The numbers speak for themselves: 10,000 activists from all 50 states, 1,500 college students – including 215 student government presidents, and more than two-thirds of Congress in attendance. Thousands of participants lobbied 525 members of Congress. (I’d like to see the list of the 10 who refused the request.) Throw in hundreds of sessions, scores of important speakers, and enough standing ovations to get a good workout. I am referring, of course, to the AIPAC Policy Conference that I, along with the rabbis and over 125 members of the KJ/Ramaz community participated in this week. It was a tremendous display of the strength of the pro-Israel community, and this year’s was the largest one yet. It demonstrated the raw power of numbers and the importance of showing up in support of the US-Israel relationship.

Numbers are impressive. Whether in professional sports attendance or shul attendance, we often find ourselves gauging success by the numbers. So it is appropriate to reflect upon numbers as we begin the Book of Numbers, which gets its name from the census of Bnei Yisrael at the beginning and end of the book.

What exactly is the reason to count the Jewish people? Why is it necessary? Rashi explains the counting of the Jewish people as an expression of Divine love. God loves the Jewish people so much that He wants to keep track of how many there are. We often say that quality is more important than quantity, but that’s not always true. If I am a collector, then I want to collect more of something. If I am hosting a celebration, I need a heard count. If I am a political observer, I am very interested in how many people will show up at AIPAC. Numbers matter.

Numbers, though, don’t tell the whole story. This is why the Ramban believes that the true reason for the census was more than to keep track of how many Jews there were. Ramban wonders “why God commanded that the total number be known” (see Ramban on 1:45). Answering his own question, he states that “Perhaps God did so in order to let the Jews know of His kindness to them, for they descended to Egypt as seventy souls, and now they were numerous as the sand of the sea with such and such numbers of those who were twenty years old.” With this understanding, we see that the census was not just conducted for logistical reasons, but also to underscore to the very nation being counted just how much it had grown from humble origins.

There are two types of numbers. There are the numbers that quantify what we see in front of us; numbers that count. Then, there are numbers which tell a story and demonstrate the value of something; numbers that recount.

Let’s look at Israel for some numbers which count. Israel is 63 years old. It is only 1/6 of 1% of the landmass of the Middle East and roughly half the size of Lake Michigan. The Sea of Galilee, at 695 ft. below sea level, is the lowest freshwater lake in the world, and the Dead Sea is the lowest surface point on earth, at about 1,373 feet below sea level. It is a fact that Israel is the only nation in the world that entered the 21st century with a net gain in its number of trees. Jericho is the oldest continuously inhabited town in the world.
The Mount of Olives in Jerusalem is the oldest, continually used cemetery in the world. Israel has only 2% of the population of the Middle East.

Similarly, the AIPAC Policy Conference statistics are numbers which quantify and count. They measure certain levels of support for the State of Israel. We can measure the number of Congressmen and Senators that sign statements of support for Israel. We can analyze the data of the votes in the UN, demonstrating how little support Israel has within the community of nations. These numbers give us the facts. The numbers count.

Then there are also numbers which tell a story. There are numbers which recount much more than amounts or size or altitude. Just as the census of the Jewish people told their story of growth and accomplishment, the same is true of the numbers which recount the tremendous achievements of the State of Israel. For example:

- Israel has the highest ratio of university degrees per capita in the world.
- Israel has the highest number of scientists, technicians, and engineers per capita in the world.
- Israel has the highest number of PhD's per capita in the world.
- Israel is the largest immigrant-absorbing nation in the world, per capita.

This information is all based on numbers, facts, and figures, but they do a lot more than enumerate or measure. These numbers tell the story of how a tiny nation disproportionately makes the world a better place, be it through the arts, medicine, agriculture, manufacturing, you name it.

Some numbers provide quantifiable information about an important subject. Others tell a story. Our calculations must take both types of numbers into account. We must focus much of our attention on the threats that Israel faces. In this struggle, numbers matter. At the same time, the census in our parsha reminds us that sometimes we must look back in order to appreciate how much we have grown, and just how far we have come.

The Torah uses the term “lifkod” to describe the process of taking the census of the Jews in the desert. The word shares a root with the Hebrew term “tafkid,” which means a mission or purpose. It is clear that our focus on numbers is much more than academic. Numbers only matter if they can be the springboard for action.

It is easy to stand and be counted. Israel needs each and every supporter it can get. It is a mitzvah to show up. If we had 125 people at AIPAC this year, then next year, we need to have 200 (or more!) attending the Policy Conference in Washington on March 4-6. Go online and register after Shabbos. (It is all refundable until next January so you don’t lose by signing up, and you will hopefully decide to go.) There are specific acts that can be counted: letters written, phone calls made. These are the core quantifiable ingredients of our Israel activism.

Not only must we stand and be counted, but it is also essential and well within our ability to recount the story of Israel for others. At a recent gathering of rabbis in New York, Consul General Ido Aharoni made a request. It was not lobbying or letter writing. It wasn’t to promote tourism. He asked that we encourage people to upload pictures of Israel on Facebook. He explained that his goal is to change the narrative about Israel. For almost everyone in the world (outside the Jewish or other faith-based community), Israel is about the peace process, tension, occupation, rockets, and violence. Instead, Ido Aharoni wants people to see Israel in the Lifestyle, Arts, and Business sections of
newspapers. Israel has a story to tell. It is a real place. It is a spectacular place with spectacular people. That story must be told as well.

In March, there was an article in the Israeli newspaper Yediot Acharonot entitled “Branding Crisis: Jews, Start Talking.” It focused on advertising experts’ strategy for raising Israel’s positive profile. Israel needs better widespread coverage that tells the story about its dramatic accomplishments. Think about it: In little more than 60 years, Israel’s population has gone from 600,000 to 7.7 million. Israel has drained swamps, paved roads, planted millions of trees, won eight Nobel prizes, sent two satellites into space, become a leader in biotechnology, and is number two in the world in the number of start-up companies. Israel makes armor that American tanks have as protection from improvised explosive devices, and the bandage that it developed that is standard issue for militaries around the world is credited with saving Congresswoman Gabby Giffords’ life. This is all just the tip of the iceberg.

These facts tell a story that must be heard. We, as individuals, can and must do a better job of recounting that story. There are marketing experts and PR professionals who can launch the formal initiative to recruit a cadre of famous Jews to be spokesmen to raise Israel’s positive profile or find a way to get Israeli scenery into the next Steven Spielberg film. Each of us, though, can tell a colleague, write a letter to the paper, and, yes, talk up the positive virtues of Israel online. That is how we can use the numbers of Israel to recount to the world what Israel is really about.

Numbers count and numbers recount. We must never forget our sacred responsibility to engage in both: to stand and be counted as well as recount the narrative of all that we are, with God’s help, accomplishing. This will go a long way, quantitatively and qualitatively, to ensure the future of our nation. Our support for Israel is enhanced not only when we count the number of Israel supporters, but also when we recount the compelling story that is the State of Israel: past, present and future.