

THE BLESSING OF A MIXED MULTITUDE

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The curtain of the Pesah story opens on a new king and an ever-so-fertile Israelite people. The Torah tells us that the Israelites were fruitful, and they multiplied until “the land was filled with them” (Exodus 1:7-9). Enter the new king, who looks at this prolific Israelite people, who sees that they are *rav ve-atzum*, numerous and vast, and he is afraid. He sees their ever-increasing numbers, and he worries that they will soon amass enough people to overtake his oppressive regime. Threatened by the Israelites and their growing potential for power, he seeks to break them both in body and in spirit. He sets taskmasters over them and initiates a program of forced, back-breaking labor—yet still, the Israelites increase in number (Exodus 1:10-12).

While the Torah refers to Pharaoh as a *melekh hadash*, a new king, a prominent talmudic opinion teaches us that this shouldn't be taken literally to mean that he was actually a new king.¹ Rather, it was this same Pharaoh who hired Joseph and welcomed Jacob and his family into Egypt with great hospitality, but he now became *like* a new king in the sense that he betrayed his prior relationship with the Children of Israel, a king “who did not know Joseph.” He acted as if Joseph, who was once his close advisor, single-handedly responsible for his kingdom's success and ability to profit in years of famine, was now part of the ever-growing mass of Israelites he did not value, each one indistinguishable from the next.

Pharaoh looked at the swarm of Israelites, and he did not see Joseph, his confidant, his advisor, his steward.

Rather, he saw a people *rav ve-atzum*, numerous and vast. Pharaoh didn't see them as individuals replete with humanity and worthy of dignity. Rather, he saw a people *rav ve-atzum*, a mass to be feared.

But Jewish tradition professes the paramount worth of the individual. Rooted in the idea that we are each created *be-tzelem Elohim*, in the image of God,² our sages teach us about the singular value of each individual life and the importance of seeing each person in the fullness of their humanity. In essence, our rabbis teach us how not to be like Pharaoh.

Mishnah Sanhedrin, in the context of talking about capital punishment, offers a striking counter-example to Pharaoh's approach.

משנה סנהדרין ו:ה

אמר רבי מאיר, בנשעה שאדם מצטער, שכיונה מה הלשון אומרת בביכול, קולני מראשי, קולני מזרועי.

Mishnah Sanhedrin 6:5

Rabbi Meir said: When a person suffers, what expression does the Shekhinah use? “I am distressed about My head, I am distressed about My arm.”

Rabbi Meir teaches that even for those who have sinned, even at the moment of their punishment, the Divine despairs and is deeply saddened by their suffering.

Rabbi Kalonymus Kalman Shapira, writing from the context of immense suffering in the Warsaw Ghetto,

1 Either Rav or Shmuel, see Talmud Bavli Sotah 11a.

2 Genesis 1:27.

notes that Rabbi Meir asks his question in the singular and not the plural. Rabbi Meir could have asked, "When the Jewish people suffer," but instead he asks about the individual.

אש קודש, פרשת תולדות, מרחשון תש"א

דר"מ מרמז בזה שלא בלבד כשהכלל כלו מצטער אלא גם צער אדם פרטי עולה למרום כי זה נהרג וזה מת ר"ל מתוך צרותיו...

כי אף שהכלל ישראל מתקיים מ"מ איש הפרטי שמת אותו ואת חייו אבדה ועד תחיית המתים את חייו הכריתו ר"ל זה שאומר הלשון שאדם מצטער כמו שאמרו בסנהדרין דף ל"ח ע"א אדם יחידי נברא שגם על צער אדם יחידי השכינה אומרת וכו' ועל הפרט והיחיד דוקא השכינה אומרת כיון שבה בחי' הפרט והיחידית כנ"ל

Eish Kodesh, Parashat Toldot, 1940

With his question, Rabbi Meir is hinting that the Shekhinah suffers not only when the entire Jewish people are in trouble, but that the pain of an individual person also ascends upon high...

Even though the Jewish people as a whole are eternal, when one individual dies, both he and his life are lost, and until the resurrection of the dead, his life is cut off, may the Merciful One protect us. This, then, is the meaning of the particular choice of wording, "When a 'person' suffers," as we learn in the Talmud, "A 'person' was created solitary" (Sanhedrin 38a). This is why even over the pain of a single individual the Shekhinah says, "O woe! My head, O woe! My arms." It is specifically the Shekhinah who speaks up when an individual suffers because she embodies the concepts of singularity and individuality.

Rabbi Shapira writes that Rabbi Meir's use of the singular is significant and teaches us that God cares not only about the survival of the Jewish people as a whole, but rather, that God cares about each and every life. Profoundly, as Rabbi Shapira attempts to make sense of his own suffering and the suffering

of those around him, he affirms and insists that God cares about the fate of each person and not just the survival of the Jewish collective. Most unlike Pharaoh, God does not look at us and see only the *rav*, a mass, each person indistinguishable from the next; rather, God looks at us and sees individuals. God mourns the suffering of each and every person because each of us is significant to God. As it is taught in Mishnah Sanhedrin 4:5, Adam was created alone to teach us the paramount importance of each and every single life.

But our rabbis go beyond teaching us that God cares about, and is deeply saddened by, the sorrow of each individual. It's not just about suffering; rather, our rabbis teach us that God values each of our unique lives in their totality. In his commentary on Parashat Bemidbar, Rabbi Shai Held writes, "Jewish sources insist that God cherishes human beings not just as faceless representatives of a privileged species but as individuals; God loves us in all of our singularity and uniqueness."³ In our individuality, in our uniqueness, we are each a crucial part of the fabric of the Jewish people.

Furthermore, Rabbi Mordekhai Yosef Leiner⁴ extends the importance of each individual when writing about the census, in which male Israelites over 20 years of age are counted (Numbers 1:2). Although this is only a partial census of the people, Rabbi Leiner sees in it a message about the importance of each individual that speaks to the value of every member of the community regardless of age or gender.

מי השילוח במדבר ב

שאו את ראש וכו' ענין נשיאות ראש היה כפי מה דאיתא בגמ' (ברכות נ"ח.) אין דעתו של זה דומה לשל זה. כי הש"י חלק לכל אחד טובה וחיים בפני עצמו ואין אחד דומה לחבירו. ע"כ נאמר שאו את ראש היינו שתעמדו כל אחד על מקום השייך לו. ועי"ז יהיה במקומו מדוגל ומנושא...

Mei Ha-Shiloah, Numbers 2

"Take a census of the whole Israelite community..."

³ Shai Held, "Parashat Bemidbar: Divine Love and Human Uniqueness," <https://www.hadar.org/torah-resource/divine-love-and-human-uniqueness>. The essay is also included in *The Heart of Torah: Essays on the Weekly Torah Portion* (Philadelphia: JPS, 2017).

⁴ 1801-1884, Izhbitz, Poland, also called the Mei ha-Shiloah after his most famous work.

The matter of taking a census is according to that which is brought in the Talmud (Berakhot 58a): The mind of one person is not similar to that of another. Because the Holy One distributed to each person goodness and life for each one, and one is not similar to the other. And so it says, "take a census of each person" in order that you stand each person in the place to which they belong. And through this, they will be in their place, marked and raised.⁵

Rabbi Leiner teaches that the broad, spiritual purpose of the census is to elevate each and every person, to note that each person is unique from the other, and to give each person the opportunity to stand and to be raised up in their place. When we see each person as the unique individual they are, valuing them in the fullness of their identity and humanity, when we allow them to stand in the place that is right for them, we raise them up. Rabbi Leiner goes on to teach the following parable: It's like someone who has carefully planted an orchard in a certain order. If a couple of the plants are switched, or if just one plant is missing, the garden is not whole. If just one of us is made to stand in a place that is not our own, if just one of us is missing, then the orchard is incomplete. When one of us is not valued in the fullness of our identity, we are all lacking.

When the Israelites came out of Egypt, they did not come out alone. Rather, they came out as an *erev rav*, a mixed multitude.⁶ Commentators note that this mixed multitude included Egyptians and converts from among the nations who joined up with the Israelites on their march to freedom.⁷ Why did these Egyptians and converts from among the nations join up with the Israelites? Perhaps, they recognized that in this new community, individuals mattered; every person would be counted.

In the opening of the Book of Exodus, when Pharaoh looked at the Israelites, he did not see individual

people. He saw a people *rav ve-atzum*; a growing mass to be feared. The lesson of the Pesah story is one in which we learn to recognize the individuality and humanity of every person. Rather than look at a crowd and simply see the indistinguishable *rav*, we learn to value and to raise up the individual. Rather than see with the eyes of Pharaoh, we aspire to see with the eyes of God.

On this Pesah, as we retell the story of our Exodus from Egypt, may we celebrate the blessing of a mixed multitude. May we each be counted in our places, raised up and honored. ♦

⁵ The Hebrew root נשנ means both "to count" and "to raise."

⁶ Exodus 12:37-38: "The Israelites journeyed from Ramses to Succot, about six hundred thousand men on foot, aside from children. Moreover, a mixed multitude went up with them, and very much livestock, both flocks and herds."

⁷ Rashi on Exodus 12:38 writes that the mixed multitude included converts from among the nations, and Seforno there writes that it included Egyptians who went out with them.