

Kol Rina
An Independent Minyan
Parashat Bamidbar
May 15, 2021 *** 4 Sivan, 5781

Kol Rina – An Independent Minyan, is a traditional egalitarian community. We are haimish (homey/folksy), friendly, participatory, warm and welcoming. We hold weekly services in South Orange as well as holiday services and celebrations which are completely lay led. We welcome all to our services and programs from non-Hebrew readers to Jewish communal and education professionals.

Bamidbar in a Nutshell

https://www.chabad.org/parshah/article_cdo/aid/2121/jewish/Bamidbar-in-a-Nutshell.htm
In the Sinai Desert, G-d says to conduct a census of the twelve tribes of Israel. Moses counts 603,550 men of draftable age (20 to 60 years); the tribe of Levi, numbering 22,300 males age one month and older, is counted separately. The Levites are to serve in the Sanctuary. They replace the firstborn, whose number they approximated, since they were disqualified when they participated in the worshipping of the Golden Calf. The 273 firstborn who lacked a Levite to replace them had to pay a fiveshekel “ransom” to redeem themselves. When the people broke camp, the three Levite clans dismantled and transported the Sanctuary, and reassembled it at the center of the next encampment. They then erected their own tents around it: the Kohathites, who carried the Sanctuary’s vessels (the Ark, menorah, etc.) in their specially designed coverings on their shoulders, camped to its south; the Gershonites, in charge of its tapestries and roof coverings, to its west; and the families of Merari, who transported its wall panels and pillars, to its north. Before the Sanctuary’s entranceway, to its east, were the tents of Moses, Aaron, and Aaron’s sons. Beyond the Levite circle, the twelve tribes camped in four groups of three tribes each. To the east were Judah (pop. 74,600), Issachar (54,400) and Zebulun (57,400); to the south, Reuben (46,500), Simeon (59,300) and Gad (45,650); to the west, Ephraim (40,500), Manasseh (32,200) and Benjamin (35,400); and to the north, Dan (62,700), Asher (41,500) and Naphtali (53,400). This formation was kept also while traveling. Each tribe had its own nassi (prince or leader), and its own flag with its tribal color and emblem.

Haftarah in a Nutshell – Hosea 2: 1-22

https://www.chabad.org/parshah/article_cdo/aid/895213/jewish/Haftarah-in-a-Nutshell.htm
This week's haftarah begins with the words, "The number of the children of Israel shall be as the sand of the sea [shore], which can be neither measured nor counted." An appropriate reading for the first Torah reading of the Book of Numbers. Hosea first prophesies about the eventual reunification of the houses of Judah and Israel. During the Messianic Era, these two perennial antagonists will make peace and appoint a single leader. Hosea then rebukes the Jewish people for their infidelity, abandoning their "husband," G-d, and engaging in adulterous affairs with

pagan deities. He describes the punishments they will suffer because of this unfaithfulness. Eventually, though, Hosea reassures the Jews that they will repent, and G-d will accept them back wholeheartedly. The haftorah concludes with the moving words: "And I will betroth you to Me forever, and I will betroth you to Me with righteousness and with justice and with loving-kindness and with mercy."

FOOD FOR THOUGHT

[Leading a Nation of Individuals \(Bamidbar 5781\) by Rabbi Jonathan Sacks z"l](https://rabbisacks.org/bamidbar-5781/)
<https://rabbisacks.org/bamidbar-5781/>

The book of Bamidbar begins with a census of the Israelites. That is why this book is known in English as Numbers. This raises a number of questions: what is the significance of this act of counting? And why here at the beginning of the book? Besides which, there have already been two previous censuses of the people and this is the third within the space of a single year. Surely one would have been sufficient. Additionally, does counting have anything to do with leadership? The place to begin is to note what appears to be a contradiction. On the one hand, Rashi says that the acts of counting in the Torah are gestures of love on the part of God:

Because they (the Children of Israel) are dear to Him, God counts them often. He counted them when they were about to leave Egypt. He counted them after the Golden Calf to establish how many were left. And now that He was about to cause His Presence to rest on them (with the inauguration of the Sanctuary), He counted them again. (Rashi to Bamidbar 1:1)

When God initiates a census of the Israelites, it is to show that He loves them. On the other hand, the Torah is explicit in saying that taking a census of the nation is fraught with risk:

Then God said to Moses, "When you take a census of the Israelites to count them, each must give to God a ransom for his life at the time he is counted. Then no plague will come on them when you number them." (Ex. 30:11-12).

When, centuries later, King David counted the people, there was Divine anger and seventy thousand people died.[1] How can this be, if counting is an expression of love?

The answer lies in the phrase the Torah uses to describe the act of counting: se'u et rosh, literally, "lift the head." (Num. 1:2) This is a strange, circumlocutory expression. Biblical Hebrew contains many verbs meaning "to count": limnot, lifkod, lispor, lachshov. Why does the Torah not use these simple words for the census, choosing instead the roundabout expression, "lift the heads" of the people?

The short answer is this: In any census, count or roll-call there is a tendency to focus on the total – the crowd, the multitude, the mass. Here is a nation of sixty million people, or a company with one hundred thousand employees, or a sports crowd of sixty thousand. Any total tends to value the group or nation as a whole. The larger the total, the stronger the army, the more popular the team, and the more successful the company.

Counting devalues the individual and tends to make him or her replaceable. If one soldier dies in battle, another will take their place. If one person leaves the organisation, someone else can be hired to do their job.

Notoriously, too, crowds have the effect of tending to make the individual lose their independent judgment and follow what others are doing. We call this “herd behaviour,” and it sometimes leads to collective madness. In 1841 Charles Mackay published his classic study, *Extraordinary Popular Delusions and the Madness of Crowds*, which tells of the South Sea Bubble that cost thousands of people their money in the 1720s, and the tulip mania in Holland when entire fortunes were spent on single tulip bulbs. The Great Crashes of 1929 and 2008 had the same crowd psychology.

Another great work, Gustav Le Bon’s *The Crowd: A Study of the Popular Mind* (1895) showed how crowds exercise a “magnetic influence” that transmutes the behaviour of individuals into a collective “group mind.” As he put it, “An individual in a crowd is a grain of sand amid other grains of sand, which the wind stirs up at will.” People in a crowd become anonymous. Their conscience is silenced. They lose a sense of personal responsibility.

Crowds are peculiarly prone to regressive behaviour, primitive reactions and instinctual behaviour. They are easily led by figures who are demagogues, playing on people’s fears and their sense of victimhood. Such leaders, Le Bon noted, are “especially recruited from the ranks of those morbidly nervous excitable half-deranged persons who are bordering on madness,”[2] a remarkable anticipation of Hitler. It is no accident that Le Bon’s work was published in France at a time of rising antisemitism and the Dreyfus trial.

Hence the significance of one remarkable feature of Judaism: its principled insistence – like no other civilisation before – on the dignity and integrity of the individual. We believe that every human being was created in the image and likeness of God. The Sages said that every life is like an entire universe.

[3] Maimonides wrote that each of us should see ourselves as if our next act could change the fate of the world.[4] Every dissenting view is carefully recorded in the Mishnah, even if the law is otherwise. Every verse of the Torah is capable, said the Sages, of seventy interpretations. No voice, no view, is silenced. Judaism never allows us to lose our individuality in the mass.

There is a wonderful blessing mentioned in the Talmud to be said on seeing six

hundred thousand Israelites together in one place. It is: “Blessed are You, Lord... who discerns secrets.”[5] The Talmud explains that every person is different. We each have different attributes. We all think our own thoughts. Only God can enter the minds of each of us and know what we are thinking, and this is what the blessing refers to. In other words, even in a massive crowd where, to human eyes, faces blur into a mass, God still relates to us as individuals, not as members of a crowd.

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. “What am I? What difference can I make? I am only one of millions, a mere wave in the ocean, a grain of sand on the sea-shore, dust on the surface of infinity.”

Against that, God tells Moses to lift people’s heads by showing that they each count; they matter as individuals. Indeed in Jewish law a *davar she-be-minyan*, something that is counted, sold individually rather than by weight, is never nullified even in a mixture of a thousand or a million others.[6] 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.

There is, however, all the difference in the world between individuality and individualism. Individuality means that I am a unique and valued member of a team. Individualism means that I am not a team player at all. I am interested in myself alone, not the group. Harvard sociologist Robert Putnam gave this a famous name, noting that more people than ever in the United States are going ten-pin bowling, but fewer than ever are joining bowling teams. He called this phenomenon “Bowling alone.”[7] MIT professor Sherry Turkle calls our age of Twitter, Facebook, and electronic rather than face-to-face friendships, “Alone together.”[8] Judaism values individuality, not individualism. As Hillel said, “If I am only for myself, what am I?”[9]

All this has implications for Jewish leadership. We are not in the business of counting numbers. The Jewish people always was small and yet achieved great things. Judaism has a profound mistrust of demagogic leaders who manipulate the emotions of crowds. Moses at the Burning Bush spoke of his inability to be eloquent. “I am not a man of words” (Ex. 4:10). He thought this was a deficiency in a leader. In fact, it was the opposite. Moses did not sway people by his oratory. Rather, he lifted them by his teaching.

A Jewish leader has to respect individuals. They must “lift their heads.” If you seek to lead, however small or large the group you lead, you must always communicate the value you place on everyone, including those others exclude: the widow, the

orphan and the stranger. You must never attempt to sway a crowd by appealing to the primitive emotions of fear or hate. You must never ride roughshod over the opinions of others.

It is hard to lead a nation of individuals, but this is the most challenging, empowering, inspiring leadership of all[1]. 2 Samuel 24; 1 Chronicles 21. [2] Gustav Le Bon, *The Crowd*, London, Fisher Unwin 1896, 134. [3] Mishnah Sanhedrin 4:4.

[4] Maimonides, *Mishneh Torah*, Hilchot Teshuvah 3:4. [5] Brachot 58a. [6] Beitsah 3b. [7] Robert Putnam, *Bowling Alone*, New York, Simon & Schuster, 2000. [8] Sherry Turkle, *Alone Together: Why We Expect More from Technology and Less from Each Other*, New York, Basic Books, 2011.

[9] Mishnah Avot 1:14.

The Limit of Numbers – Bamidbar 5781 By Rabbi Yitz Greenberg

https://mechonhadar.s3.amazonaws.com/mh_torah_source_sheets/GreenbergParashatBemidbar5781_0.pdf?utm_campaign=Dvar%20Torah%205781&utm_medium=email&_hsmi=126727987&_hsenc=p2ANqtz-9WXUoju9AnF0sAM3Y6qvM75SydtTmthRU8dCVWH75XdilFeYh3Ub_rGll2p6-M0GG9-q1pl4rwHeMGBXkDQqgtKmllyeg&utm_content=126727987&utm_source=hs_email

The fourth book of Torah, Bemidbar (“in the desert”) is a narrative of the forty year exodus journey, with its repeated failures. It is also called Humash HaPekudim (the Book of Counting) in rabbinic literature.¹ It starts with a census of the Jews who left Egypt and subsequently died in the wilderness. It closes with a count of the next generation which grew up during the trek and is poised to enter the land of Canaan.

The opening census is surprising. The Torah already reported the number of Jews departing Egypt as around 600,000, not counting children (Exodus 12:36). Bemidbar’s narrative starts only twelve and a half months later.² Why count again so soon?

Counting Jews can be a dangerous business. At the end of the Second Book of Samuel we are told that King David ordered a census by direct people count and that brought the punishment of a plague on the Israelites (II Samuel 30). In contrast, in the census conducted after the terrible breach of the covenant in the incident of the Golden Calf, Moses specifically did not count people directly. Rather, each and every adult person was asked to give a half *shekel* coin. The coins were then counted to arrive at the actual population number (Exodus 30:11-16). As a result of this census, there was no punishment at all.

Similarly, when trying to establish whether a *minyan* was present so that prayer service could include “*devarim shebikdushah* / matters of special holiness,”³ popular Jewish traditional culture sensed this objection and avoided counting individuals in synagogue. Instead of enumerating individuals, people would recite a

10 word verse, applying each word to an individual present. E.g. *Hoshiah* (1) *et* (2) *amekha* (3) *uvareikh* (4) *et* (5) *nahalatekha* (6) *ur'eim* (7) *venas'eim* (8) *ad* (9) *ha'olam* (10).⁴ Even more famously, people would establish the presence of a *minyan* by counting: “not-1, not-2, not-3...” until getting to “not-10.”

Why is there a negative attitude toward direct counting of people? There is actually a substantive theological issue involved. The human being is an image of God. This means that each individual is of infinite value, equal and unique.⁵ Counting an individual implies that we have “delimited” the person, we have established their parameters and can classify them by common characteristics as if all people are one type. We can now add one to another in the category of population registry. We should be forever exploring this unlimited dignity and never reach its limit enough to then lump the person with others as if they were similar units.

Furthermore, such a count constitutes a kind of denial of people’s uniqueness. For the purposes of the census we bracket the infinite values and hold the uniqueness, while we agglomerate all the people. This is useful for administration, taxation, and other services. While we justify the count for utilitarian reasons, this process is an encroachment on the most fundamental dignities with which God has endowed all humans.⁶

This avoidance of counting may sound like folk superstition or playful exaggeration. But in the Holocaust, the Nazis grasped that turning people into numbers alone was a way of degrading and devaluing them. The acme of dehumanization in the Holocaust was achieved by turning the prisoners in Auschwitz and other concentration camps into numbers. Once the number was tattooed on them, prisoners and guards were punished if they called people by their actual name, for this would honor their dignity and value. Numbering expressed their non-value, their facelessness, their dispensability—to be replaced by yet another less-than-human number prisoner.⁷

Why then did Moses and Aaron count the Jews again at the beginning of the actual trek through the desert? I submit that for the two leaders this was a celebration of the Exodus and an expression of triumphalism at liberating so many people from slavery. One can imagine the exhilaration Moses and Aaron felt when they added up and found the total number of Israelites to be 603,550(!)—not even counting the Levites (Numbers 2:32). Consider that when Jacob’s family came down to Egypt it comprised a total of seventy people—including Joseph and his family already there (Genesis 46:27). For the two brothers, the census was the exclamation point on a demographic explosive growth by the children of Israel.⁸

This amazing result also illuminates the sad implications of the second census at

the end of the book of Numbers. Moses and Aaron undoubtedly projected that the remarkable growth of the Israelites would continue and that they would soon reach the ideal numbers promised to Abraham when he became a Jew: "...count the stars—if you are able to number them—so shall your seed be [numerous]" (Genesis 15:5). In fact, the final count showed a total of 601,730 (Numbers 26:51)—that is essentially zero population growth. The leadership failed to see that projecting present trends indefinitely in the future frequently leads to grave distortions and unanticipated outcomes. This is a classic problem of Wall Street analysis. A company grows initially and quickly—so its development is projected *ad infinitum*. The annals of bankruptcy are littered with the bones of super stocks that were flash-in-the-pan.

Moses' and Aaron's second error was failure to factor in the **quality** dimension of people. It's true that size does matter. Larger numbers of Israelites would support more projects and capabilities and promised a large fighting force that could quickly conquer the Land of Canaan. However, Moses and Aaron failed to see that the Exodus generation was fatally flawed with a slave mentality. People were afraid of making independent judgments for which they would have to put their lives on the line. Unlike free people, they were unprepared to take on high risks for which they had no guarantee of success. Hence the Israelites balked and panicked at the idea of entering into Canaan directly and conquering a homeland (Numbers 13-14). Imbued with the psychology of slaves they were thrown by unexpected difficulties or fazed by being faced with new routines. They withdrew into themselves or sat and grumbled when there were shortages of water, or less than tasty food supplies or any out of the ordinary requirements. Not only did the Exodus generation not thrive in the wilderness, they were out of sorts most of the time. They took on fewer tasks. They had smaller families. In the end, they accomplished little of the grand plans that the leadership had in mind. By the end, Moses and Aaron were burned out. Only a new generation and new leadership could consummate the dreams and plans of the Exodus cohort.

The sad paradox of the book of Numbers is that a whole generation died out and a new generation was born and raised—but Jewish life basically marched in place. In the end, the numbers misled or maybe, I should say, led to nowhere. In his summary of his life, Moses said that the Jewish people was about quality, not numbers. "The Lord did not desire to love you or choose you because you were numerous, for you are among the fewest of all the nations" (Deuteronomy 7:7).

To this day, the Jewish impact on world civilization has not been by the numbers. Christianity and Islam became the monotheistic mass religions that conquered the world. In secular realms, Jews have had extraordinary impact on modern and post-modern civilization due to the remarkable achievements of a small number of

quality individuals who reshaped understanding of the world or reimagined whole fields of human activities—in business, science, and culture. The Jewish state, Israel, is similarly disproportionately influential to its size and numbers. It has transformed deserts into green and modeled the absorption of immigrants from all over the world. Its technological innovation in the field of medicine saves not only the lives of Israelis but is advancing positive health outcomes across the globe.

I do not intend here to dismiss quantitative analysis or deny the importance of demography. It is true that the future of the Jewish communities in the Diaspora is in danger due to low birth rates and high assimilation rates. Quantitative studies and analysis are needed to detect weaknesses and assess what aspects of Jewish life and culture are working and which are not. Nevertheless, the future of Judaism is dependent on developing a higher **quality** content of the Jewish way of living, one able to flourish and attract people in the presence of one of the most advanced and attractive civilizations of all time. Counting only gives us part of the story.

It is also critical that Jewish culture and religion absorb and integrate some of the profound insights and breakthroughs of the general culture. The Jewish way must be articulated in the language of the current high civilization. This means that the present massive sector of Jewish life, occupied by Orthodox and traditional Judaism, will have to widen its ideas and reformulate its values in a manner more respectful of the general culture and more illuminated by those best insights. The more progressive religions and the secular streams will have to reinforce their informal Jewish structures and values to assure their continuing distinctiveness in the midst of integration. The Pew research study of American Jewry suggests that the liberal streams which numerically dominate American Jewish life are heading for a demographic crash unless they step up the intensity and quality of their Jewish life.⁹

The key to a successful assurance of Judaism's future in post-modern civilization will be the development of a core population that is steeped in Jewish memory and values in a manner so internalized and freely chosen that it thrives in the presence of dynamic other religions and cultures. Aaron and Moses failed in their attempts to upgrade the quality of the exodus generation's Jewish life. We cannot afford to fail. This is where our communal investments and special efforts should be focused now.

Shabbat Shalom.

¹ See, for example, Babylonian Talmud Yoma 68b. ² The Israelite Exodus occurred on the 15th day of Nissan, the first month in the first year of their leaving. Moses and Aaron are instructed to count on “the first day of the second month in the second year of their leaving Egypt” (Numbers 1:1).

³ These include such prayers as the Barekhu and the Kedushah. ⁴ “Save your people, bless your

inheritance, shepherd, carry them forever” (Psalm 28:9). ⁵ See my book, *The Triumph of Life*, (forthcoming), chapter 2. ⁶ Compare Rabbi Akiva’s statement in Mishnah Avot 3:14.

⁷ A census or any government counting is not to be compared to the Nazi policies in any way. I denounce the meretricious use of Nazi analogies to oppose the government restrictions during the COVID-19 lockdowns. Such debasing language is outrageous and a cheapening/demeaning of the horror of the Holocaust. Nevertheless, we should be alert that all counting or objectification of human beings impinges somewhat on their dignity. Such steps can be turned by evil people into grave assaults on human value. ⁸ One can guess that the quantum growth in numbers was achieved in part by other enslaved groups joining the Israelites’ exodus under cover of the panic and breakdown of the Egyptians’ mastery. This so-called *erev rav* / “mixed multitude” proved to be undigested culturally and religiously and a source of religious rebellion and violation of discipline. See the traditional commentators on Numbers 11:4. ⁹ See the summary and analysis of this 2013 report here: <https://www.pewforum.org/2013/10/01/jewish-american-beliefs-attitudes-culture-survey/>, and the just published report here: <https://www.pewforum.org/2021/05/11/jewish-americans-in-2020/>.

“Individualism, Conformism and Community: The Book of Bamidbar“ By Rabbi Dr. Kenneth Brander

<https://ots.org.il/parsha-and-purpose-bamidbar-5781/#transcript>

“*Not one, not two, not three...*”

This is a traditional way of counting people in Judaism. We don’t count Jews conventionally, using numbers, but rather look for other ways of reaching the final sum.

Because in Judaism, every individual is important – every person is an entire world. If we count them as part of a larger whole, we limit their uniqueness and reduce them to being merely part of a group.

This dialectic of the prominence of the individual vs.the priority of the cmnty plays out throughout the entire book of Bamidbar, which our Sages accurately called “Sefer HaPekudim”, the English translation of which, the “Book of Numbers” – how the cmnty is counted and the individual adds up.

For example, the daughters of Tzelafchad, women who challenge Moshe and ask how it is possible that they are not counted for inheritance simply because they did not have any male siblings.

Why should our family, they asked, which differs from the communal norm, be excluded from inheritance in the Land of Israel?

Ultimately, the perspective of this individual family triumphs over the communal norm.

Another example is the mitzvah of Pesach Sheni, in which individuals who for various reasons were unable to bring the Pascal Sacrifice on the 14th of Nissan when the community is commanded to, are offered a “do over” one month later, when they are able to offer the Korban.

And in a third example, the Tribes of Reuven, Gad and part of Menashe request of

Moshe that due to their particular individual needs they cannot dwell in a geographic area known as Israel, and ask that the definition of the Land of Israel be expanded to accommodate their particular needs.

Sefer Bamidbar – the Book of Numbers – highlights for us the challenge and the responsibility that we have to be committed to the larger narrative of community on the one hand, while at the same time remembering that the goal of the community is to create an environment which inspires each person's creativity and ability to contribute their own unique talents to the world.

It reminds us that yes, our relationship to God needs to include the reality that we are part of a community, but it must not be limited to that paradigm: each of us needs to find our own individual rendezvous with God.

And it asks of us to be counted and to be willing to accept this duality: to celebrate our individuality while concurrently being part of our community.

Shabbat Shalom.

[Parshat Bamidbar-The Book of Ruth: True Love](https://ots.org.il/parshat-bamidbar-the-book-of-ruth-true-love/)

<https://ots.org.il/parshat-bamidbar-the-book-of-ruth-true-love/>

As Shavuot marks our receiving the Torah, the ultimate connection between the Jewish people and the Almighty, it would seem that the special text of the day would be all about our love for Him, like *Shir Hashirim*, Song of Songs. Instead we read *Megillat Rut*, the Book of Ruth, a truly unique text which at face value has only a tenuous connection to the festival. Yet by looking carefully at Ruth's story we will see it is the foundation not only of this holiday, but also our core Jewish values and the keys to Ultimate Redemption. Exploring *Megillat Rut* reveals a beautiful tale of love *ben adam l'chavero*, of people's support for one another.

Megillat Rut is aptly named as it follows the journey of Naomi and her daughter-in-law, Ruth. The text opens with the word 'vayhi' which in biblical literature means times are difficult. Indeed these are very painful times, as we quickly learn about a famine, the death of Naomi's husband and the death of her two sons. This introduction of hard times, unfortunately is not unique to this family or to this period in history. Much of Jewish history could begin with the word 'vayhi'.

In contrast, 'David', the last word of *Megillat Rut*, offers a more overt look to the future and to better times. With this singular word, we have received the introduction and the lineage to David, the great king of Israel, whose impressive resume includes conquering and establishing Jerusalem and writing *Tehillim*.

Looking at how the story of Ruth moves from a place of enormous pain to the Davidic dynasty is the lesson for Shavuot and all time. The Megillah begins by describing the struggles of Naomi, Ruth, and Orpah. The dialogue opens with Naomi trying to send her daughters-in-law away, with berachot, kisses, and tears. Although the time is painful, the connection between these women is deeply heartwarming. Orpah heeds her mother-in-law's words while Ruth follows her heart and continues with Naomi to Bet Lehem, to Israel.

When they arrive, Naomi is greeted by the local women. With great transparency, Naomi informs them of her pain and struggles. The next greeting comes from Boaz, a crucial character, as he calls to others, “May the Almighty be with you!” They respond, “May Hashem bless you!”

The beautiful interpersonal care and spiritual awareness in this exchange is furthered by the ensuing conversation. Boaz observes someone new, a stranger in their midst. Although the reaction to a foreigner is often negative, Boaz is incredibly proactive and kind. He demands the others look after Ruth’s well-being, and then approaches her with care and support. He offers food, safety, and assistance from him and all of his people.

Eventually Boaz and Ruth marry, but their love story begins here at their first interaction. It is not a tale of romance, like *Shir Hashirim*, Song of Songs. It is noticing a stranger, inquiring for their wellbeing, and providing for their needs. This is the ‘love story’ of *ben adam l’chavero*, of people’s support for one another. When Ruth queries his kindness, Boaz explains that he heard her story and knows her goodness. His words revolve around compassion, generosity, and closeness to Hashem.

These themes flow through all of the dialogue, all of the conversations, throughout the Megillah. Ruth, Naomi, Boaz, and anonymous personalities, male and female, speak to one another in encouraging kindness, support, and a connection with the Divine. No occurrences in the text are miraculous or even remarkable. It simply chronicles the lives of regular people and their struggles and successes in the land of Israel, some 3000 years ago.

Except few people live their lives like this today! Obviously times have changed with *yibbum*, levirate marriage, not being encouraged and the barley harvest using more technology. But ultimately the struggles of mankind have not changed. Unfortunately what has changed is the way we speak to and treat others. It is rare to find someone who consistently speaks and acts like the personalities in *Megillat Rut*.

Shavuot, the Revelation, binds us in our relationship with Hashem, *ben adam l’makom*. Reading *Megillat Rut* on this day should open our eyes to its corollary, *ben adam l’chavero*, the commandments which require us to care for mankind.

Are we greeting friends and strangers with blessings of connection to our Creator? Are we truly supporting our friends with words and actions of assistance and encouragement? And have we sought out the stranger to welcome, comfort, and uplift them? These are the types of words and actions which moved a family from the pain of ‘*vayhi*’ to King David. Emulating this behavior and incorporating it into our own lives will move us from our personal pains and struggles to bringing

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Counting the Moments: Shavuot by Shuly Rubin Schwartz

<https://www.jtsa.edu/counting-the-moments>

Among the many ways that the pandemic has impacted us this past year has been our relationship to the passage of time. On the one hand, time felt like a blur, with one day bleeding into another. Save for Shabbat, each day looked like the day before and the day after. We wore the same clothes and interacted face-to-face with the same few people in our pods. We sharply curtailed, cancelled, or postponed the life-cycle celebrations, sporting events, live performances, and travel that would normally punctuate our year. Our lives constricted dramatically, as did our hopes and dreams, and even if we were fortunate enough not to suffer illness, death, or job loss, many of us experienced a sense of monotony or diminishment. On the other hand, in some ways, our relationship to time's passage was heightened. We experienced minute changes in spring's unfolding previously missed; memories of the last day in our office space remain etched in our minds; and we wistfully recall the last time we indulged in previously mundane activities like haircuts and in-person clothes shopping. We were painfully aware of just how many months and days had passed since we last saw close relatives and friends who live a distance from us, and when we last hugged our grandchildren and/or our parents.

Shavuot is a holiday that is defined by marking time. Its very name, the “Festival of Weeks,” highlights its temporal relationship to Pesach, as we count the Omer each day until we reach the fiftieth day and celebrate Shavuot. This period, called ספירה, literally means “counting,” and shares the same grammatical root as the word for “story,” ספור, reminding us of the many meanings Jews have ascribed to this time. For example, some interpreted the Omer as tracking the transformation of the Israelites from slaves to free people who could willingly receive Torah. When Jews counted the Omer each year, they were enacting their growing preparedness to receive the Torah anew each Shavuot. Sefirah is also a sad period in which we recall painful episodes in the Jewish past ascribed to this time, beginning with the Talmudic recounting of the death of 12,000 pairs of Rabbi Akiva's disciples because they did not respect each other (BT Yevamot 62b).

Although Jews today observe Shavuot beginning on the 6th of Sivan, there is no mention of a specific date in the Torah. On the contrary, the Torah commands us to count fifty days from Pesach and then observe Shavuot (Lev. 23:15–16, Deut. 16:9–10), but it does not specify when to begin the count. According to the Talmud, this was a point of controversy between the Rabbis and the Boethusians (a group associated with the Sadducees), and the Rabbinic interpretation has prevailed: We count from the second night of Pesach, not the day after the Shabbat following the start of Pesach, i.e. Sunday. To prove the rectitude of their view, several Rabbis parse the biblical text to quell any doubts (BT Menahot 65a–66a).

Before the Jewish calendar was fixed, the date of Shavuot also varied based on the testimony of witnesses: Shavuot could fall on the 5th, 6th, or 7th of Sivan. In rabbinic literature, the variability of Shavuot stemmed from varying opinions concerning the actual day on which the Torah was given to the Israelites in the desert. In the Talmud Bavli ([Shabbat 86b](#)), Rabbi Yose says that the Torah was given on the 7th of Sivan, while the other Rabbis disagree, stating that it was given on the 6th of Sivan. A third opinion, found in the Talmud Yerushalmi ([Shabbat 9:3](#)), contends that the Torah was given on the 6th day of the week, i.e., on a Friday. From the perspective of the Torah, the Rabbis, and the old system of a variable calendar, the celebration of Shavuot was embedded in temporal ambiguity. Jews could strive for the moment when they would commemorate receiving the Torah, feeling once again that they themselves were accepting it, but they could not be sure when this peak (Sinai) moment would occur.

In the year 2021/5781, numerous online calendars and reminders guarantee that we always know exactly when Shavuot falls. Yet, in this pandemic year, we can viscerally identify with the uncertainty of the calendar that Jews contended with centuries ago, because the pandemic has completely upended our relationship to the passage of time. As a result, we experience the power of counting the Omer this year with renewed appreciation. Though we're still counting pandemic time, we're also starting to count differently—with excitement, with hope: the date two weeks after vaccination when we achieve full immunity; the number of meals we enjoy with friends; the moment when we hug our loved ones tightly; the number of people we see in person.

Unlike Omer counting, we know that the pandemic will not end on a specific date. And yet, after a year of “languishing” with few special moments to plan for, the process of counting toward the approaching end, of embracing every milestone and marker of normalcy, lifts our spirits and propels us toward restoring treasured activities and relationships.

As we continue to count, may we do so deliberately and meaningfully in anticipation of a brighter, safer future in the months ahead. (Shuly Rubin Schwartz is Chancellor and Irving Lehrman Research Professor of American Jewish History at JTS)

Yahrtzeits

Mike Schatzberg remembers his mother Marion Schatzberg on Saturday May 15th (Sivan 4).

Neil Fox remembers his mother Jeanette Fox (Hannah) Monday May 17th (Sivan 6)

Gail Yazersky remembers her father Martin Yazersky on Wednesday May 19th (Sivan 8)

Lisa Small remembers her mother Ruby Small (Rivkah Bat Eta Esther) on Wednesday May 19th (Sivan 8)

Mel Zwillenberg remembers Susan's father Gerald Altman (Yosef Shmuel) on Thursday May 20th (Sivan 9)

