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## Counting Jews

I was a poster kid for Hillel in college. I was the kid who emailed the Jewish a cappella group the spring before I even arrived on campus. I was running Conservative Friday night services by my second semester freshman year, and then ran the traditional egalitarian Shabbat morning service my junior year and first semester senior year. It was where I first did anything that could be called “Jewish leadership,” and here I am, I’m still calling paging numbers, reading Torah, giving divrei Torah.

Brown University, where I went to college, wasn’t unusual in having a traditional egalitarian Shabbat morning minyan in those days, the late ‘90s and early 2000s. Lots of other “selective” colleges did too, because there was a critical mass of somewhat knowledgeable, interested Jewish students.

I haven’t done a careful study of this, but anecdotally, many fewer campuses nowadays have a non-Orthodox Shabbat morning minyan.

There are lots of explanations for this. One is that the Conservative movement has de-invested in college. Koach, the movement’s college outreach branch, closed about ten years ago. And also, the decline in interest in religion is a part of this too.

But what does it take to have an egalitarian Shabbat morning minyan on a college campus? It probably takes a much bigger Jewish population, from whom there will be enough people interested in this specific kind of Jewish expression.

So if the percentage of Jewish students at a university shrinks from 19% to 11%, it might mean that the number of Jews has almost halved, and the number of Jews interested in Shabbat morning has halved, and suddenly instead of there being fourteen interested students, you have seven, and not a critical mass.

At Harvard, for example, I’ve seen it reported that there 25% of students were Jewish in the ‘90s and 2000s, but that it’s about 10% now.

But this decline in Jewish students at Harvard and its ilk is not an isolated phenomenon. A [recent article in the online magazine Tablet](#) observes that while there used to be many Jewish Guggenheim and MacArthur “Genius” award winners, there are now many fewer.

The writer points out that, “Of the 114 federal judges appointed by Joe Biden (as of this writing), just 8-9 appear to be Jewish—in a field that’s historically been at least 20% Jewish.” He laments the decline of Jews in Hollywood, in New York politics, on Jewish New York Senator and Senate Majority Leader Chuck Schumer’s staff.

When it comes to counting Jews, this is the parasha for it. It begins with the command for a census. Our tradition is ambivalent though, about counting Jews. The mechanism for taking the census is actually not taking, as Rashi comments, but rather, is a receiving, a collection—a half-shekel for each person. Then count the half-shekels, and you know how many people you have.

And the verse itself recommends this method, explaining, “that there be no plague on them, when they count them (Ex. 30:12).

The same method of counting was used when King Saul wanted to know how many soldiers there were. He asked each of them to bring a kid goat, then he counted the goats to assess how many soldiers there were (1 Samuel 15:4). On the other hand, King David counted Jews in the conventional way (1 Chronicles 21:2) But when the counting was finished, a great plague struck and many Jews died.

Thus the tradition of not counting Jews using numbers (although you can report the final number).

I want to offer three reflections on these numbers—and on the decline of the number and percentage of Jews in these elite places and lists.

First—we need to make sure we’re counting the right things. The Torah is careful to make sure that what we count is the half-shekels, what the entire people gives. We don’t count the actual people themselves. And we also don’t count Jews in comparison to others. And, we count each person the same—we don’t elevate some because of their wealth and accomplishments. It’s an amazingly equal, egalitarian, exercise.

So perhaps we should focus less on counting the percentage of Jews versus others at Harvard, or the number of Jewish federal court justices, but rather, on the impact of Jews everywhere. On what Jews give charitably, on how we contribute to American society—and not in comparison to anyone else, but simply just take note it. If we were to add up what every American Jew contributes to our society, the “number” would be higher than ever.

Second, and I’m sure some of you have been biting your tongue about this, in the Israelite census, not everyone was counted. In fact, most people were not—it only counted the number of male Jews over age 20, that is, those who (they thought) could fight. We would never call that a census now. A value of ours now is including people, letting them know and feel that they count, and that it’s not only adult men who matter.

If Ivy League schools and prestigious awards are not choosing as many Jews as they used to, who are they choosing instead? They’re choosing more people of color, people with more geographic diversity (we know that Jews are pretty tightly geographically clustered), people with more religious diversity, more economic diversity, more LGBTQ people, more recent immigrants (that used to be us, but it’s not anymore). They are being profoundly more inclusive than they were when Jews were making up such an outsized share of “the chosen people.” We’re still there, and still disproportionately represented, but our not being there as much is making space for more people, and more kinds of people, who have not previously been included. Although this means fewer Jews, this is a victory of our values.

Living our values is hard though. Are we willing to make space for others, at some cost to ourselves? Jews haven’t always had the capaciousness, the integrity, not to mention the safety and stability and security to accept or embrace making space for others at the cost of taking up less space ourselves. (And I could be speaking about Israel, or affirmative action, or lots of other things.) I think I’m ready. I hope we all are.

Here’s the third and last thing. Regarding another census, Rashi explains (see Rashi on Numbers 1:1) that God counts what God loves, over and over. I, you, we, love Jews. That’s great, and healthy. And counting Jews who succeed, who are prominent, it comes from a place of love, and pride. When there are fewer Jews to count, there is a loss, and it is real. I also look

at these awards and lists and things and notice the Jews, and feel proud. And that happens less now. Not never, just less.

It's also harder than ever to look at a list of names or a bunch of headshots and pick out the Jews. There are still Jews with "Jewish" names, but there are also lots of Jews whose names are not identifiably Jewish. Likewise with pictures—because someone is Black or Brown or Asian doesn't mean they're not Jewish.

But even if there are fewer Jews winning these awards, *we will be ok*. There being fewer Jews at Harvard or on the federal bench doesn't mean there won't be any. Our kids will still have Jewish role models in virtually every walk of life—including as second gentleman, now! I really don't believe these decreases are a result of anti-Semitism. I think they're a result of greater equity and inclusion and attention to diversity.

Let us count not who is important, but what is important.

Let our values count more than our numbers.

And here, at Kol Rinah, and in the lives of everyone any of us encounters—we each count.

Shabbat shalom.