

Pew research survey reports that religious belief is best understood as a personal choice that individuals fashion and refashion many times in relationship to their own personal spiritual journeys. The diversification and individualization of religious belief and practice, then, further erode religion's potential role as a unifying element in the construction of collective ties. The concerns that arise when counting Jews, such as intermarriage, matrilineal descent, and (in the case of Israel) eligibility under the Law of Return, emphasize precisely the models of identity (descent or faith-based) viewed as problematic by younger Jews.

Given the rapid transformation in the politics of identity in the United States, it is time to consider more seriously the tradition's prohibition against directly tallying Jews. Numbers and data galvanize a sense of demographic emergency by pointing to attenuated participation or shrinking populations. But they do so while implicitly promoting outdated paradigms of Jewish membership. The outcome of counting shifts policy considerations to policing boundaries rather than to creating compelling and exciting reasons for inclusion. Surveys are not calibrated to capture the shifting and ambiguous notions of solidarity developing today. Nor does counting fully come to terms with the voluntary basis of collectivity and membership. Finally, counting Jews fails to address the growing rift in the very community it is intended to measure as a unified group.

A more effective strategy would be to use

communal resources to promote precisely the diverse expressions of Judaism that may or may not match the established lines drawn by those empowered by the community to count. Confident and vibrant communities see individuals as ends in themselves rather than as means to establishing demographic security or ensuring biological continuity. Relationships, experiences, and ideas that cannot be counted will pave the way toward a meaningful Jewish future and a growing number of individuals committed to membership in the Jewish people. 

by the numbers

5,300

Sh'ma subscribers:
20% print, **69%**
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Discussion **Guide**

Bringing together a myriad of voices and experiences provides Sh'ma readers with an opportunity in a few very full pages to explore a topic of Jewish interest from a variety of perspectives. To facilitate a fuller discussion of these ideas, we offer the following questions:

1. Why are there *two* commandments to take a census in the Torah?
2. Do you count your "days" forward or backward? Do you look more often to future days or do you reminisce about your personal history?
3. Is counting counterproductive? Is it helpful, or not, to use communal resources to know our numbers?

"Teach us to count our days, that we may attain a heart of wisdom." (Psalm 90) *L'mnot yameinu, ken hoda; v'navee levav chochma*

Make Our Days Count

DAYLE A. FRIEDMAN

"*Why am I still here?*" was the plaintive refrain of so many frail elders who I met as a nursing home chaplain. Weighed down by illness and pain, bereft of precious partners and friends, some believed that their worth lay in the past. They did not count their days, either future or past, but often impatiently awaited an end to their earthly toil.

My mother-in-law, Miriam, could well wonder why she is still here. She has survived

so much: the unimaginable suffering of the Shoah, the loss of her adored husband and two sisters, the cancer that took half her stomach. Miriam is rarely physically comfortable; she seldom leaves her apartment. She keeps herself occupied with worrying about her family — tracking our travails, travels, and adventures — and sharing her wisdom in a myriad of phone conversations each day.

It is Shabbat dinner. Miriam is "at" our table — virtually, on a video chat in our laptop. We ask her to offer a blessing. Miriam says, "I come from a loving family. The most important thing is

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always to forgive each other. No matter what.”

The way Miriam lives her days, echoes a teaching of Rabbi Sholom Noach Berezovsky, the Slonimer Rebbe. In a commentary on the verse, “Abraham was old, he had come through his days,” (Genesis 24:1) the Slonimer taught that each day of our lives is utterly singular and irreplaceable. Each day offers a special purpose for each of us; there is a *tikkun*/repair that can only be done by *this* person, and only on *this* very day. Though we might never know what the purpose of this particular day is, we *can* be present to any unfolding opportunities for Torah (learning) and mitzvah (contribution).

Perhaps “number our days” should be translated, “Teach us to make *each* of our days count.” The challenge in later life and, actually, in all of life, is to be open to the purpose and meaning available to us in this day. This is the heart of wisdom, whether this day turns out to be our last, or far from it.

The Trap of Numbers

RACHEL BRODIE

At funerals and during difficult goodbyes, I hear the reminder to take mortality seriously, to treasure each day. Yet, most days, I can’t hold onto the poignancy of the message and, ironically, I attribute this to overexposure — not just to the message but to the medium: counting.

How? Let me *not* count the ways. I’ll leave that to great writers like Annie Dillard who, in *The Wreck of Time*, chides us for resorting to statistics to mask the incomprehensible, pointing out the many ways quantification serves to multiply misunderstandings. And, by carelessly conflating the two meanings of “to count,” we make casual assumptions of quality and, in so doing, undermine our own efforts to appreciate human life.

The value in “values” exists only when used in service of the sacred. For example, 800,000 deaths annually from measles is meaningful when it becomes a call to action in the realm of public health. It is also meaningful, if, when reading demographic surveys, we bring an awareness of the potential trap of statistical determinism and do not presume that one’s destiny can be predicted by categories such as “under 35” or “single-parent household.”

Yet we’re hardwired to perceive the world through the lens of more and less, whole and divided, many and one, all and none. So, when we remember to, we count our days. What relationship does the psalmist suggest exists

between coming to terms with our finitude and attaining wisdom? Does one lead to the other or does one constitute the other? What if we read this verse as a question rather than a statement, a challenge rather than an assumption? *L’mnot yameinu, ken hoda; v’navee levav chochma?* Meaning: We count our days. That much we know to do, but will all that counting — of years and lives — lead us to the core wisdom that there is something beyond everything we are, and have, and will ever know?

If, at least intellectually, we know our days are numbered and even if we could actually internalize (“take to heart”) this wisdom, then the deeper question we contend with is the one projected onto God in the very next verse: *ad ma-tie?* Meaning both “for how long?” and also “to what end?”

Counting Our Children’s Days

SHIRA SHAZEER

“How old is he?” “Nine months,” I answer. My husband, Ken, says, “ten months” — rounding up or down to the closest day, week, month, or year. I hesitate to make our boys one day older than they are. Maybe it’s a habit learned in pregnancy. The traditional response of congratulations on a pregnancy is *b’sha’ah tovah*, may it happen in a good time. This acknowledges the mystery and lingering uncertainty of pregnancy. When I was pregnant, we privately counted the passing weeks but never disclosed exact due dates.

Online parenting communities are filled with “pregnancy tickers,” graphics illustrating the passage of weeks. “I’m six weeks pregnant; only 238 days to go!” Initially, I was fascinated by “tickers,” drawn to the visual marker of time passing. But as I saw tickers automatically announce the birth of babies who still resided snugly in the womb at 40 weeks, the authoritative countdown grew disconcerting.

Psalm 90 — “Teach us to number our days, that we may acquire a heart of wisdom” — highlights the fleeting quality of life, the insignificance of our time compared to God’s eternity. I read this as “counting up,” not down. Like the 49 days of the *omer*, or the eight progressively brighter days of Hanukkah, the 40 or so weeks of pregnancy are most fully counted up. Counting down trivializes the remaining time, focusing entirely on the anticipated event. Counting up fills time expansively with meaning and power. Hear the difference between: “I’m four weeks from meeting my baby”

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and, “I’ve spent 36 weeks building a baby.”

Counting up allows us to be present in the moment, appreciate what we’ve been through, and anticipate with wonder what is yet to come. When pregnant, what is yet to come is a period of intimate connection with a little person who has no concept of time, for whom a minute is an eternity. A new parent can lose track of time, counting down the hours until a

break is possible. And yet the days and weeks pass “like a sigh.”

Counting our children’s first days, weeks, months, and years can help us to treasure the opportunity to be with them as they are right now, to guide them to the next milestone, and to celebrate their development into independence, our development as parents, and the ever changing parent-child relationship. 



by the numbers

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A Parting of Ways?

TED SASSON

In a survey of American Jews conducted by the Cohen Center for Modern Jewish Studies last summer, 28 percent of respondents ages 18 to 29 — compared to 42 percent of those over 60 — reported feeling very connected to Israel. Does this statistic mean that younger Jews are becoming estranged from Israel, as Peter Beinart argued in his much discussed *New York Review of Books* essay (June 10, 2010)?

Beinart’s essay galvanized interest, I believe, because it corroborated a growing sense that Israel has become a polarizing force in American Jewish life. In this view, expressed by journalists and social scientists alike, older American Jews idealize and romanticize Israel, which they believe can do no wrong, whereas younger American Jews either express indifference or view the Jewish state as anachronistic and politically retrograde. Like many similar efforts to summarize complex sociopolitical developments (think red state/blue state), this one, too, includes elements of truth alongside a good deal of distortion.

Most studies of American Jewish opinion about Israel report that older Jews express higher levels of emotional attachment to the Jewish state. But why this is so — and therefore what it means for the future — is not at all clear. The relatively greater level of attachment expressed by older Jews today may be due, as Beinart believes, to their experience of coming of age in an era when Israel faced existential threats, or even to stronger memories of the Holocaust and the founding of the state. In contrast, the relative disengagement of younger Jews may reflect their experience of coming of age in a context of greater moral ambiguity regarding Israel. If this interpretation is correct, then attachment to Israel may be declining across the generations, and the Jewish communities of Israel and the United States may be growing apart.

However, there is strong evidence that contradicts this generational interpretation. On the one hand, the tendency of younger Jews to feel less attached to Israel is not new. Younger Jews were less attached in surveys conducted at regular intervals over the past quarter-century, including the National Jewish Population Surveys of 2000 and 1990, and the annual surveys of the American Jewish Committee dating back to the mid-1980s. On the other hand, the level of attachment among Jews as a whole has remained remarkably stable over time — there is no evidence of decline. If the younger Jews of a generation ago had maintained their youthful level of Israel attachment throughout their lives, then the overall level of attachment would have trended downward. But it has not.

In the Cohen Center survey, 14 percent of respondents who grew up in intermarried households — compared to 36 percent who grew up in in-married households — felt very connected to Israel.

Taken together, these observations favor an alternative interpretation: Rather than declining across the generations, emotional attachment to Israel increases over the life course; that is, it is a life-cycle phenomenon. As they grow older, Jews become more comfortable with Jewish identity, more embedded in Jewish community, and more attached to Israel. If this is true, then today’s young adults should become more attached to Israel as they age.

But what of the apparently growing political divide between American Jews and Israel? The vast majority of American Jews — 78 percent — voted enthusiastically for President Barack Obama, who has demanded a West Bank settlement freeze, a halt to new construction in East Jerusalem, and rapid progress toward a two-state solution to the Israeli-Palestinian

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