



Parashat Naso
On the Thirteenth Day

by Jo Hirschmann on Friday June 09, 2006
13 Sivan 5766
Numbers 4:21-7:89, Shabbat 13 Sivan 5766

At the opening of *parashat Naso* (Numbers 4:21-7:89) we are being counted. God instructs Moses to continue the census of the Israelites who are assembled in the desert. The counting is an elaborate process that began in the previous *parashah* and takes 20 days to complete. God provides meticulous instructions to Moses, Aaron, and the chieftans, who count all the men over 20 years of age and note their names.

But why does an omniscient God need a census? The answer, of course, is implicit in the question: The census was not conducted for God's benefit but, rather, for the benefit of those being counted. The experience of being counted and of having one's name carefully recorded was of vital importance to our ancestors, who were still navigating the rocky road from slavery to freedom.

To be counted, then, is part of the process of claiming one's full humanity and freedom. Furthermore, because the census was ordered by God, it is infused with a divine significance that affirms each person's holiness. *To be counted is to be blessed. To count others is to bestow a blessing upon them.*

The census' great significance no doubt made exclusion from it all the more painful. Indeed, the text tells us that women and children were not counted in the census. Today, how many among us can say that, at some point, we did not count in the community of *B'nei Yisrael*? And, during this month of Gay Pride, can we say that, in every corner of the Jewish community, lesbian, gay, bisexual, and transgender Jews truly count?

To be counted is to be blessed. To count others is to bestow a blessing upon them. And, if others will not count us, we will stand up and count ourselves.

This is exactly what LGBT Jews are doing. Since the early 1970s, we have started synagogues and organizations in communities around the world. We have written prayers and liturgy and *divrei Torah* through which we tell our stories, announce our humanity, and count ourselves.



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We have used the ancient practice of Biblical exegesis to re-work the stories of Ruth and Naomi and of David and Jonathan so that we can see our faces reflected back at us. Meanwhile, our Mishnah and Talmud scholars are unpacking the multifaceted genders described by the rabbis, and they are re-creating a world view more filled with possibilities than that of our own modern culture.

At the end of *parashat Naso*, after the completion of the census, the chieftans of each of the 12 tribes bring offerings to the Tabernacle. The *parashah* provides a day-by-day description of what each chieftan brings. By the end of the twelve days, there is a rich spread of gold and silver, bowls and ladles, bulls and yearling lambs. To make an offering – *korban* – is literally to draw closer to God, so this vast, generous spread represents *B'nei Yisrael's* collective effort to feel God's nearness.

As LGBT Jews continue to strive to be counted as part of our rich, living, and constantly evolving tradition, I like to think that we could add new sentences to the end of the *parashah*. They would perhaps read:

On the thirteenth day, it was the gay, lesbian, bisexual, and transgender Jews, those who had often hidden in the darkness and counted and blessed each other away from the light of day. On this thirteenth day they came forward to the sanctuary, bringing their offerings to God. They brought their words and their passion and they called out that they wanted to draw closer to God in full view of the rest of the community. They brought their whole beautiful selves and they offered midrash and song and commentary and words of Torah and heartfelt prayer. They gave their offerings, they were counted and they were blessed, and they drew closer to God.

May we all understand that holy communities are built by people who count and are counted, who bless and are blessed. As we count and as we bless, may we forget no-one; as we are counted and as we are blessed, may no-one forget us.



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