

Count Me In

Parshat Bamidbar - 5781

Recently, my good friend Cantor Gideon Zelermyer asked me a great question. Why don't we have a ritual, or a liturgy, celebrating our completion of counting the Omer? High fives all around seems like it's not enough. A simple answer, of course, is that you are not done when you count the 49th night- only when the 49th day ends. In that sense, Shavuot itself *is* the celebration. But his question did get me thinking.

Counting has been an essential part of our lives recently- certainly in the past 15 months. We are still counting the number of infections and deaths worldwide, and even more recently, the number of people who have been vaccinated. We are about to cross the finish line of the Omer and, please God, the finish line of COVID. We count the days of shiva, the days until a bris or a pidyon haben, and the number of days until a woman can use the mikvah. Our tradition gives us decidedly mixed messages when it comes to counting people. Today, we began reading Sefer Bemidbar, which contains not one but *two* censuses . On a regular basis, we count people- to ascertain that three are present for a mezuman and ten for a minyan. Despite the need and commandment to count, however, we are also prohibited from doing so. The source for this prohibition is the Talmud (Yoma 22b), which tells us that we are prohibited from counting Jews, even when it is to fulfill a mitzvah. We learn this from King Shaul's census; one of his notable successes was counting Jewish lambs, rather than Jewish people. Contrast that to King David, who conducted a census of his own, considered by some to be one of King David's greatest mistakes. As a result, we employ all sorts of tricks to

prevent actually conducting a headcount. For instance, we recite pesukim known to have 10 words, such as הושיעה את עמך, or blessings with 10 words, like *Hamotzi*. If counting is so problematic, why does God mandate that we engage in a census, time and time again? Why does counting play such an important role in our ritual lives?

The Gemara addresses this question by noting that there is a difference between a heavenly census and a human led initiative:

רבי אמר משום אבא יוסי בן דוסתאי: לא קשיא; כאן - בידי אדם, כאן - בידי שמים.

What is the difference between a divine count and a human one? Simply put, the difference is one of perspective. When one human counts other human beings, he dehumanizes them. It was the tactic of the Nazis to reduce the Jews to numbers rather than names, to justify their atrocities to themselves and to others.

But numbers are not just dehumanizing; they are also deceptive¹. A number, presented independent of any explanation, is bound to be distorted, misunderstood, or artificially weighted². Lists like “Top 10 Hospitals in The Country” or this past week, when the LA Lakers owner, Jeanie Buss, listed the top five Lakers players in history, leaving off Hall of Famer Jerry West. This infuriated him- to think that he wasn’t worthy of mention- but who says that five is a significant number? The cutoff was completely arbitrary, yet it was invested in meaning. Another way in which numbers can be deceptively deployed is by mistaking correlation with causation. For example, over a period of 10 years, the marriage rate in Texas

¹ <https://www.forbes.com/sites/sap/2013/08/08/6-ways-numbers-can-lie-to-us/?sh=14f8beb269dc>

² “arbitrary cutoff”

per 1000 people is closely correlated to the per capita consumption of margarine, in pounds, over the same time period. Does that mean that the precipitous drop in margarine consumption is a cause of the declining marriage rate? Could it be that disinterest in marriage is a cause of awareness of the effects of partially hydrogenated oils? This is what the theologian Dr. Donald Carson meant when he quoted his father, a Canadian minister, as saying “a text without a context is a pretext.” Now, imagine you read on the news that 100 Palestinians have died in the course of two days, while seven Israelis have died during the same time. A simple, stark image is painted of a David and Goliath, a villain and a victim, an occupier and a freedom fighter. What that number fails to clarify, though, is why there is fighting in the first place, whether the deaths happened by overhead rockets to civilians, or to terrorists, or to civilians forced to be used as human shields. Numbers alone do not paint a clear enough picture. After all, the number seven doesn’t capture the gravity of the loss of innocent lives, like that of five year old Ido Avigal of Sderot. Alternatively, you can say that the Iron Dome intercepted 1600 rockets or so, and complain- as Rashida Tlaib did- that the Gazans don’t have an Iron Dome of their own. But that fails to note that shoulder mounted rockets cost a few thousand dollars, whereas the Iron Dome costs hundreds of for each rocket intercepted. And moreover, 1600 intercepted rockets doesn't tell the story of the hundreds that were not successfully intercepted, causing untold damage, mayhem and bloodshed. If I tell you that the rioting and looting of Jewish businesses and shuls is taking place in only **one** neighborhood in Lod, you might not think this is such a significant number. But anyone who has seen the pictures of the ransacked shuls with torn and charred Sifrei Torah, and has even a shred of historical awareness, can’t fail to think of similar events

that happened in shuls in Germany 82 years ago. And to be honest and fair, if I tell you that there was one or two incidents of Jewish hooligans lynching Arabs, removing them from their cars and beating them nearly to death, you might conclude that this is a minority action, unworthy of our condemnation or our attention. To not say anything, and to declare that they are statistical anomalies, would do more harm to us and to Israel than Hamas themselves are capable of. We are already depicted in the media as animals; we cannot live up to the stereotype and provide more material to our prosecutors in the court of public opinion, who salivate every time a Jew “messes up.” This is the difference between a ספירה בידי אדם and a ספירה בידי שמים - when man counts, it is precarious and subject to all of the aforementioned biases and distortions, when God conducts a census, His numbers reflect the larger truth and are therefore meaningful.

Lastly, there is a fascinating insight from the Or Hachaim. The Talmud (Berachot 62b) suggests that had David counted the Jews by way of a proxy, using an object like shards or sheep, he would not have been so severely admonished. The Ohr HaChaim, however, states that David’s error lay in not using the *Machatzit HaShekel* to conduct his census. What makes the half *shekel* the preferred method of counting people?

Perhaps it's the often-quoted concept found in the writing of Chazal, that the half shekel reminds us that we are incomplete without the other person. For such a purpose, a whole coin would send the wrong message, namely, that each person can exist in a bubble, independent from anyone else. When you adopt such an attitude, counting people is an activity fraught with grave risk, since it means that each person who perishes has no net

impact on the quality of my existence - after all, even when they are not counted, I remain whole. If, on the other hand, I am half and so is she, then neither of us can countenance the thought of life without the other.

Throughout the week, we saw images of our friends and family running for cover, often multiple times a night, counting the seconds they had until they could reach safety. Potent imagery frequented our social media feeds, including some Yeshivot like Yeshivat Kerem B'Yavneh transforming their bomb shelters into *batei midrash* so learning could continue unabated, or other images, like that of Rav Mordechai Willig, conducting a kumzitz while in the shelter of Yeshivat Shaalvim, with sirens blaring in the background. I would venture to guess that many of us, when seeing and hearing these images and stories, had but two wishes. One- that the violence would cease with a swift and immediate victory. Two- that, we could be there with our brethren. This is what it means to be one side of a coin- to feel that our lot, and our fate, are linked with our brethren. It is not just true metaphorically; it is true literally as well. In a virtual world, the devices and weaponry of anti-Semitism have expanded beyond physical assault into the realm of defamation and verbal violence on social media. Jessica is a member of a group called the Physician Moms Group (PMG); one of the founders, Dr. Hala Sabry, has been spending the last several days spewing anti-Israel, anti-Semitic hate and shutting down any pro-Israel voices. And this is a group that ostensibly has nothing to do with the conflict! Bomb shelter or not, our fates are indeed linked. If we want to count, we must never forget that.