

In this week's *Parashah*, *Bnei Yisrael* are divided by tribes into twelve camps under distinct *Degalim* / flags. *Midrash Rabbah* explains that when *Hashem* revealed Himself on *Har Sinai* to give the Torah, He was accompanied by 22,000 angels grouped under *Degalim*. Seeing this, *Bnei Yisrael* yearned for the same. Immediately, *Hashem* told Moshe, "Go make them *Degalim* as they desire." [Until here from the *Midrash*]

What is this *Midrash* teaching? R' Zvi Yisrael Thau *shlita* (founder of Yeshivat Har Ha'mor in Yerushalayim) explains based on the writings of R' Avraham Yitzchak Hakohen Kook *z"l* (1865-1935; first *Ashkenazic* Chief Rabbi of *Eretz Yisrael*):

Angels fulfill their missions single-mindedly, without distraction from a *Yetzer Ha'ra* / evil inclination. *Bnei Yisrael's* wish when they received the Torah was to do the same. Though being human means experiencing distractions from serving *Hashem*, *Bnei Yisrael's* wish was that their pure, angel-like souls would prevail over those earthly distractions, so they could fulfill the words of our prayers, "May we sanctify Your Name in this world, just as they sanctify it in heaven above"--with the same degree of dedication and purity.

To live under a flag means to belong to a group that is dedicated to a mission. That is the symbolism of the angels being under *Degalim*. *Bnei Yisrael's* aspiration was that they, likewise, would be totally dedicated to the mission they were assigned when they were given the Torah.

- Continued in box inside -

Shabbat

The *Gemara* (*Shabbat* 35b, as explained by *Rashi z"l*) mentions a custom to blow the *Shofar* six times on *Erev Shabbat*. At the first blast, the workers in the fields would cease their labors and start making their way home. At the second blast, workers in the city would stop their labors and shopkeepers would close their stores. At the third blast, *Shabbat* candles would be lit, according to the sage Rabbi Natan. Rabbi Yehuda says that at the third blast, men would remove their *Tefilin*, while candles would be lit at the fourth blast. (While the prevalent custom today is to wear *Tefilin* only during *Shacharit*, it once was customary to wear *Tefilin* all day.) A short time later, three additional blasts--*Teki'ah*, *Teru'ah* and *Teki'ah*--would announce the onset of *Shabbat*. [Until here from the *Gemara*]

R' Shlomo Zvi Schick *z"l* (Hungary; 1844-1916) writes: When the government no longer permitted these six *Shofar* blasts, the sages of that time established the custom of reciting six chapters of *Tehilim* (95-99 and 29, i.e., our "*Kabbalat Shabbat*") to welcome *Shabbat*.

R' Schick continues: King Shlomo, who built the first Temple, made a gate for bridegrooms and a gate for mourners, so people would know with whom to rejoice and who to console. He did this to give people the opportunity to perform the *Mitzvah* of *Gemilut Chassadim* / doing acts of kindness. When the Temple was destroyed, the Sages established that bridegrooms and mourners should go to *Shuls* and study halls so people would have the same opportunities to do *Chessed*. This, R' Schick writes, is the source of a custom to have a set place in every *Shul* where bridegrooms sit and another place where mourners sit. It also is the source of the custom to make an announcement on Friday night before mourners enter the *Shul* and for the congregants to turn and face the door--so they will know who the mourners are and will console them. It also is customary to announce when there will be a *Milah* during the coming week so people will perform a *Chessed* by attending. (*Siddur Rashban* #99-100)

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“Moshe counted them by the word of Hashem, as he had been commanded.” (3:16)

Rashi z”l writes: Moshe asked Hashem, “How can I enter the tents to count the nursing infants?” Hashem answered Moshe, “You do your part, and I will do mine.” So Moshe went to the door of each tent, and a *Bat Kol* / Heavenly voice announced, “There are so-and-so many babies in this tent.” Therefore the verse says, “By the word of Hashem.”

R’ Zeidel Epstein z”l (1908-2007; *Mashgiach Ruchani* of Yeshivat Rabbeinu Yaakov Yosef (RJJ) and Yeshiva Torah Ore) writes: There is a question that begs to be asked--specifically, for what purpose did Moshe Rabbeinu need to go to each tent if, in any event, a *Bat Kol* was going to give him the information he needed?

R’ Epstein answers: There is an important lesson here regarding Hashem’s interactions with man. Man is obligated to do his part, his *Hishtadlut* / effort. “I can’t” is never an acceptable answer. Man must do his part, and when he reaches his limit, Hashem will do the rest.

R’ Epstein adds: The Torah teaches this lesson in many places. For example, we read that Pharaoh’s daughter stretched out her hand to take Moshe from the basket in the river. Our Sages say that a miracle happened, and her arm lengthened. But why did she try in the first place, if Moshe was too far away? Again, the lesson is that we must perform our *Hishtadlut* and not simply declare something hopeless. (He’arot)

– Continued from front page –

Notably, R’ Thau adds, Hashem did not group all of *Bnei Yisrael* under one flag. Man is multi-faceted and multi-talented, and every person has something unique to contribute to the service of Hashem. The commandments themselves apply equally to all Jews; all are obligated to observe every aspect of *Halachah*. Nevertheless, within that framework, there are multiple legitimate approaches to serving Hashem. (For example, some emphasize Torah study, others--prayer, and others--different types of *Chessed*.) The fact that there are multiple *Degalim* is meant to allude to that richness. And, *Bnei Yisrael*’s request for the *Degalim* was meant to express their desire to channel all of their talents and abilities, without exception, into serving Hashem--just as angels do.

R’ Thau concludes: Hashem’s abilities are infinite, yet “Hashem *Echad*” / “Hashem is One.” Likewise, unity among the Jewish People does not mean ignoring the diversity of our talents. Rather, unity exists when every person is channeling his or her unique qualities toward a single goal--specifically, bringing about the revelation of Hashem in our earthly setting. (Kovetz Sichot L’moadei Iyar p.115-124)

“Hashem spoke to Moshe in the Wilderness of Sinai, in the Ohel Mo’ed / Tent of Meeting, on the first of the second month, in the second year after their exodus from the land of Egypt, saying, ‘Take a census of the entire assembly of Bnei Yisrael . . .’” (1:1-2)

Rashi z”l comments: Because they are dear to Him, He counts them repeatedly. [Until here from *Rashi*]

We read (*Hoshea* 2:1--the opening verse of this week’s *Haftarah*), “The number of *Bnei Yisrael* shall be like the sand of the sea, which can neither be measured nor counted.” The *Gemara* (*Yoma* 22b) asks: Which is correct--the first part of the verse, which says that *Bnei Yisrael* have a “number,” or the second part of the verse which says they “can neither be measured nor counted”? The *Gemara* answers: This one is true when they do G-d’s Will, and this one is true when they do not do G-d’s Will. [Until here from the *Gemara*]

R’ Elazar Loew z”l (1758-1837; rabbi in Bohemia and Moravia; best known for his work *Shemen Rokeach*) writes: The implication is that when *Bnei Yisrael* are not doing Hashem’s Will, they will be countable, but if they repent, they will immediately become uncountable. How is it possible for such a change to occur instantaneously? Also, if the first part of the verse is speaking about when *Bnei Yisrael* are not doing Hashem’s Will, and the second part refers to when they are doing His Will, then the *Gemara*’s answer should have been reversed--first, “This one is true when they do not do G-d’s Will,” and then, “This one is true when they do G-d’s Will.”

Based on the above *Rashi*, however, these questions are answered, R’ Loew writes. The *Gemara* does not mean that when *Bnei Yisrael* repent, their number will miraculously increase. Rather, the *Gemara* means that when *Bnei Yisrael* do G-d’s Will, their number will be known because, as *Rashi* writes, “Because they are dear to Him, He counts them repeatedly.” On the other hand, when *Bnei Yisrael* do not do Hashem’s Will, He will not count them. As a result, they will be neither measured nor counted.

(Yavin Shemuah Al Ha’Torah)

“From twenty years of age and up--everyone who goes out to the army in Yisrael . . .” (1:3)

Rishonim / early authorities disagree whether 20 is the “draft” age only for a *Milchemet Reshut* / optional war, or also for a *Milchemet Mitzvah* / obligatory war--for example, conquering *Eretz Yisrael* or fighting Amalek.

The *Gemara* (*Sotah* 44b) states that even a bridegroom must go out for a *Milchemet Mitzvah*. R’ Shmuel Hominer z”l (1913-1977; Yerushalayim) writes: *Pirkei Avot* teaches that a man ideally should marry at 18. Taken together, these two teachings seem to imply that even someone younger than 20 is drafted for a *Milchemet Mitzvah*. (Avodat Ha’melech)