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Subject: Shabbas Email
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Dear Eveyone,

I hope you and you family are doing great. Due to popular demand, we at the Aleph Institute will start sending out a weekly Shabbas email, to all of our members and former members, about the weekly Torah portion.

This weeks Torah portion is, **Parshah Va'etchanan - Deuteronomy 3:23-7:11** Torah Reading for Week of Jul 29-Aug 4,2012 - Av 10-16 5772.

Please enjoy this article about the portion:

Why Is the Jewish People So Small?
By Rabbi Jonathan Sacks

Near the end of Va'etchanan, so inconspicuously that we can sometimes miss it, is a statement with such far-reaching implications that it challenges the impression that has prevailed thus far in the Torah, giving an entirely new complexion to the biblical image of the people of Israel:

The L-rd did not set his affection on you and choose you because you were more numerous than other peoples, for you are the fewest of all peoples.¹

This is not what we have heard thus far. In Genesis, G-d promises the patriarchs that their descendants will be like the stars of the heaven, the sand on the seashore and the dust of the earth, uncountable. Abraham will be the father not just of one nation, but of many. At the beginning of Exodus we read of how the covenantal family, numbering a mere seventy when they went down to Egypt, were "fertile and prolific, and their population increased. They became so numerous that the land was filled with them."²

Three times in the book of Deuteronomy, Moses describes the Israelites as being "as many as the stars of the sky."³ King Solomon speaks of himself as set among "the people you have chosen, a great people, too numerous to count or number."⁴ The prophet Hosea says that "the Israelites will be like the sand on the seashore, which cannot be measured or counted."⁵

In all these texts and others it is the size, the numerical greatness, of the people that is emphasized. What, then, are we to make of Moses' words that speak of its smallness? Targum Yonatan interprets it to be not about numbers at all, but about self-image. He translates it not as "the fewest of peoples" but as "the most lowly and humble of peoples." Rashi gives a similar reading, citing Abraham's words, "I am but dust and ashes," and Moses and Aaron's, "Who are we?"

Rashbam and Chizkuni give the more straightforward explanation that Moses is contrasting the Israelites with the seven nations they would be fighting in the land of Canaan/Israel. G-d would lead the Israelites to victory despite the fact that they were outnumbered by the local inhabitants.

Rabbenu Bachya quotes Maimonides, who says that we would have expected G-d, King of the universe, to have chosen the most numerous nation in the world as His people, since "the glory of the king is in the multitude of people."⁶ G-d did not do so. Thus, Israel should count itself extraordinarily blessed that G-d chose it, despite its smallness, to be His am segulah, His special treasure.

Rabbenu Bachya finds himself forced to give a more complex reading to resolve the contradiction of Moses, in Deuteronomy, saying both that Israel is the smallest of peoples and “as many as the stars of the sky.” He turns it into a hypothetical subjunctive, meaning: G-d would still have chosen you, even if you had been the smallest of the peoples.

Sforno gives a simple and straightforward reading: G-d did not choose a nation for the sake of His honor. Had He done so, He would undoubtedly have chosen a mighty and numerous people. His choice had nothing to do with honor, and everything to do with love. He loved the patriarchs for their willingness to heed His voice; therefore He loves their children.

Yet there is something in this verse that resonates throughout much of Jewish history. Historically, Jews were and are a small people: today, less than 1/5 of 1 percent of the population of the world. There were two reasons for this. First is the heavy toll taken through the ages by exile and persecution, directly by Jews killed in massacres and pogroms, indirectly by those who converted—in fifteenth-century Spain and nineteenth-century Europe—in order to avoid persecution (tragically, even conversion did not work; racial anti-Semitism persisted in both cases). The Jewish population is a mere fraction of what it might have been had there been no Hadrian, no Crusades and no anti-Semitism.

The second reason is that Jews did not seek to convert others. Had they done so, they would have been closer in numbers to Christianity (2.2 billion) or Islam (1.3 billion). In fact, Malbim reads something like this into our verse. The previous verses have said that the Israelites are about to enter a land with seven nations: Hittites, Girgashites, Amorites, Canaanites, Perizzites, Hivites and Jebusites. Moses warns them against intermarriage with them, not for racial but for religious reasons: “They will turn your children away from following Me, to serve other gods.” Malbim interprets our verse as Moses saying to the Israelites: Don’t justify outmarriage on the grounds that it will increase the number of Jews. G-d is not interested in numbers.

There was a moment when Jews might have sought to convert others. (To be sure, there was one instance when they did. The Hasmonean priest-king John Hyrcanus I forcibly converted the Edomites, known as the Idumeans. Herod was one of their number.) The period in question was the first-century Roman empire. Jews numbered some 10 percent of the empire, and there were many Romans who admired aspects of their faith and way of life. The pagan deities of the Hellenistic world were losing their appeal and plausibility, and throughout the centers of the Mediterranean, individuals were adopting Jewish practices. Two aspects of Judaism stood in their way: the commandments and circumcision. In the end, Jews chose not to compromise their way of life for the sake of making converts. The Hellenistic people who sympathized with Judaism mostly adopted Pauline Christianity instead. Consistently throughout history, Jews have chosen to be true to themselves and to stay small rather than make concessions for the sake of increasing numbers.

Why have divine providence or human choice, or both, eventuated in the sheer smallness of the Jewish people? Could it be, quite simply, that through the Jewish people G-d is telling humankind that you do not need to be numerous to be great. Nations are judged not by their size, but by their contribution to the human heritage. Of this, the most compelling proof is that a nation as small as the Jews could produce an ever-renewed flow of prophets, priests, poets, philosophers, sages, saints, halachists, aggadists, codifiers, commentators, rebbes and heads of yeshivot; that they could also yield some of the world’s greatest writers, artists, musicians, filmmakers, academics, intellectuals, doctors, lawyers, businesspeople and technological innovators. Out of all proportion to their numbers, Jews could and can be found working as lawyers fighting injustice, economists fighting poverty, doctors fighting disease, and teachers fighting ignorance.

You do not need numbers to enlarge the spiritual and moral horizons of humankind. You need other things altogether: a sense of the worth and dignity of the individual, of the power of human possibility to transform the world, of the importance of giving everyone the best education they can have, of making each of us feel part of a collective responsibility to ameliorate the human condition, and a willingness to take high ideals and enact them in the real world, unswayed by disappointments and defeats.

Nowhere is this more in evidence today than among the people of Israel in Israel: traduced in the media and pilloried by much of the world, yet still, year after year, producing human miracles in medicine, agriculture, technology and the arts, as if the word “impossible” did not exist in the Hebrew language. When, therefore, we feel fearful and depressed about Israel’s plight, it is worth returning to Moses’ words: “The L-rd did not set his affection on you and choose you because you were more numerous than other peoples, for you are the fewest of all peoples.”

Small? Yes. Still surrounded, as the Israelites were then, by “nations larger and stronger than you.” But that small people, defying the laws of history, outlived all the world’s great empires, and still has a message of hope for humanity. You don’t have to be large to be great. If you are open to a power greater than yourself, you will become greater than yourself. Israel today still carries that message to the world.

FOOTNOTES

1.
Deuteronomy 7:7.
2.
Exodus 1:7.
3.
Deuteronomy 1:10, 10:22, 28:62.
4.
1 Kings 3:8.
5.
Hosea 2:1.
6.
Proverbs 14:28.

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