

## במדבר

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### FEW IN NUMBER, GREAT IN DEED

שאו את ראש כל עדת בני ישראל

“Count the congregation of the children of Israel” (*Bamidbar* 1:2).

The Shelah *Hakadosh* indicates that the importance of a census is to indicate to each individual that he is not an isolated man, standing alone, but that he is an intrinsic part of a larger group, the totality of *Klal Yisrael*. Nevertheless, the individual must become cognizant of the fact that his unique worth is such that the fate of the entire world is dependent upon him. The Malbim (*Eretz Chemdah*) declares that each individual is a microcosm of the entire creation, yet at the same time, he is part of a whole.

The *Navi* Hoshea prophesies:

והיה מספר בני ישראל כחול הים אשר לא ימד ולא יספר

And the number of the children of Israel shall be as the sand of the sea, which cannot be measured nor numbered (*Hoshea* 2:1).

This statement is qualified by *Chazal* (*Yoma* 22:): If *Klal Yisrael* fulfills Hashem’s will, then they will be innumerable; if they fail to fulfill His will, they will be numbered. The *Kesav Sofer* (*Ki Sisa*) echoes the sentiment of Rabbi Yehudah *Hanasi* (*Yoma* 22:) by stating that there is a difference between a human count which is quantitative in nature, and a Heavenly tally which is qualitative in nature. The actual number of people in *Klal Yisrael* is not as important as the amount of *Mitzvot* each person performs. Hence, the actual historical number of *Klal Yisrael* is actually not very relevant.

לא מרבכם מכל העמים חשק ה' בכם ויבחר בכם כי אתם המעט מכל העמים

Not because you were more in number than any people did Hashem set His love upon you, and choose you — for you were the fewest of all the people (*Devarim* 7:7).

Hashem selected *Klal Yisrael* from among all the nations of the world, for He found them to be worthier and more deserving of His love than any other people. Since the glory of Hashem is reflected in His people, it would seem appropriate that He would choose the largest and most powerful of nations; it is to counter this assumption that Hashem explains that quality is more important than quantity (Ramban, *ibid.*).

This sentiment is echoed by Amos:

מי יקום יעקב כי קטן הוא

How shall Yaakov stand? For he is small (*Amos* 7:3, 5).

Nevertheless, Amos testifies:

רק אתכם ידעתי מכל משפחות האדמה על כן אפקד עליכם את כל-עונותיכם

Only you have I known of all the families of the earth: therefore I will punish you for all your inequities (*Amos 3:2*).

Once *Klal Yisrael* earned Hashem's love due to their superior qualities, their relative size became irrelevant. The question which puzzles Amos is why is *Klal Yisrael* so severely punished for its transgressions? Certainly, the iniquities of the other nations are vastly greater than those of the Jewish people. Why then is *Klal Yisrael* so severely castigated and disciplined while the nations seem to be only mildly chastened? The answer, Amos declares, is that once *Klal Yisrael* has achieved a special relationship with Hashem, they are judged by a much sterner yardstick. As the *Gemara* states:

הקדוש ברוך הוא מדקדק עם סביביו כחוט השערה

Hashem is as meticulous with those close to Him as the thickness of a hair (*Yevamos 121*:).

Also, the nations are punished in one fell swoop, while Hashem's beloved are only punished a little bit at a time — although it might seem like a continuous punishment (*Avodah Zarah 4*•).

*Klal Yisrael* is identified with the moon, as opposed to the nations of the world which are identified with the sun (*Sukkah 29*•). At their initial creation, both the sun and the moon were created equal in size and power, but then Hashem reduced the size of the moon (Rashi, *Bereishis 1:16*; *Chulin 60*:). In discussing the requisite animal sacrifice for the new moon, Hashem used a very strange expression:

ושעיר עזים אחד לחטאת לה'

“And one he-goat for a sin-offering unto Hashem” (*Bamidbar 28:15*).

Hashem's hidden meaning is, הירר, הביאו כפרה עלי שמיעטתי את הירר “Bring an atonement for Me because I have diminished the moon” (*Chulin 60*:). Part of the new-moon ceremony involves reparation offered by Hashem for His role in diminishing the size of the moon. The moon is actually a metaphor for *Klal Yisrael*. Hence, the actual meaning of the aforementioned statement of *Chazal* is that Hashem is expressing remorse for His role in limiting the size of *Klal Yisrael* (Maharsha, *ibid.*).

A question frequently asked by agnostics is that if Hashem is truly as great as He is portrayed by the Torah, and if *Klal Yisrael* is truly Hashem's chosen nation, why then is *Klal Yisrael* not in the majority among the nations, and why does the chosen nation not enjoy a material empire akin to that established by Greece or Rome? The answer is simple; this world is a test designed to examine the mettle of man (*Mesilas Yesharim 1*). The operative factor in *Olam Hazeh* is *bechirah*, the exercise of free will. Man is afforded the opportunity to choose between right and wrong. If it were obvious that Hashem smiled upon a certain way of life, by showing favor to the practitioners of that life style, there would be no contest, no *bechirah*. Everyone would flock to that particular life style, and everyone would become a righteous member of *Klal Yisrael*. There would be no purpose to *Olam Hazeh*. Hence, it was necessary for Hashem to minimize *Klal Yisrael*, albeit reluctantly.

It is particularly repugnant to Hashem that the state of affairs of *Olam Hazeh* necessitated that His chosen nation be dominated by the vilest and lowest of the nations. *Klal Yisrael* is urged not

to associate with the tyrannizer because he is accused of harboring murderous plots against the oppressed (*Avodah Zarah* 22•). His physicians, and even his barbers, represent dangers which are to be avoided (ibid. 27•). He is accused of committing bestiality with fowl, and then using it for his food (ibid. 22:). Even his wine is prohibited, because chances are it was intended for idolatrous use. It is no wonder that Hashem is loathe to permit *Klal Yisrael* to be subjugated by the nations, but it is necessary so that existence in *Olam Haze*h may fulfill its purpose. We were given life in order to choose between good and evil, and the ultimate opportunity to determine our fate in *Olam Haba*.

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