share my feelings of gratitude for the community we have created here in this place. A community of Jewish learning and teaching, of worship and social action, a community of acts of lovingkindness and strong feelings of connection and participation. And it is a community of excellence, one which makes an impression on visitors who come to celebrate with us or who join us from larger Jewish communities who are blessed with resources far beyond ours. The quality of our community is based on the special quality of the people who make it up, and the way we have found of bringing out the best in one another, and making room for everyone to find their place and to express and explore their Judaism here.

We have such a community of quality and justice and righteousness. No words can possibly sum up all the ways that the people in this room and outside of it, each contribute to the making of a vital Jewish community like ours. Some of these people and events we just saw in the slideshow.

But one part of it is an incredibly devoted staff that works together to make things happen.

Molly: who has vastly improved our ability to communicate with one another, and the quality of that communication. She has taken us firmly into the age of Facebook and is just now launching our completely redesigned web page. If you have not checked it out, please do. And if you like it, I hope you’ll let Molly know. Her talents as a graphic designer—all

self-taught—greatly enhance the promotion of our events, particularly JewC. One of our clergy colleagues even asked to “borrow” Molly’s talents for an event she was organizing in New Jersey. And of course Molly said yes.

Lukas: who is the welcoming and engaging voice on the end of the phone to those who call our office. And in addition to managing our building, its security and its maintenance with an unusual diligence and attention to detail. Who sees as his personal obligation not just to answer the telephone, but to make sure that the connection is made between the caller and the thing that they need. And who has a fine artistic eye which has produced many beautiful displays of our congregations activities. Reaching out to individuals both inside our congregation as well as those who approach us from outside.

Shelby: Who, in addition to having to divide her attention to support the agendas and work of **two** rabbis, almost singlehandedly organized our successful Israel trip this past year. And who takes up the slack in countless situations where someone needs to step in, and does so graciously and willingly. Oh, and running our very successful Camp CBI for the 13th year.

Latifa: Thanks to the ongoing support from the UJFC, we are blessed to have to work of Latifa Kropf, in her role as our Senior Connections outreach worker. With her grace and compassion she has touched and brought together so many in that cohort of seniors, meeting them in their homes and seeking to keep them connected to CBI and to one another. You’ve seen some of the pictures in the slideshow. And she is starting her second cohort of her Wise Aging this year.

Jill: Preschool continues to earn its well-deserved reputation as a place of educational excellence, with waiting lists starting already in [month] for the coming year. Its dedicated and long-serving teachers continue to engage our youngest cohort with high quality Jewish education. One admires over and over again the ease and grace with which deep Jewish values are seamlessly imparted to these students, and their parents—under Jill’s expert and caring guidance.

Clara: Jill is ably assisted by Clara Crider, who brings so many skills to CBI: her amazing attention to detail and calmness under pressure, and noteworthy management skills. The smooth running of PS Camp this summer is resting securely on her talented shoulders. Her sweet and kind demeanor puts all our parents at ease—not to mention the uber-cuteness of almost 15-month old Oliver who sometimes accompanies her to work as our youngest staff member.

Kathryn: whose understanding of our community only deepens with each passing year, making her a fount of good counsel to me and of wise leadership for the congregation. Kathryn, who in normal circumstances works tirelessly and without any thought of hours or days, in the past year has also borne without complaint much of the burden of the considerable extra responsibilities that has been generated by the fallout of last summer’s events, liaisons with security officials and our police department and FBI...and whose threats to retire one of these days strike terror into our hearts when we hear them.

Rabbi Dan: Dan's activity behind the scenes, supporting our work with advice and his continuing participation as an active member of our community and a leader outside of it, even as a grandchild in New Jersey pulls ever stronger on his attentions. Continuing mentorship of me and of Rabbi Rachel and his sharing of the long-term history of this community are invaluable to us.

Rabbi Rachel: Continues to inspire us with a vibrant spirituality that is expressed through words and through fresh and contemporary Jewish music, and with innovative ideas to teach both young people and adults. Her caring, intelligence and compassionate and open-hearted pastoral presence has touched so many who come into contact with her. And her fantastic work with Jewish young adults in our community through JewC, finding the right mix of learning and socialization and community to keep them close to our community and inviting them to explore what CBI has to offer them. Rabbi Rachel models for us the kind of outward-looking engagement with the diversity of our Jewish community that is the future of our congregation, as well as her belief that as a Jewish religious leader, she is obligated to speak up for the human dignity and rights of others in our community. We are blessed to have her as our rabbi and I am blessed to have her as a colleague.

I am ever aware of how lucky I am, and we are—to work with such a dedicated and talented staff. And am happy to have these few moments to share their praise.

I also want to share a few thoughts about the past year.

It is safe to say that this year has been a year of challenges. The events of last summer brought the synagogue to national and even international attention. It is almost hard to remember now just how crazy things were around here for the week before and during the events of August 11 and 12, and in the week following when Charlottesville was at the center of the 24-hour news cycle for much more than 24 hours.

Our office staff, Kathryn, Lukas, Molly, Shelby, Jill and Clara turned themselves into a virtual crisis management team, sharing and dividing up the many tasks at hand: managing the deluge of attention and demands on our time and personnel from the press as well as from visitors from all over who descended on our town. Words cannot express the quality of the extraordinary teamwork and collaboration which enabled us to ride out those few weeks. And of course our thanks go to our leadership-- to Alan Zimmerman and to Diane Hillman, newly elected barely months before the summer's events, who helped lead us through those very uncertain times with great skill and dedication, and to Rabbi Rachel for her bravery and extraordinary leadership in the larger community.

In the months since then, we have been trying to figure out where we stand.

The terrifying scepter of anti-Semitic and neo-Nazi hate walking the streets of our town has pushed our community into the public eye, in a way we have not experienced before. It has pushed our rabbis into a more public role in the larger community, as participants in a larger conversation that is still going on in our town.

I think it is fair to say that in some ways many in our community remain unsettled. Part of this comes from being in the neighborhood of the parks and of the courthouses, where some of the same characters have been returning for court dates and sentencing. We are not all agreed about how to face the security issues we face, but we have formed a security committee which is doing its job with great integrity and diligence.

For some, perhaps even for some in this room, the events of last summer were just an unfortunate episode, something that came to our town, invaded our space, and left.

For others, last summer and its aftermath was a watershed, something that changed the way we understand ourselves.

We as a congregation are trying to honor and hold these diverse points of view—and everything in between-- as we find our way forward.

We are wrestling with questions of security and insecurity. We are wondering about the way the Jewish community is seen in this town. We are looking for ways to serve and strengthen our own community at the same time that we want to face up to our responsibilities to the larger community. We want to participate in the larger discussions about history and race and justice in our town.

As we look for guidance on some of these issues we were so grateful to find that in the ranks of our own membership we have world-class experts to help us understand them. Our adult lecture series addressed issues including laws regulating hate speech, the rights of cities, the opioid epidemic, and immigration.

And our newly activated Social Action Committee sponsored a diverse range of events, some in collaboration with neighboring churches, focusing on racial justice, fair housing and immigration.

We have opened our doors to the larger community for these events, and many are joining us for these conversations. There are people who I meet in town who tell me that when they see an event advertised at the synagogue, they put it on their calendar and try to come, because they know it will be an event of quality. We can be proud of that reputation.

But we need to also acknowledge a certain tension:

When it comes to these larger issues beyond our building, we have a wide diversity of opinions in our midst. Some of these issues take us to the fine line between values and politics—a line we cannot hope to define clearly to everyone's satisfaction.

So we'll need to keep our eyes focused on the way we speak to one another, to practice with one another the *middah*, the quality of *kavod* (respect) and also *anavah* (humility). And perhaps also a certain generosity of spirit towards one another, a generosity which comes from honoring the strong bonds we have forged with one another through years of

learning, celebration, acts of lovingkindness and working side by side to build this amazing, diverse and multifaceted Jewish community.

This week's Torah portion also describes the way that each of the tribes would arrange themselves when they encamped in the wilderness. They positioned themselves to the north, the south, the east and the west of the Tabernacle in the wilderness. They each had their *position*, the place where they stood. But the Tabernacle, with the Ark of the Covenant and the divine presence—always remained in the center.

We too, must strive for this vision: to keep our tradition, our covenant with God and the voice of the divine as our tradition understood it: squarely at the center. And if we can do this, we can only be stronger.

I'm inviting you to say with me the words which we spoke last Shabbat as we finished reading the book of Leviticus:

Chazak Chazak V'nitchazek.

Be strong and let us strengthen one another.

Rabbi Tom Gutherz

May 2018