

TO SUBSCRIBE:
CALL (877) 568-SHMA
ONLINE www.shma.com
EMAIL shma@cambeywest.com

41/673
October 2010/Cheshvan 5771



A JOURNAL OF JEWISH RESPONSIBILITY

Inside Counting Jews

Richard Hirsh
Knowing What Counts . . . 1

**Uzi Rebhun,
Gilad Malach,
& Ruth Gavison**
Demographic Trends
in Israel. 2

**Tobin Belzer, Keren
McGinity, Benjamin
Phillips, Diane Tobin,
Jack Ukeles & Shawn
Landres**
Counting What Matters:
A Roundtable 4

Steven M. Cohen
Bad Things Happen
to Good Numbers 8

Ruhama Weiss
Who Is Rich and What
Is a Big Community? 9

Noam Pianko
Why Counting Can Be
Counterproductive 10
Discussion Guide 11

*“Teach Us to Count
Our Days”*

Dayle A. Friedman
Make Our Days Count . 11

Rachel Brodie
The Trap of Numbers . . 12

Shira Shazeer
Counting Our
Children’s Days 12

Ted Sasson
A Parting of Ways? . . . 13

Leonard Saxe
Counting American
Jewry 14

Jeffrey S. Gurock
New York: A City’s
Many Jewish Stories . . 15

**Toba Spitzer, Sami
Barth, Ira Sheskin,
Aaron Brusso**
NiSh’ma 17

Bonnie Koppell
Sh’ma Ethics 20

Numbers count. And while our people have always been relatively few, how many is too few Jews? Since the days of King David, our numbers have been a source of contention. Today is no different. When does a preoccupation with the number of Arabs, or ultra-Orthodox or Russian Jews in Israel, cross the line separating legitimate political consideration from rank racism or ethnocentrism? Should we count intermarried couples as Jewish? Jewish Buddhists? Will the controversy over how Jews are counted and who counts as a Jew ever abate?

This month, *Sh’ma* explores these questions in the context of demography and more: We ask about how, and whether, numbers ought to determine policy: Who are we as we count ourselves? How do we count on the world’s stage as Jews? In addition, three contributors — representing three different points along the spectrum of years — reflect on Psalm 90, “Teach us to count our days,” and two writers wonder about the legitimacy, or wisdom, of counting.

Some numbers have enormous poignancy, power, and cache: ten for a *minyan*, seven days of the week, Six Million. That power is harnessed by *gematria*, a system that suggests the mystical relationship of the Hebrew alphabet to numerical equivalencies. Throughout this issue, as we contemplate numbers, we share some numbers of our own, puncturing the wall between publishing and print, and, we hope, enlightening readers about the journal in the process. —S.B.

Knowing What Counts

RICHARD HIRSH

I was at a Hillel Shabbaton during college when I first discovered the Jewish aversion to counting. I was admonished by an observant student to stop counting “one, two, three....” to see if we had a *minyan*. Bumped from my nascent venture into *gabbai*-hood, I watched my classmate start over with “not one, not two, not three...” Whence this anxiety?

While the Torah includes two instances where counting people is mandated (Exodus 30:12 and Numbers 1:1), the narrative drama occurs later, when King David is both commanded to take a census and then punished for that very act. (II Samuel 24:1) And when this story is retold in the first book of Chronicles (21:1), God is excised as the source of the command to take a census and Satan is substituted: “*Satan* arose against Israel and incited David to number Israel.” Hence, “not one, not two, not three...” allows us to count without *really* counting.

For a people obsessed with the imagined threat of becoming statistically insignificant, we are curiously ambivalent about numbering

ourselves. Some segments of the Jewish community (federations, agencies, academia) are devoted to demographics and regularly produce “community studies” that presume to count Jews from all sorts of angles (i.e., age, religious observance, geography, marital status). Other segments of the Jewish community (the observant, primarily) refrain from counting Jews, not

Counting is but one refraction of the broader category of measuring, assessing, identifying, and defining.

only in the case of determining the requisite number for a *minyan*, but also in simple social circumstances. There remains an unvoiced and perhaps unconscious nod toward the *ayin hara*, the evil eye — “How many children did you say you have? We’ll see about that....”

A commandment “to count,” though, is found in the Torah: to count time. “You shall count... the *omer* [sheaf]...50 days from [what the talmudic rabbis later clarify as] the second day of Pesach (*mimacharat haShabbat*) until Shavuot.” (Leviticus 23:15-16) We know this as the mitzvah of *Sefirat HaOmer*, the counting

of the *omer*.


What is it, then, with Jews and counting? The real issue is not “counting,” but whether the counting applies to a “what” or a “who.” When it comes to counting time (When, precisely, is Shabbat over? When, exactly, are the eleven months of kaddish concluded?), Jewish tradition not only sanctions, it obsesses. When it comes to counting people (*minyan*, for example), Jewish tradition not only discourages, it dissimulates. What accounts for the discrepancy?

Time is an arbitrary category. Nanki-Poo, the hero of Gilbert and Sullivan’s *The Mikado*, famously suggests to his bride that in the face of his anticipated execution at the end of 30 days, “We’ll call each second a minute, each minute an hour, each hour a day, and each day a year. At that rate, we’ve about 30 years of married happiness before us!”

But while time is abstract and demarcations are arbitrary, anyone conscious of aging knows that however it is measured, time is real. Defining time, then, becomes determinative; it is the mechanism through which our culture and tradition define a great deal: “There is a time for every purpose under heaven.” Seven days of *shiva*; 30 days of *shloshim*; eight days

until *brit mila*; 49 days of the *omer*.

Counting is but one refraction of the broader categories of measuring, assessing, identifying, and defining. Precisely what we can do with things, so the tradition seems to teach, is what we cannot do with a person. How would we numerically “measure” a person? How would we “assess” or “define” or “identify” someone’s essential nature? How do we define the boundaries of a life? What is too short? How much is enough? What, in the case of suffering, is too much? By what standards are we judged, and according to whom are we evaluated? Who do we need to tell us that “we count”?

Psalm 90 teaches, “Let us number our days, so we may attain a wise heart.” But the psalmist leaves ambiguous whether we are to count the days already past or those that lie ahead. Both are finite. One is a known quantity; the other is an open question. Where should we focus — on what has happened and cannot be changed, or on what lies ahead? Should we focus on determining how that time is filled or used or sanctified? In a paradoxical way, knowing that the time we have left is by definition finite opens up an array of opportunities that are infinite. 

Rabbi **Richard Hirsh**, a member of the *Sh'ma* Advisory Committee, is executive director of the Reconstructionist Rabbinical Association and teaches at the Reconstructionist Rabbinical College.

Uzi Rebhun is a senior lecturer at the Avraham Harman Division of Jewish Demography and Statistics at the Institute for Contemporary Jewry at the Hebrew University of Jerusalem.

Gilad Malach, an expert in public policy and Jewish thought, specializes in religion-and-state issues and intergroup relations in Israel. He is currently writing a doctoral dissertation at the Hebrew University of Jerusalem on public policy strategies toward the ultra-Orthodox.

Ruth Gavison, founding president of the Metzilah Center, is the Haim Cohn Professor of Human Rights in the faculty of law at the Hebrew University of Jerusalem.

Demographic Trends in Israel

UZI REBHUN, GILAD MALACH, & RUTH GAVISON

What level of Jewish majority does Israel need in order to be both Jewish and democratic? The question — though an issue since the beginning of statehood — became more acute after the 1967 Six-Day War; it is also, though, relevant within the confines of Israel’s Green Line.

The goals of Israeli society reach beyond being Jewish and democratic; Israel also aspires to be a developed and prosperous country that upholds human rights and is committed to the welfare of all its residents and citizens. This essay presents findings from the 2009 report* of the Metzilah Center for Zionist, Jewish, Liberal and Humanist Thought in Jerusalem. Our underlying premise is that accurate demographic information is essential for both intelligent public debate and decision making about how to define and fulfill a demographic policy that will allow Israel to survive as a developed and democratic state — one that is attuned to the welfare of all its inhabitants and in which the Jewish people can fulfill their right to self-determination.

In its 62-year history, Israel’s population has grown in a dramatic way — unprecedented in the West — from fewer than 900,000 persons at the time of the first census (1948) to 7.5 million at the end of 2009. The Jewish majority, however, has been clearly diminishing since it peaked in the early 1960s at 89 percent. In 2009, Jews (including “others,” i.e., non-Jews who are allowed to immigrate under the Law of Return) accounted for 80 percent of the total population. Three main factors explain the erosion of the Jewish majority: (a) higher natural increase of the Arab population (especially Muslims), (b) the annexation of eastern Jerusalem in 1967, and (c) periodic downturns in Jewish immigration.

Various subgroups of the two major populations — Jewish and Arab alike — also underwent important demographic changes. The number of Haredi (“ultra-Orthodox”) Jews has grown rapidly over the past 20 years. During this time, the proportion of Jews who define themselves as Haredi increased from 3 percent to roughly 9 percent. In 1990, fewer than 10

* This essay was adapted from the position paper “Demographic Trends in Israel” of the Metzilah Center for Zionist, Jewish, Liberal and Humanist Thought, Jerusalem (2009). To read the full report, visit www.metzilah.org.il/?p=362.