What does it mean to count? In parashat Bamidbar, we are introduced to a sweeping census of the Jewish people, with each family in each tribe to be accounted for. Rashi has one of the most profound and insightful looks into the purpose of the census, saying, “Because they were dear to The Holy One, God counts them every now and then: when they went forth from Egypt God counted them (Exodus 12:37), when many of them fell in consequence of their having worshipped the golden calf God counted them to ascertain the number of those left (cf. Rashi Exodus 30:16); when God was about to make God’s Presence dwell amongst them (i.e.: when God commanded them to make a Tabernacle), God again took their census; for on the first day of Nisan the Tabernacle was erected (Exodus 40:2) and shortly afterwards, on the first day of Iyar.

Here is one of the most heartfelt, personal images of the Divine, as the Source of love who is in relationship with the Jewish People and the world. It conveys an image of a God who feels that every life is precious, so much so that God actively wants to be close to each individual in the times of their greatest triumphs and as well as their greatest suffering. Think of the the image of a God
who reaches out to exalt with the people flee from Egypt, holding the fleeing
Children of Israel in their joy and safety, as well as a God who extends a
comforting arm as those same people suffer death and pain after their terrible
mistake of creating the Golden Calf. This is God at God’s most iconic, God who
stands up as a model to show each of us not only how precious we are, but how
we are meant to value one another.

This, according to Rashi and so many others, is how we count. We do not
count people as merely numbers, but as individual universes of Divine goodness,
as whole incredible worlds of sacred potential. This is why often, when people
traditionally look around to see if there are at least the ten people present for
minyan, they do not count using numbers (1, 2, 3...) but rather using a 10 word
phrase of their choosing. Mine is the second line of the Ashrei prayer, which
comes from Psalms 144:15 and the first two words of Psalms 145:1:

אָשֵׁרָי הָעָם שֶׁפֶךָהּ לַאָשָׁרָי הָעָם שֶׁשִּׁיְּרָהָו אֶלֹהֵי. תְּהִלָּם שֶׁיַּהֲוָה

Happy the people who [are taken care of] just so; happy the people whose God is
the LORD; A Psalm of David.

And so we are told to make certain, as we begin this new chapter in both our
Torah reading and in the history of the Jewish People, that we must be certain to
account for all people because when we count another human being we reaffirm,
to them and to one another, that they count, that each of us counts. You matter.

Right now, in our country, we are being called to account for all of the
people who we are failing so spectacularly. Today I, like many around the country,
am wearing orange in order to take part in Gun Violence Awareness Weekend.
The color orange was originally chosen by family and friends of Hadiya Pendleton,
a 15-year-old Chicago girl who was shot and killed in 2013 by random gun
violence. Her death, coming just weeks after she performed with her prep school
band at President Obama’s second inauguration galvanized an entire movement
of ordinary citizens whose lives have been irrevocably broken by gun violence.

Sadly, too many lives have ended tragically like Hadiyas. There are tens of
thousands more each year who are injured by gun violence and survive, and
countless others who are their family, friends, classmates, teachers, co-workers,
and community members whose lives will never be the same.

This issue touches every single neighborhood, community, and city in the
country, and I feel as though we still have so much that needs to be done. For
sadly it is not only the people directly affected by each incidence of gun violence
that are affected, but we all change the way we live our lives from the way we
want to live, the way we feel we should be living, to instead walk a path through
the world that is tinged with a sadly necessary amount of fear, anxiety, and suspicion of the people around us.

And far too often, these incidents simply leave us numb. After all of the Parklands and the Poways, the Columbines and the Virginia Beaches, the Charlestons and the killings on our blocks, we rage, we cry, and we cringe as little changes.

Our parashah warns us against this very phenomenon. At the very end of Parashat Bamidbar, the Torah describes, in great detail, the roles of the Kohathite priests, and then, God impresses upon Moses the urgency for these priest to avoid looking inside the Mishkan and witnessing the disassembling of all the sacred elements (Num. 4:18). Ovadia Sforno, the 15th century Italian commentator, says that this injunction was designed to keep this procedure from becoming too commonplace, something the Kohathite priests were so used to that they failed to give this sacred work the care and attention it deserved.

The small, repetitive actions we do day in and day out become so mundane, so trivial, that we cease really paying attention to them. Whether it’s tying our shoes or brushing our teeth, we have rituals that we go through everyday without really thinking about them in any significant way. Unfortunately, our nation-wide community has added a new ritual to the repetitive actions we take without
meaningful result. After each new tragic loss of life at the hands of a gun or another weapon of destruction we rage, we wring our hands, we write letters and sign petitions, and then we sink back, deflated and defeated, as no real meaningful changes to our national policy, our culture, or our legislative agenda are made.

The logjam preventing the move toward meaningful change has little to do with a lack of knowledge. Having a national gun registry and a lengthy process to learn to fire a gun and obtain a license would help. Measures like Red Flag laws, which would allow family members and law enforcement to remove guns from people who have shown a clear risk of harm to themselves and others, have been proven to reduce the number of violent incidents in a community. Allowing doctors to talk with their patients about the health risks of guns, which they are currently barred from doing, or allowing funding for the CDC to be able to actively research gun violence outcomes would greatly curtail the pervasive violence that we face today. Removing immunity for gun manufacturers and their lobbying arms from prosecution for pushing more and more guns into our communities would force them to come face to face with the consequences of their negligent business models, which focus on getting more, and more powerful, guns into the hands of anyone who wants them.
When we do nothing, when nothing changes, we are saying that these lost and damaged lives do not count. We are leaving aside the stories and voices of those who can no longer speak for themselves because they were silenced by gun violence. I refuse to make this a repetitive action that I don’t pay attention to. Getting angry and advocating for changing our gun laws and gun culture is not like brushing our teeth, it is not a cycle to repeat over and over and over again, coming back to the beginning of this gut-wrenching circle days or months or years later, only to find that nothing has changed. I refuse. I resist.

In two days, Governor Ralph Northam is calling a special session of the Virginia State Legislature to bring up the issue of gun violence. Call on him, and on the Virginia legislators, to take this issue seriously, to not adjourn until they have some real meaningful legislation on the table. Perhaps they will make a model that other cities have attempted, bringing some sanity to an endless wave of heartbreaking violence.

Do not let this become commonplace. Do not let yourselves get tired, or resigned to this culture of violence. Change has always been, and will always be, possible.
And remember, you count. Your voice counts. Your actions count. Your anger counts. Stand up and count all those who suffer needlessly from this type of violence.

This is the seventh year we have set aside time on the calendar to mark and protest against the destructive influence our gun culture has had on the lives of people throughout our nation. Make this Gun Violence Weekend Count. And maybe next year, we won’t have to count it again.

Shabbat Shalom.