

As we approach Tuesday night June 3, Jews around the world are literally counting the days and the weeks between Passover and the biblical festival of Shavuot, when our community will celebrate the receiving of the Torah on Mt. Sinai. Through counting the Omer, our community indelibly links the ideal of freedom from slavery to the ideal of taking on the responsibility of living a life of Torah.

As we progress with our countdown (last night marks the 39th day of the 50 day period), we are acutely aware of the power and the challenge of counting. Counting has significance in our tradition. Not only do we count the *omer*, but we count the days between Rosh Hashanah and Yom Kippur, known as *aseret yamei teshuvah*, the ten days of repentance. We count to calculate the sabbatical and jubilee years, demonstrating our understanding of the value that neither human beings nor the land truly belong to us. We count for the eight days from the time of a baby boy's birth to the brit milah, the biblical command to bring baby boys into the covenant with God through circumcision. And our Torah scribe recently counted the letters of our new *sefer Torah* to be sure that none were added or none were missing. He counted 304,805 letters in black ink on the scroll, to be exact.

Counting time and counting letters, all is good. But counting people: that is another matter. That has always been a problem in Jewish tradition: it is forbidden to take a direct numbering of the people of Israel and plague was often the result for those who tried. The Talmud tells us:

“Rabbi Eleazar said, “Whoever counts Israel, transgresses a [biblical] prohibition, as it is said [in the book of Hosea]: ‘Yet the number of the children of Israel shall be as the sand of the sea, which cannot be measured.’”

Counting takes away the uniqueness of the individual. By counting a person, we risk turning him or her into a simple number, dehumanizing the person.

We still understand a community to be the number we can count on the fingers of two hands – a minyan is ten people. Numbers bind us to one another. Yet when we count heads for a minyan, we don't actually count with numbers, but rather with words. The traditional way of counting a minyan is to recite Psalm 28:9, comprised of ten words: *boshia et amekha u'varekh et nahalatekha u'r'eim v'nasseim ad ha-olam* - Save Your people, and bless Your inheritance and tend them, and carry them forever. Another traditional way to determine a *minyan* is to say “not one, not two, not three etc.”

The fear of counting people and thus separating them from their own humanity has long roots in Judaism. Only God is really allowed to count us, only God

is seen as having the ability to count without discounting so to speak. Counting is power.

The English title of the book Numbers follows from the Greek translation, the Septuagint, whose editors titled the book thematically after the censuses mentioned in the first chapter of this book. The rabbis coined the Hebrew name of the book after the word, *Bemidbar*, meaning wilderness, which appears in the opening verse. We also find in the Talmud that this book was often called *hummash ha-pekudim*, the book of counting, meaning counting people. Why do we count people? What is the end goal of this? What does the language of our parashah tell us about the outcome of counting?

The description of the counting that takes place early in the parashah is described with a curious idiom that is not conveyed by usual English translations: Take a census of the whole Israelite community. A more literal translation of the Hebrew would be: “Lift up the head of each of the community.” The *midrash* notes this verse, “Lift up the head of each of the community.”□ And then the *midrash* continues:

It is not written ‘Exalt the head,’ or ‘Magnify the head’, but ‘Lift up the head’, like a person who says to the executioner, “Take off the head of So-and-So.”□

This could be because the census in the book of Numbers is being taken for men for the purpose of enlisting to prepare for battle in the wilderness. In a real sense, being counted could lead to losing one’s life. When the *midrash* notes that the Hebrew literally says, “Lift up the head,” it is really asking “Are we being counted for life? Or are we being counted for death? Is our community going to survive? Or will it fade away as our census numbers decline?”

This is not just a rhetorical question for us. As Jews we have pondered and dealt with this question for millennia. Most recently as American Jews, the issue was put front and center yet again by the release of yet another study about the question of our thriving or our surviving.

In October of 2013, The Pew Research Center published the results of a survey they conducted entitled, [A Portrait of Jewish Americans](#), including both our demography and affiliation. The study has spurred much reflection and no small amount of hand-wringing about the resulting numbers and about who we are as a people.

Perhaps I waited so long to speak about this publicly because I concur with the words of *Kobelet*, the book of Ecclesiastes: אין-כל-חדש תחת השמש - there is nothing new

under the sun. What will this survey really tell us? Won't I as a rabbi continue to be guided by Jewish tradition and what my teachers taught me – survey or no survey? Did I really become a rabbi only to have this spiritual work be mastered by numbers? Will this data or should this data shape my understanding of Jewish tradition and how I should be a rabbi? Is survival purely a numbers game?

Perhaps I am standing on the shoulders of the great theologian Rabbi Abraham Joshua Heschel who chided leaders at a meeting of the General Assembly of the Council of Jewish Federations in the 1960's, when he said, "There are two words I should like to strike from our vocabulary: surveys and survival. Our community is in spiritual distress, and some of our organizations are often too concerned with digits. Our disease is loss of character and commitment, and the cure of our plight cannot be derived from charts and diagrams." He was never invited again to speak at another Federation General Assembly.

And so when the study [A Portrait of Jewish Americans](#) was released in the fall, I read and watched the commentaries that paraded by on my computer screen, as people wrung their hands once again over the fate of the Jewish people.

Among the many pessimists, I was grateful for one towering and profound voice of realism and optimism: Dr. Sarah Bunin Benor, the Associate Professor of Contemporary Jewish Studies at the Los Angeles campus of Hebrew Union College. What is her take on this survey?

Dr. Benor notes that much of what was published in reports on the survey looked for the most dramatic findings to report. For example, *The Jewish Forward* focused on the fact that in 1957, Jews made up 3.4 % of the U.S. population, compared to 2.2 % today. Oy, cue for more hand-wringing.

But Benor points out that this decrease can be explained by the steady streams of mostly non-Jewish immigrants from Latin America and around the world, which have increased the U.S. population at a higher rate than the Jewish population.

So it depends on how you count. The study estimates that there are eight million people in the United States who are willing to tell a phone interviewer that they are fully or partly Jewish. But many of those are also Christian or have no Jewish ancestry and have not converted. The researchers realized that different readers would want to apply different definitions, so they provided a handy calculator where we can check off boxes to calculate the size of the U.S. Jewish population based on different definitions of what it means to be Jewish.

Here are some of the options one can choose. By clicking on one or more, the total population number shifts accordingly:

- **Jewish by religion** - People whose religion is Jewish
- **Jews of no religion** - People who are atheist, agnostic or have no religion but who were raised Jewish or have a Jewish parent and who consider themselves Jewish aside from religion
- **Jewish self-ID** - People who self-identify as Jewish aside from religion
- **Partly Jewish self-ID** - People who self-identify as partly Jewish aside from religion
- **Jewish background** - People who have at least one Jewish parent or were raised Jewish, but now have another religion or do not consider themselves Jewish
- **Christian by religion**
- **Both Christian and Jewish by religion**
- **Other religion** - e.g., Buddhist, Wiccan, Hindu, etc.
- **Both other religion and Jewish by religion**
- **No religion** - People who have at least one Jewish parent or were raised Jewish, but now have no religion and do not consider themselves Jewish
- **Jewish affinity** - People who say they consider themselves Jewish for any reason – even though they do not have a Jewish parents and were not raised Jewish

It is interesting and key to note that missing from calculator tool is a *halakhic* or a Jewish legal definition that holds in the Orthodox and Conservative understanding of the tradition: there are no options for checking “Jewish by birth to a Jewish mother,” or “converted to Judaism.”

If we include only people who say they are Jews and do not also subscribe to another religion, we find 6.7 million. People who say their religion is Jewish (called “Jews by religion”) total 5.1 million. No matter how you calculate our population, we still have an impressive representation.

And here in Marin County, a mere 3,000 Jews were tallied according to a 1959 survey by the San Francisco-based Jewish Community Federation (JCF). But according to the recently finalized 2004 JCF study, nearly 50,000 Jews now call Marin or Sonoma counties home. How wonderful is that!

I roughly estimate that about 10% of those 50,000 are affiliated with a spiritual community. What I can tell you as a rabbi in this community, is that if I met

personally with all of the Jews and people interested in Judaism whom I encounter in my day to day activities in the broader community, I would not have enough hours in a year to do this! While I meet personally with many people during the course of a week, a month or a year, there are dozens more with whom I could be engaging. As far as I am concerned, the sky is truly the limit with Jewish involvement in Marin.

The Pew study also took a close look at intermarriage. The New York Times reported a 71% rate of intermarriage among non-Orthodox Jews. But Benor points out that this is a bit misleading. First, it includes only people who have married since 2000 and whose marriages are still intact. Second, it includes Jews of no religion. The sample size was too small to calculate the %age of non-Orthodox Jews by religion who married non-Jews in the last thirteen years. But if we look at all Jews by religion, we find the recent intermarriage rate at 50% (marriages from 2000 to 2004) and then 45% (2005-2013); note the drop in the last several years.

Third, if we look only at Jews with two Jewish parents, a common practice in demography, we find the intermarriage rate is 37%, compared to a whopping 83% of those with only one Jewish parent.

Benor then asked Pew to calculate the intermarriage rate for non-Orthodox Jews with two Jewish parents, and they complied: 43%. Again, the sample is too small to divide these results by year of marriage or even age, but it is clear that the “intermarriage rate” can vary widely depending on how it is calculated. And in our own movement, it is 27%.

And Benor goes on to say that instead of bemoaning or even debating the numbers, an alternative response to the survey would be to marvel at the fact that so many Jews still marry other Jews. We live in an age of acceptance: Not only are Christians willing to marry Jews, many (an estimated 800,000) feel so connected to Jews or Judaism that they tell a phone interviewer that they are Jewish, even if neither of their parents is Jewish.

Why don't the majority of Jews marry non-Jews? Benor suggests it is because synagogues, schools, youth groups, Hillels and other Jewish organizations are creating opportunities for Jews to get to know other Jews.

According to conventional wisdom, Jewish organizations are no longer touching most Jews. The survey finds the opposite: 58% of all Jews report that they attend Jewish religious services at a synagogue or other place of worship at least a few times a year. There is little difference among age groups in synagogue attendance.

We see similarly high numbers for Jewish education: 67 % of respondents participated in some kind of formal Jewish education. And when we look at Jewish day school attendance — the most exclusive and demanding form of Jewish education — we see an increase based on age: Only 17 % of those 65 and older attended day school, compared to 35 % of those 18-29. And in our own movement we find that 88 % of Conservative Jews are raising children Jewish. 30 % of Conservative parents have their children enrolled in Jewish day school, and 50 % in another kind of formal Jewish education, such as synagogue schools.

Yes, the report finds that the Jewish population is changing. But I urge us to see ourselves here in Marin in context with the national picture. It is true that these numbers look a little bit different here in Marin. But we are a part of something larger and our values and traditions link us to other Jews and other community across the US and around the world.

As a Jewish adult, I lived in the South Bay for six years and in Los Angeles for twelve years. During these years, well before I ever thought of the possibility of moving to Marin, I knew of this fine congregation. Kol Shofar has a wonderful reputation in broader Jewish community. While we in Marin may often feel isolated as the only Conservative congregation in the county, I have to tell you, that the perception out there is that Kol Shofar is a destination. We are defined by stellar learning and a warm community all housed in a sacred space that calls upon us to share our light with others.

When I reflect on the vibrant experiences and thriving Conservative Jewish communities that I have been a part of from Temple Beth Am in LA, to Congregation Sinai in San Jose, to Congregation Kol Emeth in Palo Alto and now to Kol Shofar, I see a live and relevant way of Jewish life. It is challenging for me to reconcile these experiences over the last twenty plus years, with the assertions that Conservative Judaism is on the decline. According to the Pew study, we make up 18% of the Jewish community in the US, about 1.2 million. But when we looked at those who are affiliated with a synagogue, we make up 29%.

I am heartened by the sage words of the Professor of Jewish Studies and eminent historian, Jonathan Sarna, who also advised the Pew study. In an email to the Jewish Forward, he states that the statistics facing our movement could be good for us. Comparing our movement's situation to that of the Orthodox movement in the 1950s and the Reform movement in the 1930's, he notes that relative lulls preceding large growth. He pointed out that this could force the movement into creative reinvention.

In the past, many were affiliated somewhat by cultural default. But in an era when synagogue affiliation is a more conscious decision, those who do join really do so with intent. Synagogue affiliation is a much less conformist choice than in the past. What I have found in the communities in which I have been a part of, is a Conservative Judaism of hope and courage – what my mentor and Rabbi, Brad Artson, describes as:

“a way of honestly distilling Torah’s wisdom through the lenses of modernity, of integrating new ethical insights into the growing structure of *halakhab* and *mitzvot*, of restoring a passionate service of the Holy One and of God’s people to the center of our spiritual concern. Rather than worrying about whether we are too Reform or too Orthodox, let us create our own agenda based on whether we are true to our own understanding of God’s will. . . Looking over our right and left shoulders precludes clear vision, and is unworthy of a tradition of living Torah. If Conservative Judaism looks eclectic to others, so be it. . . The center must hold for the branches of American Judaism to remain capable of talking to each other, of a common language and a shared destiny. The center must hold to allow the liberals to find pathways to honor and engage the tradition, and for the traditionalists to be able to access academic scholarship and the realities of the 21st Century.”

This is the vision we are nurturing here at Kol Shofar that goes beyond data and defies demographics.

The 20th century scholar Simon Rawidowicz wrote an essay titled, Israel, the Ever-Dying People. The essay opens with the following words:

“The world makes many images of Israel, but Israel makes only one image of itself: that of a being constantly on the verge of ceasing to be, of disappearing.”

Later in the essay, Rawidowicz relates a letter that the great 12th century sage Maimonides wrote after he finished his last major work, the Guide to the Perplexed in North Africa. The letter was written to scholars in Southern France:

"This I have to tell you, that in our difficult times there are none left who care for the Torah and Talmud except for you and your neighbors. All other places are dead or decaying (as far as the Torah is concerned.) There are three or four decaying centers in Palestine, one in Syria, a few in Babylonia. Little is studied in the Yemen and other Arab countries. . . The Jews in India do not even know the written law. Thus all that is left to us is you, in Southern France. Be strong

and fortify yourselves for the benefit of our people for the matter depends on you-that is, the survival of Israel and the Torah depends on you alone."

This was the picture of the end of the glorious Golden Age as painted by one of the greatest and most creative Jews of the Middle Ages: Moshe ben Maimonides.

Even the great Maimonides had his Pew survey of sorts and he erred in estimating that the end of the Jewish people was so near at hand. Heschel would have reprimanded Maimonides too.

And so we return to the curious idiom of counting that opens our *parashah*:

שָׂאוּ אֶת־רֹאשׁ כָּל־עַדְת בְּנֵי־יִשְׂרָאֵל

"Lift up the head of each of the community. " The final take of the *midrash* on this verse is that of an optimist. Lifting up the head is not so that we lose our head to the executioner. Rather lifting up the head to be counted means there is a possibility of rising to greatness. Rabbi Abraham Joshua Heschel is rooting for us. Dr. Sarah Benor is rooting for us and so are Rabbi Brad Artson and Dr. Simon Rawidowicz. But who's counting? Shabbat Shalom.