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Kol Rinah  
Parashat Bamidbar  
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I get lots of divrei Torah each week via e-mail, from many different organizations. One d'var Torah I received this week focuses in part on the census taken of the Israelites at the beginning of the book of Numbers, and reminds us that we are one people—we are each individuals, but we all count, equally, and we're all an important part of the whole. We may each be different, with different needs, talents, and gifts, but each of us, with our individuality, is integral to the whole. And even though we are individuals, we need a measure of communal unity. This is a good drash, one I've given and will give again.

Another d'var Torah I received this week looks at the census, and notes who is not counted: women, children, and families headed by a widow. It's as if they don't matter, don't count, and are invisible. This got me thinking.

Nowadays, for example, when you raise your hand in a class and are never called on, you feel invisible. When you stand in a crowded room, and no one speaks to you, or even looks at you, you feel invisible.

While it's a common fantasy to be able to turn invisible, feeling invisible is rarely a positive feeling. The song "Mr. Cellophane," from the musical Chicago, about someone who feels transparent, and invisible, is a kind of lament. And the primary power of the evil One Ring in J.R.R. Tolkien's "Lord of the Rings" is invisibility. Invisibility becomes a curse.

Invisibility is not positive. Rather, it's a degrading, dehumanizing, discouraging feeling. And it happens here, and pretty much in every synagogue and church. People sit with their friends, and talk to their friends, and notice their friends, and don't look at and don't notice the people who they don't know.

That's what we do naturally, and it takes a real effort to do anything different. And that's why I'm talking to you about this today. Because there cannot be invisible people here at Kol Rinah. No one should be allowed to sit by themselves at kiddush. No one should be allowed to stand by themselves. This is our responsibility. And it can't be delegated to a person, whether a greeter or a rabbi. It must be each person's responsibility. It must be my responsibility. And it must be your responsibility too.

If you ever feel invisible, like I and we are not seeing you, I hope you will feel comfortable speaking up, waving your hand, hollering—getting people's attention. But that can be really hard to do, and the responsibility cannot just lie with the invisible.

There are, of course, degrees of invisibility. There are the people who are here, who we just don't see because we don't know them. Then, there are the people who are members of our congregation who are not in shul. Maybe they used to come, but don't or can't anymore.

I'm terrible at noticing who's not here. It's not how my brain works, because I'm usually so focused on the people who are here.

But I know some of you notice when certain people aren't here. If someone's missing a particular week, call them. E-mail them. Text them, if they do that. Facebook them if they're on Facebook. It's an incredible feeling to feel missed, to know someone noticed your absence. It's a gift you can give someone.

Even harder, but even more important, is being in touch with people who used to come, but haven't been in shul for a while. Perhaps someone is ill, or unhappy, or their mobility has become limited. Regardless, a call is so important. Because when it doesn't come, because no one notices, it makes people feel invisible, and feel disconnected from the shul, and like no one cares about them.

The solution is simple, but hard to do. But together, we can do it, if we each take responsibility and don't assume someone else will do it.

Rabbi Shafrin and I are happy to call people, but we need your help in noticing who's not around, and who may need a call. Tell us, after Shabbat, so we can write it down, and we're happy to call. But it's not enough for us to call—people's friends and community need to call too.

At the end of the census, all the tribes have been counted, except the Levites. According to the midrash (Numbers Rabbah 1:12), Moses is worried, and thinks maybe the Levites, his tribe, have been excluded from the count because there's something wrong with them, or because they've sinned in some way.

When we feel invisible, so often we think the problem is with us. If it happens enough, eventually we internalize the sense that we are marginal, and invisible, and don't matter.

We've become much better about noticing, counting, and including a group of people the Torah's census ignores: women. We're better about noticing and including children. As I see it, we're engaged in a long process of seeing more people, and seeing more people more fully, with all their needs, gifts, talents, and identities.

Ignoring the ways we are different renders pieces of ourselves invisible. For example, there are number of people in our congregation who have hearing loss, and need folks like me to speak more loudly, more clearly, and especially more slowly. When I speak slowly, and am conscious of those with hearing loss, I'm seeing those people, even though their hearing loss is only a small part of who they are.

And when I speak too fast, it's like they are invisible to me, even though of course I see them, and don't intend to ignore them or make them feel like I'm ignoring them.

Those of us who might be part of the majority group might be fine treating everyone the same, but the moment we're in the minority, we realize the ways we need to be seen differently, so as to feel seen.

Some people have hearing loss; some people have limited mobility; some people didn't grow up Jewish; some people don't read Hebrew; some people have darker skin color; some people are not American citizens; some people are lesbian, gay, bi, trans, and/or queer; some people have vision trouble; some people have young children; some people have no children; some people are single; some people are in unhappy relationships; some people are mourning; some people are ill; some people are dying; some people don't have enough money; some people are out of work; and the list can go on.

Each of these is an important piece of identity, that we may not always want to draw attention to, yet there will also be times when we will feel invisible if this piece of our identity is not seen and acknowledged, and considered.

Why is there a census at the beginning of the book of Numbers, anyway? Not much time has passed since the census that is done after the golden calf—just a matter of months. It's because God loves the people, and is continually counting them—because God loves us, and

is continually counting us, explains Rashi. But God doesn't actually do the counting—people have to do the census for God. So, when we see people, with all their needs, gifts, talents and identities—when we count them, and make them *feel* seen and counted, we're showing our love for them, and we're showing God's love for them.

Shabbat shalom.