

OF STARS AND SAND

THE JEWISH FUTURE IS NOT A NUMBERS GAME BY ROBERT SUSSMAN



IN HIS ESSAY TITLED “CONCERNING THE JEWS”, Mark Twain famously asks: “If the statistics are right, the Jews constitute but one percent of the human race. It suggests a nebulous dim puff of star-dust lost in the blaze of the Milky Way. Properly the Jew ought hardly to be heard of; but he is heard of, has always been heard of. He is as prominent on the planet as any other people... His contributions to the world’s list of great names in literature, science, art, music, finance, medicine, and abstruse learning are also way out of proportion to the weakness of his numbers... All things are mortal but the Jew; all other forces pass, but he remains. What is the secret of his immortality?”¹

When we speak of the Jewish future, we often get caught up in statistics, considering the current size of the Jewish people and how that number might change for better or worse based on various criteria.

At the very beginning of Parshas Bamid-

bar, Moshe is commanded to take a census of the Jewish people. One of our great Sages, the Ramban (Nachmanides), comments on this episode that we must not count the Jewish people unnecessarily – for example, for the sake of satisfying our curiosity regarding how many Jews there are. Even when we do count, he says we do not count everyone, as it is essential that a portion of the people remain uncounted in order that the precise total remains unknown, so that there is no fixed or finite limit imposed on us. For example, we see that Hashem often commands that only persons over a certain age be counted.

The Jewish future is not a numbers game. We really have no need to worry about how many Jews there are presently or how many there might be in the near or even distant future. Why? Because Hashem promised to all of our Avos (forefathers) that our number would be beyond count – and this is indeed the answer to Mark Twain’s question

concerning the secret of the immortality of the Jewish people:

To Avraham, Hashem said²: “...Count the stars if you are able to count them... so shall your offspring be.” And again, following the Akeidas Yitzchak (the binding of Isaac), where Avraham demonstrated his limitless devotion to Hashem, Avraham was told³: “I will surely bless you and greatly increase your offspring like the stars in the heavens and like the sand on the seashore.”

And to Yitzchak, Hashem said⁴: “I will multiply your offspring as the stars in the heavens.”

And to Yaakov, Hashem said⁵: “And your offspring will be as the dust of the earth”

One of our Sages⁶ takes note of the fact that Hashem compares our size to different objects (ie, the stars, the sand on the seashore, and the dust), explaining that each one refers to different periods in our history. At a time of tranquillity and prosperity, Israel is compared to the stars –

“WE NEED NOT WORRY IF THERE WILL BE JEWS OR HOW MANY JEWS THERE WILL BE – WE NEED ONLY WORRY IF WE – AND OUR CHILDREN, AND OUR CHILDREN’S CHILDREN – WILL BE COUNTED AMONG THEM!”

FASCINATING FACTS

SO, HOW MANY GRAINS OF SAND ARE THERE ON THE SEASHORE (NOT COUNTING DESERTS)?

According to one estimate¹, the number of grains of sand on the world’s beaches is approximately:

7 quintillion 500 quadrillion², that’s 75 followed by 17 zeros after it (7 500 000 000 000 000 000)

AND HOW MANY STARS IN THE VISIBLE UNIVERSE?

According to one estimate³, the number of stars in the visible universe is approximately: 70 sextillion, that’s

7 followed by 22 zeros after it (70 000 000 000 000 000 000 000)

Although within the entire universe (ie, what exists beyond the scope of our current telescopes) there may be many more stars.

because this is a comparison that speaks of great magnitude. At a time when our enemies seek to destroy us, Israel is compared to the sand – but not just any sand, not the sand at the bottom of the sea, and not the sand in the vast deserts. We are compared specifically to the sand at the seashore, because just as the waves rise up and threaten to flood the entire Earth, when those waves reach the sand at the seashore they are immediately broken. So too, when the nations rise up to destroy Israel, they are unable to do so, and they fall and break just as the waves on the sand. At a time of lowliness or disgrace, when we have been crushed to the lowest level, Israel is compared to the dust – but from there we will rise up from our disgrace and spread out in all directions⁷. We may ask why must we ever even reach such a level? Unfortunately, it is because Israel does not search for Hashem with all of their hearts until they have fallen to just such a level.

The Talmud teaches⁸ that it is forbidden

to count Israel even for the purpose of fulfilling a mitzvah, and the Rambam (Maimonides)⁹ codifies this teaching, adding that it is forbidden to count Jews except via another object. For example, as we see throughout Tanach, when a census was commanded or became necessary, persons would contribute a half-shekel¹⁰, or another object¹¹, and those objects would then be counted. The Rambam notes that when David took a census and actually counted the people themselves, a severe plague resulted.

So why don’t we count Jews? Firstly, one of our Sages¹² explains that when we count a person, it causes the heavenly court to take note of all of that person’s deeds, and this may result in the person being punished for his sins at a time when he would have otherwise not been punished.

Secondly, Jews exist beyond mazel – beyond what is written in the stars. We are not bound by the finite nature of the world. The Talmud teaches¹³ that when Avraham complained to Hashem that he had seen in the stars that he would not be blessed with a child, Hashem replied to Avraham that he must abandon his astrology since there is no mazel (no star) for Israel – that Israel’s fate is not controlled by the stars. As Rashi explains, through prayer and merit we can change what is written in the stars for the good! Regarding this same episode in the Chumash, when Hashem takes Avraham outside and shows him the stars, Rashi¹⁴ brings a Midrash, in which Hashem says to Avraham: “Abandon your study of the stars, through which you see in the stars that you will not have a son. Avram does not have a son, but Avraham does have a son. Sarai does not bear a child, but Sarah does bear a child. I change your name and it changes your mazel.” The horoscope page in the newspaper simply doesn’t apply to a Jew.

Thirdly, the Talmud teaches¹⁵ that “blessing is found only in what is hidden from the eye”. In other words, that which is hidden from sight. The Talmud teaches that when a person goes to measure his grain, he should pray for blessing regarding its

quantity. When he begins to measure his grain, he should also pray for such a blessing. But once a person has measured his grain, such a prayer is useless, and in fact, in vain – because blessing is not found on that which is weighed, measured, or counted but only on that which is hidden from the eye. This is an important lesson not just regarding counting people, but regarding everything in life. If we want to see blessing – or if we want to preserve the blessings that we have – we must keep a low profile; we must not be ostentatious and flaunt things for everyone to see.

We have a guarantee from the Creator of the Universe that there will always be Jews – that our very number will actually exceed our ability to count. Our focus on statistics, therefore, is completely misguided. We need not worry if there will be Jews or how many Jews there will be – we need only worry if we – and our children, and our children’s children – will be counted among them! Hashem has given us His Torah and it is up to each of us to accept that gift – to take hold of it, to learn it, to guard it, and to transmit this precious treasure to our children and our grandchildren so that they too can be a part of the immortal Jewish people. **IL**

1. Mark Twain: Concerning The Jews, Harper’s Magazine, March, 1898. <http://www.fordham.edu/halsall/mod/1898twain-jews.asp>
2. Bereishis 15:5
3. Bereishis 22: 15-17
4. Bereishis 26:4-5
5. Bereishis 28:14
6. Kli Yakar on Bereishis 22:17.
7. See Bereishis 28:14.
8. Yuma 22b.
9. Temidim & Musafim, Halacha 4.
10. See Shemos 30:11.
11. See I Shmuel 15:4.
12. Rabbeinu Bachya on Shemos 30:12-13.
13. Shabbos 156a.
14. Commenting on Bereishis 15:5.
15. Bava Metzia 42a, Ta’anis 8b.
16. <http://www.hawaii.edu/suremath/jsand.html> (University of Hawaii).
17. Billion 1,000,000,000 (9 zeros), Trillion 1,000,000,000,000 (12 zeros), Quadrillion 1,000,000,000,000,000 (15 zeros), Quintillion 1,000,000,000,000,000,000 (18 zeros), Sextillion 1,000,000,000,000,000,000,000 (21 zeros).
18. http://articles.cnn.com/2003-07-22/tech/stars.survey_1_sextillion-big-number-universe?_s=PM:TECH (calculated by a team of stargazers based at the Australian National University).