

Counting on Your Story
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In 2010, I was a year out of University, and I was still four years away from enrolling in Rabbinical School. In that time of figuring out what I wanted to do next, I pieced together several odd jobs to make ends meet. That year, I was an intern at the Jewish Journal of Los Angeles, a cashier at a store called BevMo, the supply coordinator for Camp Ramah in California, and a Census Taker for the US Census Bureau.

My job was to take a list of addresses from the Bureau and go to each of the homes listed, knock on the door, and conduct the interview. Generally, these interviews were for addresses whose mailed interview had not been received by the Bureau for whatever reason, and I was to stand on their front porch and make sure that it was submitted, that the residents were counted.

Some people I spoke to were college students who told me they hadn't bothered to fill in the form because their parents "back home" had included them, despite explicit instructions on the form that it was to be filled out *only* accounting for individuals living at a *particular address* on April 1, 2010, and clearly stated that college students should be counted at their school residences, not their family's residence. No matter. I was to

duplicate them, and, in theory, someone with more authority than I had would somehow sort it out later based on my note.

Sometimes the person on the other side of the door didn't speak English. Often, that person was nervous about this young, white woman in front of them asking for information about their date of birth and race. Once, I was able to muddle through the interview in my okay-ish Hebrew, but for most non-English speakers, I'd mark to have someone else come back and conduct the interview in Spanish. I hoped that someone with better language skills than mine was able to reassure them that this was a routine gathering of statistics, that the goal of the Census Bureau was not to find undocumented immigrants, but I am not certain that such reassurance is always possible.

Once the person who answered the door was an older gentleman, a veteran who angrily insisted that he'd served his country, and that the "current President" had no business trying to butt into his business. He did not believe me when I told him that the Census was not, in fact, President Obama's idea, but rather was mandated by Article 1, Section 2 of the Constitution of the United States and would be used to determine representation of the population. This could not possibly be the first time in his life a Census had taken place. Still, he would not speak to me. His interview form was submitted with the "Refused to answer," box checked off on every question--even his gender. Officially, I wasn't allowed to assume anything.

But after I left his house, I had to wonder...how did he not remember this happening before? Was he forgotten ten years prior in 2000? What about in 1990, 1980, 1970? Had he had a wife who'd filled out the forms each decade, sending them in without mentioning it to him? If so, where was she, what happened to her? Was this man's anger covering some unspoken grief?

The US Census does not gather such information. It's about numbers, not stories. In 2010, it asked how many people lived in a particular residence, and what the name, age, birthdate, and race of each resident was. The information gathered led to changes in the number of seats that eighteen states held in the House of Representatives, but it did not record anything about who these individual people were, *where* they were born, *how* they'd come to be in my neighborhood, *who* they *were*, what they loved or lost. Again, it is just about numbers, not stories.

I bring this up because the Census was amongst the things I had expected to feature at least a little more heavily in 2020. Maybe not as heavily as it did for me in 2010, since I did not have to knock on doors seeking unreturned civilian homework, but still. I thought it would be a little more than an online form Brad and I filled out and forgot about.

But, if we're being honest, those haven't really been the numbers of people we've been focused on. No, this year, we've been counting lost lives, lost

livelihoods, lost security. As of this past Monday, more than 200,000 Americans have died from COVID-19. For context, that's about a quarter of the population of Indianapolis. It's more than the full population of Little Rock, Arkansas, more than the entire population of Shreveport, Louisiana, a place where two of my dear friends and classmates have made their first Rabbinic jobs. 200,000 lives lost, and, in an effort to ensure that that number isn't even *higher*, we've lost so, so much more of our usual way of life. Times with friends. Hugs. Vacations. Concerts. Proms. Graduation Ceremonies. Baby showers. State Fairs. Plays. Wedding and Bar and Bat Mitzvah Receptions. Birthday parties. Family holiday gatherings. Quiet moments in the house before family members got home from school or work. Gathering in person for prayers and funerals. Having you all sitting in these seats in front of me, not on the other side of that camera.

The weekend after Purim, I was supposed to go on a Women's Shabbat Retreat in California with my mother and my sister.

That retreat was cancelled.

In May, I was going to attend my first Rabbinic Ordination after my own, get to see friends and my chevruta, my primary study-partner, join me as Rabbis and colleagues. I was going to watch where I'd stood a year prior, and then I was going to rush to give them a hug and to be amongst the first to call them, "Rabbi."

That Ordination was done on Facebook Live. I was, at most, a little blue link labeled "Jenni Greenspan".

In July, I “attended” my cousin’s wedding from my living room couch, on Zoom, in place of the large celebration that was originally going to happen in November. We hope to have a celebration for their anniversary next year, but no one knows if that will really be possible.

We’re all grieving something. These are just a few of the big sources of grief *I* have been carrying--and I know all of you have your own, and little ones, too--quiet commutes, chance meetings with friends, enjoying a coffee *at the coffee shop*. We’re mourning the things that should have happened. We’re mourning pains and losses that have happened. We’re mourning a world that we thought we knew until it was uprooted and overturned six months ago. We’ve mourned people, both those who have died and those that we simply can’t get to safely in a world of social distancing.

I started this talk by bringing up the US Census. The Torah also documents a few censi of our people as they wandered the desert after they’d left slavery in Egypt. Perhaps unsurprisingly, these are recorded in the book of, well, Numbers. The first couple of times that the Torah gives us a census, it is straight numbers, gathered for a purpose, just as the US Census takes numbers primarily to determine political representation. How many people are in each of the twelve tribes? How many of them are men between the ages of twenty and fifty and therefore able to form a military for the Israelites? A second census follows immediately, this time focusing solely on the tribe of Levi, specifically counting the men between thirty and fifty

so that they may serve the Cohanim in ritual, sacrificial service in the Tabernacle. Once again, numbers--not stories.

But this is not where Census taking in the Torah ends. Because the Torah is about stories, about our stories. As Jews, we both love numbers, and can't let things stand as just numbers. Our numbers are to combine and make up our story. In fact, there's a teaching that says that there are 600,000 letters in the Torah, corresponding to the 600,000 Israelites recorded in the first census--which teaches that each Jew is one letter of the Torah--if you remove one, the Torah, our story, will no longer be complete. The math is a little off, but the sentiment is there. We can't do numbers without stories, because we are stories. And the stories feel off this year, with so many missing.

Which brings me to the final Census of the book of numbers, one that spans the final three Portions of the Book. *This* Census seems to interrupt itself to review the stories of some of the names as they come up. It reminds us of Nadav and Abihu, the sons of Aaron who died in Leviticus when they offer a strange fire to God. It reminds us of Korah, who led a rebellion against Moses and was swallowed by the earth along with his followers. It inserts the story of five daughters who lost their father and had no brothers, and who approach Moses and God and point out the inequality that prevents them, as women, from inheriting their fathers' property.

It's a Census of numbers *and* stories, our stories. The stories that make us who we are, rather than just a random number in 600,000 Israelites. And most of those stories recorded here contain something to mourn.

This year, the Official US Census, a once-in-a-decade event, was completely overshadowed. So much has happened to us this year, and so much that we thought should have happened didn't.

The story-census of late Numbers doesn't shy away from the overtly difficult stories, the hard stories, the early deaths and the painful moments. The difficult political struggles, and the fear before courage. And neither should we. Let ourselves hold the pain with the joy. Let's remember the things you had looked forward to that didn't happen, the awful things that happened to you and to the world this year, and the wonderful things that did. They are all a part of the story that you lived this year. They all belong in our counting of the year.

In Judaism, we recognize the deep need for stories. In fact, stories are a huge part of how we mourn. Traditionally, we sit for a week after someone passes away, sharing the stories of their life with one another. That storytelling is meant to do two things: it preserves the memory of the lost person in the minds of the mourners, and it allows the mourners the opportunity to begin to heal. Stories allow the loss of what was to be processed, to be worked into the mourner's soul, into their new story that can go forward.

You may recall a teaching I shared last year, about the process of entering the courtyard of the Temple. If you were doing mostly okay, you would enter the courtyard and circle the “roundabout” to the right. If you were a mourner, you would circle to the left, and each and every person going to the right would stop and as you, “Mah Lach, How are you?”

This year, it seems like we’re all going to the left, (assuming we can even find our hand sanitizer and open the door), and we’re doing it masked and without getting too close to anyone. We’re all hurting, we’re all grieving something.

The problem is that, if no one is going right, ready to ask, “Mah Lach,” how do we keep ourselves from simply spiralling to the left? Usually, we take turns being in mourning, grieving. But with no one going through that roundabout to the right, we need to instead turn to one another and make the mourning space together. And I think we have to do it by allowing one another to name what hurts. Grieve the events that should have happened and didn’t, and the ones that shouldn’t have happened and did.

I have seen many social media posts and articles that try to get us to focus on the positive, find the silver linings. I’ll be honest, the fact that I *can* Zoom with my family in California, that I can have had my cat sit next to me while I wrote this sermon from home, and that I can have homemade sourdough pretzels from my husband’s home-grown starter he nurtured in

our backyard...these are all blessings and bright moments. And you know how much I care about and encourage an attitude of gratitude But shifting my focus there just doesn't mend my soul of the losses I've experienced. But making a point to face those losses also might balance the two together, let me heal.

You are going left. So is everyone you love. Stop. If we don't, we'll never get our souls moving back the other way. The project of Yom Kippur is to complete Teshuva, to repent and return to who we are and who we, paradoxically, have not yet been--true to ourselves, and with our real experiences as part of our new story. We must find the way *together* to turn and go the other direction again, even knowing that loss has changed us.

Grieve. And even at a distance, grieve *together*. Share with someone you trust what you are mourning this year. And let them share it with you. If you can, do it with someone you don't live with--call a friend or family member outside the bubble you might be spiraling in, and let it all out.

It won't fix everything at once. Shiva is seven days long, and it's only the first part of traditional mourning. But it's a step, a step toward turning.

Together, take a Census of your year--and I mean the later in Numbers version. Count people in your life, the ones nearby, the ones far away, the ones you've lost. And interrupt the count with the stories that matter. Don't

become that gentleman yelling on his porch because he was to be a number not a person.

Who has been in your life, and what have they brought?

What stories do you need to share so that you can let go of the pain?

What are the big and little things you have grieved?

What are the big and little things you have celebrated?

What have you found, done, discovered about your world that you never would have encountered without the radical shifts that life thrust upon you this year? Those are also a part of your story. Reflecting on them is part of mourning, and a part of healing.

Count your moments. Count the beautiful ones, and the painful ones. Count the tears, the laughs, and the losses.

And

Count on yourself.

Count on the story of who you are and who you have been to bring you to who you have not yet become.

May your stories bring you comfort, and bring you to an even stronger version of you, counted in full.