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## Student Perspective

### Los Angeles Graduation 2026, Hebrew Union College

My grandmother is an artist. It was in her house in Queens, drawing together at the kitchen table, that I developed my own love of art. Whenever I visit my childhood home, I unpack elementary school doodles, middle school sketchbooks, high school still lifes, and college paintings. I sprawl them across my bedroom floor and trace the threads of my grandmother's kitchen table to the easels at my undergrad. I take stock of my work. I count my artistic journey.

Last week, we began the fourth book of the Torah, Bamidbar: the book of Numbers. The book begins with the command to take stock, to count. "On the first day of the second month, in the second year following the exodus from the land of Egypt, Gd spoke to Moses in the wilderness of Sinai...saying: *s'u et rosh*, take a head-count of the entire community of the children of Israel" (Numbers 1:1-3). Moses and Aaron were to present this number to Gd.

There are many words used throughout the Torah that translate to "count." Yet *s'u*, which comes from the root *nassa*, means "to lift, support, exalt." In this *parsha*, Moses is not just told to number the

heads of the Israelites, but to *lift their heads*. Though the census numbers Israelites who will not make it out of the wilderness, each person is still exalted—indispensable—in the safe journey of their children into a future for which they laid the foundation. We are told that this is a census taken for Gd, but I believe it is actually a census taken for the next generation—to look back on, hold on to, and see their ancestors recognized, recorded, and lifted up.

I can see my grandmother's handwriting on the oldest pieces when I unpack my childhood artwork. A perfect outline of a bird with scribbles of crayon bursting out the seams signed "Mollie, age 3." A scene of aliens abducting astronauts labeled "Mollie, age 5." As the dates climb forward, the handwriting of the signature transitions into mine. Now, in my recent artwork, I see her influence in my vision and composition but it's subtle, almost fragile. The Israelites born into the wilderness must have felt this fragility; the fulfillment of the promise to enter the Land could only come to fruition after the loss of those who came before. They must have felt a desire to hurry and a wish to prolong. A tension between the wilderness of beginnings and the order of endings.

We, this year's graduates of Hebrew Union College, have spent a number of years feeling this tension, a pull between the past and the future. In our classrooms, we critically welcome and thoughtfully challenge the people and structures that set the groundwork for contemporary Jewish leadership. We romanticize and catastrophize the future of Judaism and our places in its continued formation. Now, at graduation, we pause in the potential of what we may offer to our fields, how our work can count.

The counting in Bamidbar only comes after two years of escaping, receiving, building, and wandering (just like graduate school), when the Israelites take their first breath of pause. The Women's Commentary explains that this census "represents a point reached in every community when the group takes stock of who stands in its ranks. In an important sense, the opening of Numbers is utopian." Utopia exists in this rare stillness, when past, present, and future coexist, when anything and everything is possible. The art my grandmother and I once made together was a utopia. She drew the lines and I colored them in.

At the Rhea Hirsch School of Education, I learned that the ability to reflect, “to think about what one is doing, what one is going to do, and what one has already done” is integral to the work of education. In my role as a Jewish leader, I strive to embody a reflective stance, one that helps me get closer to the utopia of seeing how all of the pieces of my educational work might fit together; the past I am inspired by, the future I hope to bring closer, and the present of which I try to take stock. As we line up for our hoods and as the Israelites stand to be counted, we hold the possibility of all three.

Graduation provides us with a moment to reflect on our time at Hebrew Union College, having had the great fortune to learn from professors and faculty, taking stock of their gleanings, revelations, and innovations. The contributions we make to our fields will only count because of the Jewish leaders who paved the way for our journeys, and the family, friends, and communities who have, and continue to, support us on our ways. As graduates, we have the opportunity to lift up their insights and carry them with us into our own versions of what is to come. As Jews, it is our tradition to make the old new and the new holy.

We cannot do this without the string, the stories (and also the artwork), that connect the past to the future. We learn from those who came before us, seek to do better than them, and hope the same for those who come after. Without my grandmother's handwriting, I choose to bring forward her talent and creativity. I can see her pride when she sees me do this, and do it better than she did.

Graduates, we are the children of the wilderness who have the renewed chance to honor our inheritances, the ancestors counted, in our proud building of an enduring Jewish future. I invite you to ask yourself, when you unpack your experiences, when you remember your education, when you summon those who came before you: how will you exalt the past as you bring forward a holy future?