

You may have met my friend Daniel ben Moshe. He's come to daven in our shul a few times through the years; most recently, just before we began to shelter in place, he came late to morning minyan, put on tallit and tefillin, and brought big smiles to everyone who recognized him. He also probably caused a raising of the eyebrows among those who hadn't met him before. Daniel, you see, is a Marine, and he's been deployed overseas for long stretches of time, so his visits to the shul are few and far between. So it's understandable that those who are newer to the community might not recognize him.

But there's another reason his arrival at minyan causes curiosity. Daniel ben Moshe is black. Most people wouldn't imagine that he's Jewish, and would be amazed to see him wrap tefillin like it's second nature. But find him on Facebook if you can; his profile is in Hebrew letters. He's as Jewish as I am.

Earlier this week, the subject of Jews of Color became a source of conflict and deep pain. Two researchers published a study in eJewishPhilanthropy.com claiming that about 6% of America's Jews are People of Color. They contested the findings of another study that claimed that the figure is closer to 12-15%. A number of Jews of Color responded immediately expressing their hurt. One comment said: "Seriously? We're out here leaving the community on mass (sic) because everyone is so damn racist, and then you publish this."

Why do numbers even matter, you ask? Because the larger the percentage of a particular group, the stronger its claim on the need for more philanthropic support and investment from the mainstream Jewish community. By cutting the percentage number in half, say Jews of Color, the more their community is minimized, literally and figuratively.

The matter of counting Jews is timely, as we begin *Sefer Bemidbar*, known from its Latin name as The Book of Numbers. God commissions a census of the Israelites, so they can know the size of their armed forces. That's how this Biblical book begins. The methodology of data collection and analysis is this: "You and Aaron shall record them by their groups, from the age of twenty years up, all those in Israel who are able to bear arms. Associated with you shall be a man from each tribe, each one the head of his ancestral house" (Numbers 1:3-4)

This first count identifies a specific gender and age demographic. When we speak of the roughly 600,000 Israelites identified by the census, we are speaking only of men of military age. Women, children, and the elderly are not included in the number. The absence of women from the count is noteworthy, and in a way, it becomes the subject of the end of *Sefer Bemidbar*, when the daughters of Tzelofehad step forward to raise a case of land inheritance before Moshe. The particulars are a discussion for another day; what we should notice is that the uncounted are only heard from because they step forward and advocate for themselves.

Marc Dollinger is a respected scholar and chairs the Jewish Studies department at San Francisco State University. He stepped into the fray this week in an essay published by JTA. "Two summers ago," he wrote, "I published an academic book about blacks and Jews that did not include a single black Jew in the narrative." He quickly heard about it from Ilana Kaufman, a leader in the movement of Jews of Color. She asked him to reread each chapter of his acclaimed book and rethink its thesis through the eyes of a black Jew. Dollinger understands the pain Jews of Color feel when they are excluded from the narrative, when they go uncounted.

“When two senior Jewish studies scholars dismiss those who claim we need to do a better job of counting diverse Jews and minimize their numbers, it can send a message: Treat philanthropy requests from Jews of color with greater skepticism — they are fewer than you imagined,” writes Dollinger. “The result? Jews of color, yet again, are forced to prove they are not lying about their numbers, that they are vital and that they deserve philanthropic support. To watch all of this is to bear witness to a hierarchy of charitable giving based on race.”

Kaufman, in a powerful ELI Talk (that’s the Jewish version of TED Talks), asked this question: Sure, we all know and celebrate that Rabbi Abraham Joshua Heschel marched with Reverend Martin Luther King across the Pettis Bridge. So we know a Jew walked with a black man. But did anyone ever wonder if a Jewish black man walked behind them?

In his commentary on the Torah, the 16th-century Italian scholar Rabbi Ovadiah Seforno wrote that God instructed Moshe to count the Israelites *bemispar sheimot*, listing the number of the names, not the names themselves. God fully expected all these people to enter the Promised Land, and had it not been for *Het Hameraglim*, the sin in response to the report of the scouts, they would have all made it in, and the names would be listed later. We learn from this that hidden in every statistic is one individual, and then another, and then another. Census or not, no one wants to be made to feel that he or she is just a statistic. But sometimes statistics matter, and the way we tabulate them has ramifications on individuals.

In these difficult days, when we long to be seen and counted, let’s be mindful of the Divine character of every human being. And when we think of Jews, let’s remember to include those who may have long been excluded from the count. And when we do get back to being together in person, if a Jew of Color walks through our doors, let’s be sure that our first instinct is “us” and not “them.”