


— intermarried or not — so that those unfamiliar with the sometimes complex “choreography” of Jewish life will be invited into and helped with the “Jewish dance.”

Jewish numbers are certainly subject to contestation — maybe that’s why God commanded

Moses to count the Israelites twice. That said, good and true Jewish numbers can illuminate and generate good Jewish public policy — but only if we adopt a more dispassionate approach to evaluating them, even, or especially, when their implications are disturbing. 

by the numbers

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Who Is Rich and What Is a Big Community?

RUHAMA WEISS

Who can count the dust of Jacob?

“I will make your offspring as the dust of the Earth, so that if one can count the dust of the Earth, then your offspring, too, can be counted.” (Genesis 13:16) Such is God’s promise to Abraham. Was this promise ever fulfilled? Would we want it fulfilled? Numerous biblical censuses of the nation of Israel count the persons and clans of our ancestors. We find dreams on the one hand, reality on the other. In actuality, we are not as numerous as the sands of the seashore; we are a rather small nation that can definitely be counted.

Does size matter?

Why do we want to be a multitude? Is our size important to God? The fantasy of being “as the sands on the seashore” creates an anxiety that remains part of the counting of the nation. Because we can be counted, we are counted. But taking the census can be catastrophic; God, thus, commands us to count silver instead of people.

What thread connects the divine promise that we would be as the sands on the seashore and the prohibition to count the Israelites? Is this a fear of the greed that accompanies counting or is this a fear of encountering a limited reality? Why is our size as a people important?

Who is rich?

How do I count my money? How do I know if I have enough? The Talmud tells of several Jewish sages in the second century of the Common Era who tried to understand the common desire of becoming rich. What did they do? They played a type of conceptual game in which each sage offered a definition of the concept of wealth. The interesting definitions that entered the pages of history challenge the fantasy of wealth. They examine it and sometimes

pass criticism; they wink at it and at us and ask what is really important in our lives and whether money can provide that answer. Here are their definitions: Who is rich?

- Whoever is satisfied with his riches, says R. Meir.
- R. Tarfon says: Whoever has 100 vineyards and 100 fields and 100 servants who work in them.
- R. Akiva says: Whoever has a wife whose ways are pleasant.
- R. Yosi says: Whoever has a bathroom (toilet) near his table.

(Talmud Bavli, Tractate Shabbat 25b)

R. Meir claims that a rich person is one who is satisfied with what he has (the more familiar format — “one who is satisfied with his lot”). Poverty is true suffering, but the desire for wealth has no limits. The only limit, according to R. Meir, is a private limit; wealth is the ability to place limits and to be happy with what exists. A rich person is one who knows how to be happy.

R. Tarfon, who was very rich (and, according to talmudic legend, craved money), is uncritical and humorless regarding money. He says: A rich person is rich. A rich person has a lot of money.

R. Akiva married the daughter of one of the richest men in Jerusalem, Kalba Savua. R. Akiva’s wife made an intriguing choice (I’m not sure I identify with her choice, but it was a brave choice); she relinquished her father’s wealth and chose to devote her life to her husband’s success as a *talmid hacham* (Torah scholar). R. Akiva tells us that there are things that cannot be purchased and that the highest level of happiness is devotion to the marital relationship. Money cannot buy love.

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To me, R. Yosi is the wisest and funniest of the sages. In the period when these sages lived, most houses did not have toilets. A rich man, R. Yosi tells us, is someone with a bathroom in his house. I smile to think of this image of happiness: on the rich man's table, an abundance of delicacies for people to eat, drink, and enjoy. R. Yosi reminds us that not long after the meal, one needs the bathroom. Wealth does not provide happiness, but it provides brief pleasures that very quickly wind up in the waste disposal. True happiness is not acquired with money but with ongoing effort.

Why do we care about wealth?

What is a big community?

In the spirit of our talmudic passage, I wonder: "What is a big community?" R. Tarfon's response involves counting members. Here are three other possibilities: A big community is one whose members are happy with their community and with their lot. A big community is one whose members are engaged with each other — concerned, loyal, and loving. A big community is one whose members know that everything in this world is temporary and who understand the limitations and illusion of power.

So, actually, why is it that we care about how many Jews there are in the world? 

Why Counting Can Be Counterproductive

NOAM PIANKO

A clear ambivalence about counting characterizes the Jewish tradition. Biblical sources make census-taking a central part of the Jewish people's founding narrative. Yet, other sources and subsequent legal traditions prohibit directly counting Jews. Today, the dialectical tension in the tradition seems to have swung toward a preference for quantitative data-gathering, rather than more qualitative attempts to capture the meaning and relevance of Jewish collectivity. Jewish communities allocate tremendous resources to the activity of counting.

Indeed, hard data and quantitative analysis have emerged as the lens for evaluating the efficacy of various social, cultural, and philanthropic endeavors. It is not surprising that Jewish communities have integrated these popular modes of analysis into how they address self-understanding and communal policy. Psychological factors are likely at play — the perceived benefits of counting and perhaps a hesitation to ask more complex questions about how and whom to count.

But there is also a counterproductive outcome to quantifying Jews and their behaviors. Measuring population size and establishing levels of participation provide a faulty sense of unambiguous boundaries. That is, the process of counting promotes a misleading belief that Jewishness is an unchanging and core dimension of identity. One response in the face of insecurity about the nature of Jewish identity and uncertainty about the ties that link an increasingly fragmented Jewish population to one another is to preserve the idea of a binary distinction between Jews and non-Jews. Yet, categories of identity today are more fluid and nuanced than counting can fully capture.

Counting and the assumptions it sustains clash with changing notions of race and religion in the United States today. The moral and practical assessment of racial categories dramatically changes the theoretical playing field around issues of group membership and identity. Bonds of inclusion perceived as inherited or fixed (including inherited religious belief or ties based on birth) have a dwindling place within American ideals of liberal citizenship. A recent

Numbers and data galvanize a sense of demographic emergency by pointing to dwindling participation or shrinking populations. But they do so while implicitly promoting outdated paradigms of Jewish membership.

Population surveys, social scientific research, and other data about Jewish demographics shape communities' leadership agendas, popular concerns, and academic debates. Institutions, organizations, and foundations strive to measure the efficacy of their activities by counting the number of members, participants, donors, and constituents. The demographic balance between Jews and Palestinians in Israel (and the West Bank and Gaza Strip) has raised the visibility of numbers and counting to an even greater degree of urgency.

There are several factors that contribute to a growing tendency to downplay the tradition's discomfort with adding up individuals. Metrics, spreadsheets, and financial models have become central tools for our societies' assessment of various trends outside the business sector.

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