

Parshat Bamidbar, *Hagesher*, Schechter Westchester/Leffell School Newsletter

What really counts these days?

All too often, students (at least in high school) describe their lives with a series of numbers. How do they rank? How many “friends” do they have? As adults, we can also be bombarded, at times, by numbers. Every day, it seems that the headlines are filled with the latest polls and statistics. How many Americans are unemployed? How many citizens support a particular candidate? In the Jewish news, it is the same. What is the percentage of unaffiliated Jews? Intermarried? Our surveys, statistics, and calculations have become more than just support for important news or self-worth. In our world today, the numbers themselves have become the news.

As Jews, we have a particularly confusing relationship to numbers, especially to counting people. Many Jews hold onto a superstitious idea that anything that is *noticed* is doomed. Ask a *bubbe* how many grandchildren she has, and she’ll refuse to say. We don’t want to “tempt the evil eye,” or “count” our blessings lest they be taken away from us.

This fear plays out in our ritual life, as well. Of course, we need ten Jews for a minyan, but we don’t actually *count* them. Instead, we tally fingers, we choose a verse with 10 words—one for each person—or we explicitly refrain from counting: “*not one, not two, not three...*” Count, but count with caution!

This ambivalence, as I wrote in *The Jewish Week* a few years ago, goes back to Biblical times. Parshat Bamidbar presents part of the Bible’s confusing message about counting people, beginning the entire book with the national census. Evidently, there is no problem with tallying the people here. God instructs Moses in the wilderness:

‘Take a census of the whole Israelite community by the clans of its ancestral houses, listing the names, every male, head by head. You and Aaron shall record them by their groups...’ (Numbers 1:2-3)

Here, counting the people is actually a commandment. And yet, later in our Biblical history, King David is punished for this very same thing. “And David’s heart smote him after that he had numbered the people.” (II Samuel 24: 10) In addition, this week’s haftarah, from the book of Hosea, insists that we will have so many people that it will be impossible to count us, as the sands in the sea.

No wonder we are so confused about numbers! And the Talmud doesn’t make things any clearer. According to Tractate Taanit, blessing can only be found in that which is hidden from the eye—not in that which is weighed, measured or counted. As soon as we calculate something, the rabbis suggest, its value is diminished, as is its blessing.

On the other hand, another selection from the Talmud, in Tractate Chullin, teaches that counting is *necessary* to assure the safety of our families and home. “That which is not measured or watched is open to attack by demons.” We must count things, argues this text. It is, in fact, dangerous *not* to do so. The reality is that life demands it. If we are to be responsible about our lives, we must know how many mouths to feed, how much money we can spend, how much time is in our schedule. On a communal level, we must know how many Jews need our help, socially, educationally, or financially. *Not*

keeping track, if we let our families, our possessions or our communities go unrecorded, can lead to trouble.

So which is it, then? Do we count—to make sure we keep our things and our community safe from harm—or do we not count, in order to keep our blessings safe?

I'll never forget a beautiful teaching introduced to me by Reb Mimi Feigelson, who pointed to the Izhbitzer Rebbe's understanding of the psychology of counting. The Chassidic master, Rabbi Mordechai Yosef Leiner, focuses on the Hebrew word that the Torah uses for the census. God tells Moses to count the people, using the Hebrew word "*se'u*," which also means "lift up." The Izhbitzer reminds us that God distributed a special portion to each human being, and no single person is like any other. When we "count" each person, we place each person in a position that is appropriate to the individual, allowing each of us to be "lifted up" in our own unique area of the world. When each of us is working to our own potential and to our own goals, we are each elevated to a place of prominence within the community.

In other words, what matters is not whether we count, but the way in which we count the members of our community. The entire conundrum—count, don't count—isn't really important. Indeed, it seems that either extreme is rejected by the tradition. Ultimately, we may make an accounting of people, but we must do so in a way that honors each individual, in a way that elevates, and ultimately, in a way that makes each person count.

What a powerful alternative to Facebook or statistics! We can use the model of Bamidbar to lift one another up and to create a community of individuals, each of whom has an important role in building the whole. Shabbat Shalom.