

Shabbat Shalom. These are some queer times.

Lately, I have been thinking a lot about numbers. Counting. Time.

The number of days I have been sheltering in place with my kids at home: 84.

The page of daf yomi I am learning that day — Masekhet shabbat 92 is today's daf, which means I've completed 156 out of 2,711 pages. And counting.

The estimated, reported, deaths from Covid-19 in the US - almost 110,000 as of Friday afternoon. Or to be more precise, and yet precision is elusive: 109,979. And counting. And the disproportionate nature of this number when analyzed according to race and class.

Some studies are showing that black Americans are dying at 3 times the rate than white Americans from coronavirus. The percentage of cases among black and brown communities exceed their percentage of the population—numbers will vary according to location but the trend is solidified.

Some other numbers about which I've been thinking: the 10 days (and counting) of protests in the wake of the brutal killing of George Floyd on May 25th. The two days between Floyd's death at the hands of police and Tony McDade's death also by police. McDade was a 38 year old transgender man in Tallahassee. It's been 7 days since he was killed. It's been three months since Breonna Taylor, an African American woman, was killed by police in Kentucky. She would have been 27 yesterday.

And, I've been thinking about the roughly 60 years since another era, known for its widespread protests occurred, where people took to the streets for Civil Rights, Women's Rights, and Gay and Lesbian Rights.

There's other numbers to consider of course: those of unemployment and the Dow Jones industrial average just to name two. And, I note this now and will return to it soon, the Torah portion for this week is in the book of Numbers, and it, along with last week's parasha, is all about, well Numbers, counting, or as Naso means: lifting up.

Before turning to Naso, though, there's a number I would like to lift up. A number myself, and of course many many others, have been returning to over the past 13 days: 8:46. Eight minutes and forty six seconds. And I'm going to offer us the opportunity to sit together with that number, for that exact amount of time, and to breathe.

Some of us will sit silently with their thoughts, some of us can look at the sources I provided and read the names that appear in different contexts. Let's count together. Honoring George Floyd's memory.

8:46

So. Happy Pride. On the source sheet I provided I tried to offer, to lift up, glimpses of part of current and historical struggles of LGBTQ people. To remind us of just part of the history of LGBTQ liberation and that it was born out of protest, violence, rising up against oppression.

Too many lives lost. Names that need to be lifted up.

I've struggled with the inadequacies of language, names, and numbers—and I, reader of ancient texts for a living—appealed to images to convey certain sketches of the past in the sources I provided.

But here we are with a text, in the book of Numbers, with all its counting. The book begins with a census, a headcount of all the community of Israel—though of course only the male heads of households were counted—lifted up. Censuses then, as now, always already inaccurate and thus inadequate to do a total reckoning of we the people.

But the chapters relentlessly offer up numbers: As they lift up the heads of tribes, in last week's parashah, we are privy to an onslaught of them. From the tribe of Reuven, 46,500 male members, Shimon, 59,300 male members, Judah, 74,600 male members. Until we get to the total of 603,550 men. In chapter 3, also from last week, the text counts the number of men from the tribe of Levi: a total of 22,000. In chapter 4, from this week, we get another count of 8,580 men.

In chapter 5, we get a break from those numbers — but I want to focus on a number that is presumed throughout this chapter and the entirety of the Bible. The invisibility of this number to most readers testifies to its hold, its tenacity, and thus magnifies the damage it inflicts for some.

It's the number 2 in the context of genders. In Numbers 5:2-3 we read, *Command the Israelites to remove from the camp anyone who has a skin affliction, an irregular genital discharge, and anyone defiled from a corpse. From male to female you shall send them out, outside the camp you shall send them.*

In verse 5:6 we read, *When a man or woman commits any sin that people commit, to do a trespass against the Lord, and if that person is guilty.*

Both of these verses, and there are many others throughout the Bible, presume a classificatory system of gender as binary: male and female and only male or female. Imagine reading these texts as someone who identifies as neither, as both, as more, as other. If we don't stop and imagine that, we are participating in, complicit in, systemic oppression—which results in the exclusion, silencing, and erasure of people. On the other hand, if we imagine addressing the inadequacies of this text by calling it out as inadequate, naming it partial, and then adding to it, we participate instead in the dismantling of a system of oppression: that of binary gender.

To understand the Torah as inadequate is nothing new. To act on the impetus to change it, is also nothing new. About 1700 years ago, rabbinic interpreters repeatedly called out the inadequacy, the incompleteness, and thus the wrongness, of binary biblical gender. They incorporated into the body of Israel more genders than two. Three of the dozens, and perhaps hundreds, of rabbinic texts that do this, are directly connected to this week's parasha on Counting in the Book of Numbers.

When the rabbis encountered Numbers 5:3 and Numbers 5:6, they set out to supplement the inadequacies of the Torah and expand the tent, the house, of Israel. When they read male and female and man or woman they asked about the inclusion of non-binary gender people. In their language, the tumtum, one whose gender is indeterminate, and the androgynos, a person who has both male and female genitalia. Consistently, they could not read the Torah's mention of man or woman and male and female without questioning, challenging, and thereby dismantling its system of binary gender.

We will take a quick look at the texts I provided on the last page of the source sheet to see this work in action.

Sifre Numbers Naso (ca. 3rd century C.E.)

From male to female shall you take out [outside the camp shall you take them] (Num. 5:3). I only know male and female, from where do I know tumtum and androgynos? Scripture states, *outside the camp shall you take them* (Num. 5:3).

מזכר ועד נקבה אין לי אלא זכר ונקיבה טומטום ואנדרוגינוס מנין תלמוד לומר אל מחוץ למחנה תשלחם

Turning to Numbers 5:6, Sifre Numbers Naso similarly queries:

When a man or woman shall commit any sin that people (adam) commit, to do a trespass against the Lord, and if that person (ha-nefesh ha-hee) is guilty (Num. 5:6). "And if that person is guilty." Why does scripture state this? Since scripture states "man or woman," I only know man or woman. From where do I know [this applies] to a tumtum and an androgynos person? Scripture states "And if that person is guilty."

ואשמה הנפש ההוא למה נאמר לפי שהוא אומר איש או אשה אין לי אלא איש או אשה טו"א מנין תלמוד לומר ואשמה הנפש ההוא:

The connection between the next text, from Mishnah Nazir to Parashat Naso, is based on the mention of the laws about Nazirites addressed in Numbers Chapter 6—also part of this week's Torah portion. We can note that here to, in Numbers 6:2 we read, *Speak to the people of Israel, and say to them, When a man or woman shall separate themselves to vow a vow of a Nazirite.*

The text from the Mishnah doesn't directly address that verse, but it nevertheless expands the bible's binary classification of gender, changing it to reflect the rabbis

construction of gender as beyond binary: comprised of male, female, and two non-binary gender: the tumtum and androgynos person.

Mishnah Nazir 2:7 (ca. 3rd century C.E.)

[If one says] “Behold, I am a Nazirite when I have a son” and a son is born to him, behold he is a Nazirite. If a daughter was born to him, or a tumtum, or an androgynos, he is not a Nazir. If he said, “When I see what child I have [I am a Nazirite], even if a daughter is born to him, or a tumtum or androgynos, behold he is a Nazirite.

הַרִיבִי נָזִיר לְכַשִּׁייהָ לִי בֵן, וְנוֹלֵד לוֹ בֵּן, הָרִי זֶה נָזִיר. נולד לוֹ בֵּת, טֻמְטוּם, וְאַנְדְּרוֹגִינוֹס, אֵינוֹ נָזִיר. אִם
אָמַר, כְּשֶׁאֶרְאֶה, כְּשִׁייהָ לִי וְלֹד, אֶפְלוֹ נולד לוֹ בֵּת, טֻמְטוּם, וְאַנְדְּרוֹגִינוֹס, הָרִי זֶה נָזִיר:

Again, what each of these rabbinic texts is doing, in the 3rd century CE, is rewriting, changing, supplementing, addressing the inadequacy of two and only two genders in the Bible. What we see represented in these texts are four genders.

Now, this is not a total reckoning of rabbinic genders: there are more genders in rabbinic sources. To learn about those, however, we need more time—perhaps some more shabbatot and classes devoted to exploring gender and Judaism.

I will close with some brief reflections on the last text I provided—hoping we see it as a call for further action:

Mishnah Avot 2:21

He [Rabbi Tarfon] used to say: It is not your duty to finish the work, but neither are you at liberty to neglect it

הוּא הָיָה אוֹמֵר, לֹא עָלֶיךָ הַמְלָאכָה לְגַמֹּר, וְלֹא אַתָּה בֶּן חוֹרִין לְבָטֵל מִמֶּנָּה. אִם לְמַדַּת תּוֹרָה הִרְבֵּה, נוֹתְנִים
לָךְ שָׂכָר הִרְבֵּה. וְנֹאמָן הוּא בְּעַל מְלָאכָתְךָ שִׁישְׁלֵם לָךְ שָׂכָר פְּעֻלָּתְךָ. וְדַע מִתֵּן שָׂכָרְךָ שֶׁל צְדִיקִים לְעֶתִיד
לְבָא:

I am certain that everybody involved in planning this shabbat, and those Pride events that will follow during this month, and future hard work to follow up on both cis-gender heteronormativity and white supremacy within the Jewish community and beyond, know that this work is ongoing—perhaps unfinishable. We are not obligated to finish the work. But nor are we free to neglect it.

One Pride Shabbat is not enough, coupled with Racial Justice even less so. This is not to say that LGBTQ and Racial Justice are strangers unto themselves—indeed they share much, with deep entangled roots, without being reduced to each other. As a community, we have to take account, and to lift up, fundamental inadequacies, failings, not only those enshrined in the Torah, but those ongoing in the very make up of our community and liturgy.

It is going to take more than adding sermons and speakers—it is going to take fundamental changes to what constitutes our rituals and about who gets counted as Israel.

One final note: Naso doesn't only mean to lift up, it also means to carry. As the Levites carried the Mishkan through the wilderness, detailed at the beginning of parashat Naso, may we shoulder each other's burdens humbly, together as we undertake the hard work of carrying our community through and forward—as we continue to expand who counts among the people of Israel at GJC and beyond.

Shabbat Shalom.

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Are we willing to do what the rabbis did with the Torah when they filled the silence concerning non-binary genders by acknowledging often unacknowledged racism in the Jewish community with the same commitment we show we join or support protests against structural racism happening nationwide—at this very moment?

So the book of Numbers. It begins with a census. A reckoning, a head count, and dividing—by tribe.

But for now I'm going to pivot to the Torah portion for a moment. As luck would have it, the weekly torah portion is in the beginning of the book of...Numbers. So let me throw out some numbers from last weeks parashah and this weeks just to give you a sense of what I mean.

Much of Numbers chapters 1-4 is the record of a census. It is the first of two censuses that frame the book of Numbers (the second one starts in Numbers 26). Naso, in fact, which is the name of this weeks parasha, means to “lift up” and the complete phrase is to lift up the head of the household. It is also from where the word ‘prince’ (or Nasi) derives. As the Torah recounts the numbers of those enrolled in each tribe of Israel—there are 12 not including the Levites—it then provides a final tally of 603,550.

African Americans are 2 and 1/2 times more likely than white Americans to be killed by the police.

The number of days of protests in the wake of the murder of George Floyd on May 25th. Protests have been happening for ____ days.

The disparity in numbers of people protesting the death of Tony McDade at the hands of police officers in Tallahassee, Florida on May 27th. Tony was an African American trans man.

Tori Cooper, HRC director of community engagement for the Transgender Justice Initiative, tells *Rolling Stone*. “Black people, **LGBTQ** people, and especially all LGBTQ people of color are at greater risk for violence every day in this country. This must end.

We live with certain myths: the civil rights era ended with successes. We live with these despite all evidence that can be mustered to the contrary
One of the myths we live with is that gender can be divided into two.

The census will be null and void — Israel that experienced the exodus and yet denied God’s ... will slowly die off.