

This week's parashah, Bamidbar, opens with the instructions to take a census of the Israelite people, or, more specifically, a count of the males over the age of 20, those who are *yotzei tzeva*, "going out to the army."

The word "count" is not actually used. Numbers 1, verse 3 instructs, "שָׂאוּ אֶת-רֹאשׁ בְּנֵי-יִשְׂרָאֵל" literally, "lift the head of the whole community of Israel," and take is what is translated as "take a census."

This ambiguous description of census appears throughout Torah. The very first instruction about a census, back in Exodus, Chapter 30, uses the same euphemism: "Ki tissa et rosh b'nei Yisrael." – translated as, "When you take a census of the Israelites, but is again, literally, "when you lift the heads of the Israelites." That verse continues with the instruction that each person should actually bring a half shekel coin, and the coins should be counted, rather than the people, with the verse ending, "so that there be no plague among them, when you count them."

Medieval commentator Rashi comments on that verse in Exodus, "during a census, the Evil Eye presides, and plague comes to them." Indeed, there is a description of a plague punishing King David for taking a census. This anxiety about the census actually leads a halacha, a Jewish law that forbids counting Jews directly. As some of you have been poorly attended services know, we don't even count for a minyan, we use a Hebrew verse with ten words and see if we have enough people to complete the verse.

And yet, on the verse in this week's parasha, "lift the head of the whole community of Israel" Rashi, the same medieval commentator says, "Because of how beloved [the Israelites] are, God counts them every so often."

According to Rashi, and the evidence of the repeated censuses in Torah, God frequently likes to check up on how many of there are – or at least, the males of age. At the same time, the very act of doing that is fraught with danger, and it must be done via euphemism – “raise the head.”

Of course, a census *is* fraught and it continues to be so to this day, as we have seen with controversies about the US 2020 census. In Torah study yesterday, we discussed the problematics of census. Sometimes we are counting for the purposes of a draft, and there is ambivalence about that, about knowing that to be counted is to be accountable, to be expected to show up when called. Also, someone is always left out – in the Biblical census, it’s the women and children. Today, we worry about whether non-citizens, whether people without access will be left out.

The best a census can do is offer us a snapshot of the the statistics and demographics of a community – and of course it will be immediately inaccurate as people don’t stop being born and dying. The worst a census can do is diminish the importance of individuals in our community, by reducing them to numbers and statistics. Of course it is dangerous.

This past week, a bruhaha has developed in the Jewish communal blogosphere in response to a paper that some Jewish social scientists published, suggesting that our data in approximating how many Jews of Color exist in the US may be faulty. Who gets to define ‘Jews of Color?’ Who gets to decide how they are counted?

But as Yavilah McCoy, a national leader of Jews of color pointed out this week in E-Jewish philanthropy, Jews of color, no matter how few or many there are, are facing greater health and financial risks during this COVID crisis, as are people of color in general. She wrote, “Jews of Color studies that have emerged over the last several years have provided plentiful data to our community supporting the fact that Jews of Color and their families exist and have been historically under-counted and under-served by existing Jewish institutions and systems.... As we consider current strategies that are developing to better prepare Jewish institutions for the “post-Covid” moment, we are wondering what can be learned and changed through acknowledging who is being seen and not seen as Jewishly vulnerable within the Covid-19 crisis.”

Ms. McCoy’s point underscores the same problem with the Biblical census – sometimes we need to count, in order to know who is here. But counting is problematic, if we only see people as statistics. The aggregate numbers should never obscure the humanity of each individual in the community.

As Rabbi Jonathan Sacks writes, “That is the meaning of the phrase, “lift the head,” used in the context of a census. God tells Moses that there is a danger, when counting a nation, that each individual will feel insignificant. . . .In Judaism taking a census must always be done in such a way as to signal that we are valued as individuals. We each have unique gifts. There is a contribution only I can bring. To lift someone’s head means to show them favour, to recognise them. It is a gesture of love.”

This feels particularly important in this moment as the US and the state of Oregon take steps to “re-open the economy”, a term that itself is a euphemism – for all of the people who will be grateful for to go back to work and to get out, and for all of the people who will be terrified to go back to work, who will find their safety compromised by this decision. In the microcosm that is our Jewish community, we feel the tension of the desire to gather together, to have a minyan, to be counted. But we also know that each of us counts, and that gathering together in this building, attractive as it is, is not worth putting the health of individuals in our community at risk. So we will negotiate, as Torah negotiates counting and not counting, with an attempt to gather outside together, starting in about a month, and we will proceed with care, as Torah also commands.

Psalm 147:4 has a description of God that I love. It says, “מונה מספר לכוכבים, לקרא שמות יקרא” – “God numbers the stars and calls each of them by name.” What this implies is a God who can hold the vastness of the aggregate – the number of all the stars, while simultaneously intimately caring about each part. And we are created in the image of God. We, too must strive for that bifocal vision, of not just knowing how many we are, but of seeking to raise up each head.

Shabbat shalom.