

Pekudei 5779

“By The Numbers”

Go to any Rabbinic convention - and I've been to a few - and there is a certain shape that a conversation with a new colleague will take. Maybe we'll be in line for coffee, maybe sitting around before dinner, maybe just chatting at the end of a session - but after the exchange of names (if that - there are name tags now) and where we were ordained and when, the question always comes up: “How big is your shul?”

It always feels like a bit of a loaded question, actually. It always feels, at least to me, that I am being asked to talk about more than just numbers, whether numbers of members or the state of our books: that I'm really being asked about how established the shul is, or how well we are running - whether we are a flourishing community or one beset with challenges.

But all this comes wrapped up in the language of numbers. Like the beloved Count von Count on Sesame Street, it seems that we, too, are preoccupied simply with the act of counting.

And we don't just count our own communities. In 2013 a national study - The Pew Study - came out that injected real consternation into the discussion about our Movement. It suggested that according to the numbers, Conservative Judaism is on a precipitous decline in the USA. But as a followup book by Jack Wertheimer reveals, the raw numbers do not tell whole story.

This week's Torah portion has the same sort of narrative arc. At the start of Pekudei there is a numbered record of all of the donations brought to build the Mishkan, the desert sanctuary. All the gold, the silver, the copper - it's all set out - *ele fekudei haMishkan* - as if to evaluate the project:

*All the gold that was used for the work...came to 29 talents and 39 shekels...
The silver of those of the community who were recorded came to 100 talents and 1,755 shekels...*

The copper from the elevation offering came to 70 talents and 2,4000 shekels...

But there's a problem. The math doesn't really work! The traditional commentators wrestle with the fact that we don't know exactly how much gold ended up being used to overlay the various furnishings and how much was left over. Also, there would have been more people giving silver than were recorded, so that total has to be wrong as well.

The preoccupation with numbers is odd, anyway given that last week we were told that at a certain point the people had been so generous with their donations that Moses had to tell them to stop? Because that happened last week: the people brought so many freewill offerings "morning after morning" until the team of artisans had to beg Moses to stem the flow. There's a measure of the success of the Mishkan project, if ever there was one! If the donations were "more than enough," then why would the Torah tell us the specifics of how much and how many?

I wonder if the real lesson this Torah portion is trying to teach us is that it's not always safe to try to find comfort in numbers.

It's not that numbers aren't useful. Only a few weeks ago I was talking about the importance of a minyan, the quorum of adult Jews needed for certain prayers. And it's not that numbers are inherently bad - they can convey significant types of information. How would it be to live in a world where there were no quantified salaries, no house prices, no football scores...?!

The down side of our love of counting, though, is that very often we come out with a sense that what we have is not enough. And that feeling can lead us into some difficult places. Perhaps we feel a sense of failure, as if somehow we did something wrong. We can feel a sense of failure, a sense of disappointment or discontent. And while sometimes there's nothing to do but live with that sense of failure and move on, we are not so good at doing that, I think. It can quickly become the case that we make the connection that however much we have numerically, it is not enough - and we ourselves are not enough either. And that means we live with a sense of gnawing discomfort - what my friend Rabbi Julie Pelc Adler calls "the wanties." And those feelings are tough ones to try to live with.

So even as it gives us the numbers, this Torah portion goes out of its way to tell us “it was enough.” Quite early on, that counting fades out. The other donations are not quantified. The numbers were less important than the fact that the project was achieved at the end. It doesn’t matter that the math doesn’t work because what makes a community is not subject to mathematical calculation. All we need to know is that all the donations, all the work, all the craftsmanship - was enough.

And this message - the message about the truth of what made the project successful - is underlined by the way the parashah ends, finishing off the whole of the book of Exodus. We read:

When Moses had finished the work, the cloud covered the Tent of Meeting and the Presence of the Lord filled the Tabernacle.

Moses could not enter the Tent of Meeting because the cloud had settled upon it and the Presence of the Lord filled the Tabernacle.

As I wrote in this week’s brochure, clouds are impossible to quantify. They shift, they evolve, they defy measurement. This particular cloud fills up the space of the Mishkan so completely that even Moses can’t get inside.

And the cloud carries certain messages that mere numbers can’t. It blesses every part of the Mishkan equally, from the humble copper pegs to the splendid gold Ark. It fills up the space entirely. It connects all the separate parts to each other, as if to remind them of the role that each of them has to play in creating the first community space that will truly belong to the Children of Israel. The cloud invites us - in defiance of the title of the parashah - to evaluate the Mishkan project in terms of quality over quantity.

So I think next time I’m at a rabbinic conference, that’s the conversation I’d like to have with my colleagues. Not “how many?” but “what kind?” What kind of shul do I have? What kind of projects do we undertake? What kind of future are we building together? And what are the invisible aspects of our community that work truly to make us equal in our differences, to bind us together - but most of all, to give us that sense of satisfaction. Because in the end, it is those things - and not the numbers - that hold the secret to a flourishing community.