

Zera Shimshon

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Chapter XLVI: Ekev (Deut. 7:12–11:25)

Essay 2. Do not fear the nations

"כִּי תֹאמַר בְּלִבְבְּךָ רַבִּים הַגּוֹיִם הָאֵלֶּה" וְכוּ'. קִשְׁיָה דְבְּכָאן סְלִקָא דְעֵתָא דְיִשְׂרָאֵל לְהֵיוֹת הֵם הַמְעַט מִכָּל הָעַמִּים וּלְעֵיל הֵנָּה סְלִקָא דְעֵתָא לְהַפֵּךְ דְאִיִּצְטְרִיךְ קַרְא לְמִימַר "לֹא מִרְבָּכֶם מִכָּל־הָעַמִּים" וְכוּ'.

“Should you say in your heart, ‘These nations are more numerous than we; how can we dispossess them?’”¹ There is a difficulty, for can it enter your mind here that Israel is fewer than all the nations, but above, can the opposite enter your mind, that Scripture needed to say, “It is not because you are the most numerous of peoples that the L-rd grew attached to you and chose you—indeed, you are the smallest of peoples.”² I.e., at Deut. 7:7, Moses was telling the people, “Don’t think that G-d chose you because you are the largest nation. In fact, you are the smallest.” But then a few verses later, in Deut. 7:17, there is a warning not to think that other nations are more numerous.

Question 1: How do we explain the discrepancy? Did they suddenly change their mind because they were told they were the smallest nation?

וְאִין לֹא מִרְבָּכֶם" וְכוּ'. קִשְׁיָה דְבְּכָאן סְלִקָא דְעֵתָא דְיִשְׂרָאֵל לְהֵיוֹת הֵם הַמְעַט מִכָּל הָעַמִּים וּלְעֵיל הֵנָּה סְלִקָא דְעֵתָא לְהַפֵּךְ דְאִיִּצְטְרִיךְ קַרְא לְמִימַר "לֹא מִרְבָּכֶם מִכָּל־הָעַמִּים" וְכוּ'.

One can’t say that after that they heard that the Holy One, Blessed be He, said to them, “indeed, you are the smallest of peoples,” they began to fear [the nations]. For if so, since He said, “it is not because you are the most numerous,” it should have immediately been written to reassure them, “Even though you are few, ‘Do not fear them; only remember what the L-rd, your G-d, did to Pharaoh and all the Egyptians.’”³ But instead, there were several verses between Deut. 7:7 and 7:17. So the fear did not arise from being told they were the smallest of nations. So how do we explain the discrepancy?

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¹ Deut. 7:17.

² Deut. 7:7.

³ Deut. 7:18.

Question 2: Also, what is this language, “Should you say in your heart”—why specifically “in your heart”?

Question 3: Also, how would it enter your mind that Israel would have said that they are the most numerous of peoples, for aren't they one nation, and the other nations seventy in number?

וְלִכְאוּרָה יֵשׁ לֵאמֹר בְּדוּחַק שָׁהֵם הָיוּ חוֹשְׁבִים בְּדַעְתָּם מִכֹּל אוֹמָה וְאוֹמָה לְחִוּדָהּ אֲנִי הָאוֹמָה יוֹתֵר גְּדוּלָהּ מִכּוֹלָם, וְהִקְב"ה אָמַר לָהֶם שְׂאִין לְחֹשׁוֹב כֹּל אוֹמָה לְבִדְהָ אֵלֶּא כִּי אַתֶּם הַמְעַט מִכֹּל הָעַמִּים מִכּוֹלָם יַחַד.

Answer to Question 3: **Apparently, it can be said that they would think in their minds that compared individually to each and every nation, we are the nation that is greater than all. But the Holy One, Blessed be He, said to them that they shouldn't think of each nation alone, rather, that you are the smallest from all the nations taken together.**

Possible answer to Question 1: Perhaps Israel was larger than each of the 70 nations, so at Deut. 7:7, Moses was telling the people, “Don't think that G-d chose you because you are the largest nation, i.e., Israel was larger than each of the 70 nations.” In the later verse, Deut. 7:17, the thinking that other nations were more numerous was with regard to the seven Canaanite nations, taken as a whole. But if Israel was larger than each of the 70 nations, why did Deut. 7:7 add, “you are the smallest”?

אָבֵל יוֹתֵר נִרְאָה לֵאמֹר דְּבִפְרָק קָמָא דְעֵבֻדָּה זָרָה אֵיפְלִיגוּ תַנְאֵי בְּבִרְיֵיתָא אִי אֲזַלְיִנן בְּמֵר הַתְּקֵמָה וְהַבְּקִיאוֹת אוּ בְמֵר הָרוֹב. וּבִפְרָק קָמָא דִּיבְמוֹת נְמִי מְאִי דְכְתִיב עֲשׂוּ בֵּית שְׁמַאי כְּדַבְרֵיהֶם אִף עַל גַּב דְּהוּהוּ בֵּית הַלֵּל רוּבָא, דְּכִי אֲזַלְיִנן בְּמֵר רוּבָא הֵיכָא דְכִי הִדְרִי נִיגְהוּ. הֵכָא בֵּית שְׁמַאי מְסַדְדֵי טְפִי. וְאִף בְּעֵגְנֵן אֲכִילַת הַחֹלֶה בְּיוֹם הַפְּפוּרִים כְּתִיב הַטּוֹר (אוֹרַח חַיִּים סִימָן תר"ח) אֵיכָא מֵאֵן דְּאָמַר דְּאֲזַלְיִנן בְּמֵר הַתְּקֵמָה וְהַבְּקִיאוֹת אִף נִגְדַּד הָרוֹב שֶׁל הָרוּפְאִים שְׂאִינָן כֹּל כְּדָ תְּקַמִּים.

But it appears better to say that in the 1st chapter of tractate Avodah Zarah, there is a Baraita that brings a dispute if we follow the ruling of rabbis who are distinguished for their wisdom and expertise, or if we follow by the ruling of the majority of the rabbis, even if there are rabbis with a different minority opinion who are wiser.

In the 1st chapter of tractate Yevamot, why is it written that Beit Shammai acted in accordance with their own opinion, even though Beit Hillel formed the majority? When do we follow the majority? Where [the parties] are equal [in wisdom] to one another. Here, Beit Shammai were sharper [than Beit Hillel]; thus, they followed their own opinion, even though they were in the minority].⁴

Even regarding a sick person eating on Yom Kippur, the Tur writes, “Some say we follow [doctors] with the most wisdom and expertise, even when it conflicts with the majority [of the doctors], who are not so wise.”⁵

⁴ Yevamot 14a.

⁵ Tur, Orach Chaim, siman 618.

וְזוֹ הַיְתָה סִבְרַת יִשְׂרָאֵל שָׂאָף עַל פִּי שְׁהָאוּמוֹת הֵם הָרֹב עִם כָּל זֶה, אוֹתוֹ הָרֹב אֵינּוּ נִחְשָׁב לְכֻלָּם, וְאֶדְרָבָא יִשְׂרָאֵל נִקְרָא הָרֹב הוּאֵיל שְׁהֵם יוֹמֵר תְּכַמְיִם מֵהֶם כְּדִכְתִּיב "כִּי הוּא תְכַמְתְּכֶם וּבִינַתְכֶם לְעֵינֵי הָעַמִּים" וְכוּ', "רַק עִם-תְּכֶם וְנִבּוֹן הַגּוֹי הַגְּדוֹל הַזֶּה", וְהַקֵּב"ה הִשִּׁיב לָהֶם שְׁהֵדִין אֵינּוּ כִּף אֶלָּא אֶדְרָבָא אֲזַלִּינָן בְּתֵר הָרֹב מִמֶּשׁ אוֹ לְפָחוֹת נִשְׂאָר הַדְּבָר בְּסִפְקָא כְּמוֹ שְׁפָתָבוּ הַפּוֹסְקִים, וְזֵהוּ "לֹא מֵרַבְּכֶם מִכָּל-הָעַמִּים" וְכוּ' שְׂאֶדְרָבָא "אַתֶּם הַמַּעֲט מִכָּל-הָעַמִּים".

This was Israel's opinion, that although the nations are the majority, nevertheless, that majority was considered worthless. Rather, Israel was called the majority, because they were wiser than [the nations] were, as it is written: "Observe them faithfully, for that will be proof of your wisdom and discernment to other peoples, who on hearing of all these laws will say, 'Surely, that great nation is a wise and discerning people.'"⁶

The Holy One, Blessed be He, answered them that the law is not like this. Rather, to the contrary, we are guided by the actual majority, or at least the matter remains uncertain, as the decisors wrote. This is the meaning of "It is not because you are the most numerous of peoples that the L-rd grew attached to you and chose you—indeed, you are the smallest of peoples." That is, Israel was not larger than the individual 70 nations; they just had thought that they should be considered as larger, because they were wise and discerning. But G-d corrected them that that didn't mean they should consider themselves larger.

וְהַטַּעַם שְׁפָתָרְתִּי בְּכֶם וְלֹא בָהֶם הוּא מִפְּנֵי שְׂאִתֶּם קְרוּבִים לִי כְּדִכְתִּיב "לִבְנֵי יִשְׂרָאֵל עִם-קְרָבוֹ", וְרֹב וְקְרוּב הֵלֵךְ אַחֵר הַקְּרוּב, וְאֵם לֹא תִשְׁמְעוּ בְּקוֹלִי לֹא תִהְיוּ עוֹד קְרוּבִים לִי וְאֵז יֵשׁ לֵילֵךְ אַחֵר הָרֹב, דְּגִרְסִינָן בְּבִבְא בְּתֵרָא (דָּף כ"ג ע"ב) אָמַר רַבִּי תַנְיָנָא, רֹב וְקְרוּב, הוֹלְכִין אַחֵר הָרֹב, וְאֵף עַל גַּב דְּרוּבָא דְאֹרְזִיתָא וְקוּרְבָא דְאֹרְזִיתָא, אֶפִּילוּ הִכִּי, רוּבָא עֲדִיף. מִתִּיב ר' זִירָא וְכוּ', וְכָתְבוּ הַתּוֹסְפוֹת שֶׁם וְנ"ל (בד"ה רב וקרוב הלוח אחר הרוב), דְּלֵר' תַנְיָנָא אֲזַלִּינָן בְּתֵר רוּבָא אֵף עַל גַּב דְאִיפָא קוּרְבָא דְמוֹכַח וְרַב פְּלִיג עֲלֵיהּ, וּבְדִאִיפָא קוּרְבָא דְמוֹכַח אֲזַל בְּתֵר קוּרְבָא וְעֵי"ש.

The reason I chose you and not them is because you are close to me, as it is written, "to the children of Israel, the people close to Him."⁷ Perhaps the rule is that between **majority and closest, follow the closest, but if you won't listen to My voice, you will no longer be close to me, and then, one should follow the majority. As it is said in tractate Bava Batra (page 23b):**

Rabbi Chanina says: [When resolving an uncertainty regarding the status of a found item, such as whether a piece of meat is kosher, if the status of the] **majority** [of like items indicates that it has one status] **but** [the found item is] **proximate** [to a source that indicates otherwise, one] **follows the majority. And even though the majority** [applies] **by Torah law and [the rule] of proximity** [also applies] **by Torah law, even so, the majority is preferable.**

Rabbi Zeira raises an objection . . .

- Bava Batra 23b

⁶ Deut. 4:6.

⁷ Ps. 148:14.

The Tosafot write there (at the text, “[Between] majority and closest, follow the majority”), and this is their language, that according to Rabbi Chanina, we follow the majority even though [the object] is so close [to a source that indicates otherwise] that it is like a proof [that it came from there].

Rav disagrees with this, [and holds] that if it is close [to a source that indicates otherwise] that it is like a proof, we follow the close [source].

וְנִהוּ שְׁאָמַר הַכֶּתוּב "כִּי מֵאַהֲבַת ה' אֶתְכֶם" "כִּי עִם קְדוּשׁ אַתֶּם לֵה' אֱלֹהֵיךָ בְּחַר ה' אֱלֹהֵיךָ לְהִיּוֹת לּוֹ לְעַם סִגְלָה" וְכוּ', כְּלוּמַר לְפִי שְׁאִתָּם קְרוּבִים לִי בְשִׁבִיל זֶה "וְאַהֲבָה וּבִרְכָה וְהִרְבָּה" "בְּרוּךְ תִּהְיֶה מְפִלֵּהֶעַמִּים" וְכוּ'. אֲבָל אִם זֶה הוּא דְלֹא כְּהִלְכָתָא דְהָא קַיִמָּא לִן רֹב וְקְרוּב הִלְךְ אַחֲרָהּ הָרֹב אֶפִּילוּ בְּקוּרְבָּא דְמוֹכָח, וְעַיִן בְּשִׁלְטָן עָרוּךְ (יִזְרָה דְעָה סִימָן קכ"ט סְעִיף י"ח) וְעַיִ"ש, וְאִם כֵּן הִיָּה לּוֹ לִילְךְ אַחֲרָהּ הָרֹב שְׁהֵם הָאוּמוֹת.

This is the meaning of Scripture, “but it was because the L-rd loved you,”⁸ “because you are a holy people to the L-rd, your G-d, the L-rd, your G-d, chose you to be His treasured nation out of all the nations on the face of the earth.”⁹ This is as if to say that you are close to me, because of this, “He will favor you, and bless you, and multiply you,”¹⁰ and “You shall be blessed above all other peoples.”¹¹ But even this isn’t the halacha, for we hold that between majority and closest, we follow the majority, even if [the object] is so close [to a source that indicates otherwise] that it is like a proof. See Shulchan Aruch, Yoreh De’ah, siman 129, se’if 18. If so, [G-d] should follow after the majority, which is the nations.

וְלָכֵן אָמַר הַכֶּתוּב פֶּן תֹּאמַר בְּלִבְבְּךָ כִּשְׁהֵלֵב יְבִין בְּמַחְלֹקֶת הַנֶּ"ל לִיחֹשׁוֹב שֶׁהַבְּטָחָה שֶׁעָשִׂיתִי לָךְ אֵינָה הַבְּטָחָה מִפְּנֵי שְׁאֶדְרַבָּא צָרִיךְ אֲנִי לִילְךְ אַחֲרָהּ הָרֹב וּבְשִׁבִיל זֶה תִּתְיַרָא מֵהֶם מִפְּנֵי שְׁהֵם רַבִּים, "לֹא תִירָא מֵהֶם". דְּלֹא מִטַּעַם קוּרְבָּא דְמוֹכָח לְחַוְנָה עָשִׂיתִי הַבְּטָחָתִי לָכֶם, אֲלֵא מִטַּעַמָּא אֶחָרִינָא, "זָכַר תִּזְכֹּר וְכוּ' "הַמַּסֹּת הַגְּדֹלֹת" וְכוּ'. דְּאִיתָא שֶׁם (סִימָן הַנֶּ"ל סְעִיף י"א) וְאִם יֵשׁ לִיְהוּדִים שְׂכוּנָה לְבָדָם, שְׁאִין דְּרָךְ הַגּוֹיִים מִפְּסִיקָתָהּ, הוֹלְכִים אַחֲרָהּ רֹב בְּנֵי הַשְּׂכוּנָה, וְכִתְבוּ הַטִּ"ו וְהַשִּׁ"ף דְּאִם עַל גַּב דְּרֹב וְקְרוּב הוֹלְכִים אַחֲרָהּ הָרֹב אֶפִּילוּ בְּקוּרְבָּא דְמוֹכָח, שְׁאִינִי הִכָּא שֶׁהַמוֹעֵט הוּא מוֹבְדֵל בְּפְנֵי עֲצָמוֹ עכ"ל.

Answer to Question 2: **Therefore, the Scripture essentially said: Perhaps you’ll say in your heart—when your heart understands the above dispute—it will think that the promise I made to you is not a promise. Perhaps you’ll say that to the contrary, I need to follow the majority, and for this reason, you should be afraid of [the nations] because they are many. To address this possibility, Scripture said, “do not fear them.” For it is not for the reason of a closeness that is like a proof alone that I have made My promise to you, rather for a different reason, “only remember what the L-rd, your G-d, did to Pharaoh and all the Egyptians, the wondrous acts that you saw with your own eyes . . .”**¹²

⁸ Deut. 7:8.

⁹ Deut. 7:6.

¹⁰ Deut. 7:13.

¹¹ Deut. 7:14.

¹² Deut. 7:18-19.

For it is brought there in the Shulchan Aruch:

When thieves have broken into a cellar and opened the barrels of wine that were there, the wine contained in these barrels is forbidden, if the majority of the thieves in the city are gentiles. But if the majority of the thieves are composed of Israelites, the wine is permitted . . . **When the Israelites live in a neighborhood in a gentile city, in which the gentile have no passage, one must rely on the majority of the inhabitants of this neighborhood;** even when the majority of the inhabitants of the city are gentiles [and thus the wine is permitted].”

- Shulchan Aruch, Yoreh De'ah, siman 129, se'if 11

Also, the Taz and the Shach wrote that even though generally between majority and closest, we follow the majority, even if [the object] is so close [to a source that indicates otherwise] that it is like a proof—it is different here, for the minority has set itself apart.

נהכי נמי "לא תירא מהם זכר תזכר את אשר-עשה" וכו' "לפרעה" וכו' "המסת הגדלת" וכו', דהיינו פשהתחיל הקב"ה לבחור בכם היתה לכם שפונה בפני עצמה נהייתם מובדלים מן המצריים. וזהו עקר הפלא והנס של המכות שבמקום בני ישראל לא באו שם, כדכתיב "רק בארץ גשן אשר-שם בני ישראל לא היה ברד" "והפליתי ביום ההוא את-ארץ גשן" וכו'. ומשום הכי קודם "לא מרבכם" אמר קרא "כי עם קדוש אתה" וכו' דמשמע מובדל בפני עצמו, וכן הוא האמת שישראל מובדלים במעשיהם מכל האומות.

So too, “do not fear them; only remember what the L-rd, your G-d, did to Pharaoh and all the Egyptians; the wondrous acts that you saw with your own eyes,” which is that when the Holy One, Blessed be He, began to choose you, you had a neighborhood by itself, and you lived apart from the Egyptians. This is the principal of the wonder and the miracle of the plagues, that in the place of the Children of Israel, they didn’t come, as it is written, “Only in the region of Goshen, where the Israelites were, there was no hail,”¹³ “but on that day I will set apart the region of Goshen, where My people dwell, so that no swarms of insects shall be there.”¹⁴ Because of this, before the verse “it is not because you are the most numerous of peoples that the L-rd grew attached to you and chose you,” Scripture said, “because you are a holy people to the L-rd, your G-d, the L-rd, your G-d, chose you to be His treasured nation out of all the nations on the face of the earth,” the meaning is that you set yourself apart, and thus this is the truth, that Israel is distinguished in its actions from all the nations.

Thus, at Deut. 7:7, when Moses told the people, “Don’t think that G-d chose you because you are the largest nation. In fact, you are the smallest,” he meant, “Don’t think that because of wisdom that you should be considered the greatest.” Then a few verses later, in Deut. 7:17, the Israelites were told not to be afraid: That even though generally the majority would trump those closest to G-d, there was another consideration, that they had set themselves as a nation apart.

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¹³ Ex. 9:26.

¹⁴ Ex. 8:18.