



From the Sons of Israel to *Benei Yisrael*: On the Power and Danger of Groups

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One of the givens of Jewish tradition is that matters of holiness require ten people, as we see in the context of the *minyan* of prayer. Different Rabbinic sources try to locate the basis for this demand and many sources in the Rabbinic tradition of Israel connect the ten people needed for a *minyan* to the original, literal Sons of Israel, the ten of Ya'akov's sons who went down to Egypt to get food due to the famine plaguing Canaan at the time. We will examine one *midrash* in Bereishit Rabbah and the way that it grounds the requirement for a *minyan* from the verses about the journey of Ya'akov's ten sons in our *parashah*.

The short group of verses that are the focus of the conversation are found at the very beginning of our *parashah*:

בראשית מב:ג, ה

וַיֵּרְדּוּ אֶחָד-יְיֹסֵף, עִשְׂרָה, לִשְׁבֵּר בָּר, מִמִּצְרַיִם [...] . וַיָּבֹאוּ בְנֵי יִשְׂרָאֵל, לִשְׁבֹּר בְּתוֹךְ הַבָּאִים כִּי-הָיָה
הָרָעָב, בְּאֶרֶץ כְּנָעַן.

Bereishit 42:3, 5

The brothers of Joseph, ten of them, went down to obtain provisions from Egypt...
and the sons of Israel came to obtain provisions among the others who were coming,
for there was a famine in the land of Canaan.

The verses seem redundant! At first the brothers are described as coming down to obtain provisions from Egypt, then they are again described by the verses upon their arrival with the rest of the people who have come to Egypt! It seems that this unnecessary repetition is what



allows the *midrash* to expand these verses to be speaking to matters beyond their local and original context.

Another detail in these verses is worthy of attention in the context of our conversation its emphasis on the number of brothers, “ten of them.” Since Ya’akov’s sons were twelve, there is a need for an explanation: Yosef is absent as he is already in Egypt, and Binyamin’s absence is explained in the verses—he remained home at the behest of his father “lest disaster befall him” (v. 4).

But perhaps the most significant oddity in these verses is not the extra information, but the interesting terminology. At first the men who go down to Egypt are described as Joseph’s brothers, then they are described as the sons of Israel. And this is the first time that we see the term “sons of Israel” applied to a group in the present.

R. Samson Rafael Hirsch (Germany, 1808-1888) highlights this moment in his commentary, “This is the first time that they appear as the Sons of Israel. This is a fateful moment; the entire future is enclosed in it.”

Let’s turn our attention to the use of these verses to require ten for a *minyan* in the *midrash* that will be the focus of our discussion. Interestingly, it is a universal given that ten is the proper number for a *minyan*, but there is a dispute on how to arrive at that number through textual analysis. On each side of the dispute there is a two-tiered analysis. First there is an open-ended verse that suggests that there need to be a group of people for things that demand a context of holiness. This verse is then followed by a second one which defines the group as consisting of ten.

בראשית רבה (תיאודור-אלבק) פרשת מקץ פרשה צא

ומנין לעשרה?

...אמר ר' סימון נאמר כאן "תוך" ונאמר להלן "תוך" מה תוך האמר להלן עשרה אף תוך האמר כאן עשרה.

אמר ר' יוסי אם בתוך הבאים אפילו כמה!?

אלא נאמר כאן "בני ישראל" ולהלן "בני ישראל", מה כאן עשרה אף להלן עשרה.



Bereishit Rabbah (Theodor-Albeck) Parashat Mikeitz #91

How do we know that ten is necessary?...

R. Simon says: It says “among” here and it says “among” there. Just as there it is ten, so too here it is ten.

R. Yose says: It says “among those who are coming” which implies any number! Rather it says “sons of Israel” here and “sons of Israel” there. Just as here it is ten, so too there it is ten.

The first verse in the analysis is from VaYikra: “Do not violate my holy name and I will be sanctified among the children of Israel. I am the Lord who sanctifies you” (22:32). This verse is understood as demonstrating that sanctification requires an audience of people, a congregation, a *minyan* in contexts of holiness. Therefore a quandary is raised as to the minimal number of people that this group needs to include in order to fulfill the definition of “among”.

Following this quandary there are two possibilities set forward suggesting teachings that the number is ten. They both use the verse from our *parashah* to arrive at that number, but they use different strategies. R. Simon focuses on the word “among” which appears both in Bereishit and in VaYikra. Because this phrase appears both in the context of holiness and in the context of Yosef’s brothers, R. Simon sees an invitation to connect the two stories. We know that God is asking, demanding, aspiring to be consecrated (*kadosh*) “among” and we know that Yosef’s brothers were “among.” And since we know the exact number of the brothers, ten, we can learn that God is sanctified in a group of ten.

R. Yose, however, evinces some discomfort with R. Simon’s analysis. The language of “among” in the verse of Bereishit doesn’t refer to the brothers themselves, but refers to their presence among all of the other people who are coming to Egypt! The Torah does not specify how many other people were coming along with the ten brothers and it is these other people to whom the term “among” refers! Therefore the term “among” is not helpful in determining that we need a context of ten. Therefore R. Yose proposes an alternative. He bridges the verse about holiness, in VaYikra, with the number ten, in Bereishit, by means of the term “Sons/Children of Israel”.

This shift, to the Children of Israel, is meaningful beyond the technical solution that it provides. It possibly enables us to fold in R. Hirsch’s understanding that calling Yosef’s



brothers and Ya'akov's sons the sons of Israel at this moment is fateful and significant. R. Yose allows us to tie the original group of Ya'akov's descendants with his descendants throughout history, the future congregation and people of Israel, and invites us to see the initial ten as the seed out of which the holy people are required to publicly sanctify their god as a group, as the Children of Israel.

Whether you follow the exegetical preference of R. Simon or of R. Yose, what this *midrash* presents is a tradition that ties together two apparently disparate contexts, the troubled context of Yosef's brothers as a group and the holy contexts of prayer and sanctification of God's name. Why do R. Yose and R. Simon make this choice, to locate the *minyan* requirement in a group of ten that has behaved so treacherously, that has sold its own brother?

Of course, the rabbis here do not reveal the motivations and understanding behind these exegetical strategies, so all we can do is surmise. What is so surprising here is the choice of using a group that is known for doing something bad as the paradigm for the group of holiness, for a *minyan*.¹ And perhaps we can see in these verses an echo of a warning: groups can do evil. There is no guarantee that any group, gathered and unified, will lead to positive outcomes or to holiness, and perhaps this warning comes out of the Rabbinic interpretation as well. When people come together, even for an ostensibly holy purpose (and possibly particularly then), there is danger. There is a danger that jealousy will lead to evil, a danger that the voices of the majority will silence the voice of the minority, a danger that once a group has coalesced and started to move together, the responsibility is dispersed and no one will take it upon themselves.

Ya'akov himself reveals another danger that comes from people coming together as a group. As we mentioned, the reason why there are only ten brothers who go down to Egypt, as opposed to eleven, is that Ya'akov decided not to send Binyamin, "lest disaster befall him." This rationale on Ya'akov's part raises a troubling question: Wasn't he concerned about the safety of his other sons? It seems that he is not. He is not concerned for the group in the same way he is concerned for the individual. A group thus holds the risk of blurring the unique value of individuals.

¹ And similarly in the parallel conversation in the Babylonian Talmud (Megillah 23b) the number ten is learned from another unfavorable group, the ten spies.



Alongside these warnings comes God's demand, "Do not violate my holy name and I will be sanctified among the children of Israel. I am the Lord who sanctifies you." A close reading reveals that perhaps the presence of a group, of an "among", enables greater sanctification of God's name. The danger implicit in forming a group does not override the tremendous potential for holiness that a group has. Moreover, when people join together as a group to sanctify God's name, there is also the potential for mutuality, that we be sanctified by God, "I am the Lord who sanctifies you."

May we come together for holiness and the good.

