

Seventy Souls

By Rav Elchanan Samet

A. INTRODUCTION: LISTS IN THE TORAH

Of all the dramatic events of our parasha, requiring sensitive reading and careful literary analysis, I have chosen to address the list of seventy souls comprising Yaakov's household that descend to Egypt. This choice may appear surprising: what is it about this list of names and numbers that provides material for an in-depth study? And why address a group of verses of such technical nature, representing a literary "island" that severs the continuity of the plot, in a parasha so heavily packed with dramatic action?

Lists of various types are an important and common literary phenomenon in Tanakh, and the modern reader tends to ignore them – generally for lack of interest. This often has a sound objective basis: lists of names of people or places or objects don't mean the same to us today as they meant to the reader of ancient times, to whom such names were familiar and connected to his life and his environment. But this is only a partial explanation. The main reason for the lack of interest is the change in literary taste of the modern reader as opposed to that of the ancient one who, after all, represented the initial audience to which the Tanakh was addressed. Readers of ancient times were very fond of these lists, and some were even a sort of "poetry" for them. Many lists are recorded in Tanakh specifically for the purpose of introducing a more celebratory and elevated note into the "routine" biblical story, and some lists are poetical in nature even in the form in which they are written in the Torah.

All of the above concerning lists in Tanakh applies also to the list of the seventy souls who accompany Yaakov to Egypt. This list represents a celebratory climax to the story of Yosef and his brothers, and is located at an important point in the development of the plot – in between the news transmitted to Yaakov to the effect that his son Yosef is still alive and the actual meeting between them in Egypt. At the same time, this list represents the "watershed" in the history of Yaakov's family, dividing between what happens to the family in Canaan and their experiences in Egypt. The sensitive reader therefore recognizes that this list is a point of elevation in the story, an emotional expression of the story's themes and messages.

There are also aspects of the list that are hidden from those who suffice with a cursory review of its names and numbers. Within our list there are hints of important issues pertaining to the family of our forefathers and the future of the Jewish nation.

There are also difficulties and contradictions that require explanation.

I shall begin with a general impression of the list and its purpose, followed by a closer look at some of its details.

B. THE LIST OF NAMES REFLECTS ALL OF SEFER BEREISHIT

The list of "the names of the children of Israel who came to Egypt" is, as noted, the watershed in the story of Yosef and his brothers and in the history of the nation as recorded in the Torah. As such, the list reflects two opposite directions in time: the past, which has led up to it, and the future, for which it serves as a starting point. Amazingly enough, the list points to a conclusion that is common to both of these perspectives, as will be clarified below.

In parashat Miketz, I noted two different significances of the story of Yosef and his brothers in general. A study of the story itself suggests that it is a story of the "generations" of Yaakov in Canaan. As such, the story of Yosef and his brothers connects to the previous stories of the difficulties encountered by the chosen individuals of Sefer Bereishit in their efforts to establish their seed, of which this is the final example.

The difficulty in establishing the seed of the family of Yaakov at the outset of the Yosef story arises from the severe crisis that the family has reached because of the mistakes and sins of all family members. Two of Yaakov's sons – the most important among them, Yehuda and Yosef – are temporarily severed from the family because of this crisis, and face a real danger of their family line being cut off. The story of Yehuda and Tamar describes the victory over this danger thanks to Tamar: Tamar bears Yehuda two sons, and thus his seed is established. The story of Yosef's experiences in Egypt (in chapters 39-41) describes how, after being sold as a slave in Egypt, Yosef rises to greatness, consequently being able to marry a wife and to have his own two sons. The story continues with a description of the family's battle for survival during the famine. It is around this battle that the family reunites, and the two severed branches – Yehuda and Yosef – rejoin the fold, with their offspring.

The moment of complete reunification of the family in Egypt – before Yaakov and all his children meet Yosef in Egypt and everyone comes together in one whole family again – is preceded by the list of the seventy souls comprising Yaakov's household. What, then, is this list telling us? In my shiur on parashat Miketz I called it the "victory song" in the battle to establish the seed of Yaakov's family. The list is hinted to in the heading that introduces the story, "These are the generations of Yaakov..."

It is towards this list that the story as a whole is headed, from the very beginning: it describes how Yaakov's family prevails

over the crisis of internal disintegration, succeeding in raising a large third generation that is eventually reunited around the patriarch of the family with none missing; ALL of Yaakov's sons have established their own families, and all return with their offspring to live in the midst of the clan.

It is therefore not only a "victory song," but also a song of praise and thanks to God. We remember Yaakov's prayer at one of his difficult moments, when the danger of Esav hovered over his family:

(32:11) "I am unworthy of all the mercies and all the truth that You have performed with Your servant, for I passed over this Jordan with just my staff, AND NOW I HAVE BECOME TWO CAMPS."

Who was included in these two camps? Yaakov's two wives and twelve children, the eldest of whom was then about thirteen years old.

Since then, Yaakov has returned to Canaan, and many years (more than thirty) have passed, during which he has dwelled with his family in the land. Yaakov's sons have grown up; each has established his own family and given birth to children. If Yaakov uttered a prayer as he descended to Egypt to meet Yosef, he certainly would have said: "I am unworthy of all the mercies that You have performed with Your servant, for it was with two camps of wives with their twelve young children that I crossed the Jordan on my return journey to Canaan, and now I have become seventy souls – a great tribe with twelve heads of households." The list in our parasha is a replacement for this imaginary prayer of thanks, which Yaakov had no opportunity to offer. Yaakov, the elderly patriarch, can look at the wagons coming to Egypt full of women and children who are his descendants, and which are led by his adult sons, with great pride and satisfaction.

From this perspective, the list of Yaakov's seventy descendants, together with the entire story of Yosef and his brothers, illuminates all of Sefer Bereishit. The selection of Avraham represents a new beginning in Sefer Bereishit, parallel to the selection of Noach ten generations previously to rejuvenate humanity after the Flood. Taking this idea further, we may say that the list of Yaakov's seventy souls corresponds to the seventy grandchildren of Noach listed in the "generations of the children of Noach" (10:1). The names mentioned in our list are the lists of families from which the future nation will be built; they are also the names of the families concerning which the Torah teaches, in the census of those who will inherit the land (Bamidbar 26:53), "To these the land shall be divided in inheritance, bnumber of names." This list, then, is a miniature of all of humanity, a humanity comprised of the seventy nations established by the grandchildren of Noach, concerning whom we are told (10:32), "And from these separated out the nations in the world."

C. THE LIST OF NAMES AS SHEDDING LIGHT ON SEFER SHEMOT

The other significance of the story of Yosef and his brothers, which I also noted in parashat Miketz, arises from a view of the story in a broader context as introducing the Egyptian exile. In this story, Yaakov and his descendants live through the realization of the decree of exile promised to Avraham in the berit bein ha-betarim (chapter 15): "You shall surely know that your seed shall be a stranger in a strange land..." The famine in the land, and Yosef's descent to Egypt where he becomes viceroy, serve as the means to "tempt" Yaakov to descend to Egypt in an honorable way – "with mortal chains" and "with bindings of love" – so that the exile might begin with him and his children.

The moment of the actual entry of Yaakov and his household into Egyptian exile is preceded by the list of the seventy souls comprising the family. What is the meaning of this list as an introduction to the Egyptian exile? Its importance lies in two factors. Firstly, it teaches that the Egyptian exile was not the exile of a group of individuals or of a single family, but rather the exile of a large tribe – the beginnings of a nation EXILED FROM THE COUNTRY WHERE IT WAS FORMED. From this perspective, there is great significance to the emphasis in the introduction to the story that "the generations of Yaakov," concerning whom the narrative will later develop, were created while Yaakov dwelled in the Land of Canaan. The perception of the sojourn in Egypt AS THE EXILE OF A NATION FROM ITS LAND is of great importance in the molding of the consciousness of the children of Israel living in Egypt: they live there with the knowledge that it is not their land. Their land is Canaan, birthplace of their forefathers – the seventy souls who established the families of which the nation of Israel is comprised. And it is towards Canaan – the rock from which the nation is hewed – that their eyes will be lifted to return, when "God will surely remember them."

However, the list of the seventy souls has additional importance. Within just a few generations, these seventy souls will become a great and mighty nation, and God's promise to the forefathers concerning the multiplicity of their descendants will thereby be fulfilled. In relation to this demographic revolution the number "seventy" is not at all large; Yaakov's twelve children did all admittedly have children of their own, but the rate of growth of Yaakov's family in the generation that lived in Canaan was not out of the ordinary. In Egypt, a truly extraordinary process of growth began, such that at the time of the Exodus the nation numbered six hundred thousand adult males alone. This is highlighted by Moshe in his speech in Sefer Devarim (10:22):

"With seventy souls your forefathers descended to Egypt, and now the Lord your God has made you like the stars of the heavens for number."

This aspect of the significance of the list of "seventy souls" is noted by Chizkuni in his commentary on verse 8:

"And these are the names' – The Torah repeats their counting in order to tell of the wonders of the Holy One, that with seventy souls they descended to Egypt, and within a

short time became more than six hundred thousand."

We have therefore seen that the list of the seventy souls comprising Yaakov's household is meant "to tell of the wonders of the Holy One," both in relation to the past – as a summary of the processes that took place in Yaakov's life and which were described in Sefer Bereishit, and in relation to the future – to the development of the nation of Israel from those same seventy souls, as will be described in Sefer Shemot.

D. CONTRADICTIONS IN THE NUMBERS OF THE LIST

Having viewed the list in our parasha in its broad context, as a historical junction of religious significance, let us now look at its details.

The list is composed of four groups of the families of Yaakov's children, arranged according to the mothers. First the individual names are mentioned, and then the sums are tallied. Here is the tally:

Leah's children – 33
The children of Zilpa, her maidservant – 16
Rachel's children – 14
The children of Bilha, Rachel's maidservant – 7

Even at this initial stage of examination, we note several discrepancies between the list and the tally; let us begin with two:

i. The list of Leah's children (even including Dina) numbers only 32! The extra person in the summary of Leah's children disrupts the numerical harmony that is evident in the list: the children of the wives of Yaakov are double the number of the children of the maidservants, both in the overall total (46:23) and in each pair separately (Leah-Zilpah 32:16, Rachel-Bilha 14:7).

ii. The list concludes (verses 26-27) with a second tally: the souls that "came from the loins of Yaakov" who came to Egypt were 66; and Yosef and his two sons, who were already in Egypt.

Who, then, is the character who is sometimes included in the counting and sometimes not, AND WHAT IS THE CRITERION for his inclusion or exclusion?

In Midrash Bereishit Rabba (94:9) we learn:

"Some say: Yaakov completed the number.

R. Yitzchak said: This may be compared to two legions of the king: Decumani and Augustiani (the two most important legions in the Roman army). When the king is counted together with one legion, its number is complete. And when he is counted together with the other legion, its number is complete."

The two main "legions" in Yaakov's "army" are the children of Leah and the children of Rachel. In the first tally, Yaakov is included with the children of Leah, and therefore the total is 33 – including him. But when we come to the concluding figures, the total number of Yaakov's children who "descend to Egypt" is 66, and this number of necessity does not include Yaakov himself. In order that the total equal 70, we must add Yaakov to Yosef and his two sons (since no number is mentioned specifically in connection with them). In this way Yaakov completes the census of Leah's children on the one hand, and that of Rachel's children on the other. And both end up with the number they should have.

When his children leave Canaan for Egypt, Yaakov is included in the group of Leah's children, for this is the largest and principal group. But at the conclusion of the list, in the encounter between those who come down to Egypt (66) and those who are already there, Yaakov moves over to Yosef's family, since, from this moment onwards – with the reunification of the family under Yosef's patronage – Yosef regains his previous status as the favorite son.

The answer provided by the Midrash – that the 33 children of Leah include Yaakov, while the total of 66 does not include him – may be proved from the language of the text in both instances. In the verse that introduces the list, we read:

(8) "And these are the names of the children of Israel who came to Egypt – Yaakov and his sons; the eldest son of Yaakov was Reuven."

What do the words "Yaakov and his sons" add to the meaning of the verse; why are they necessary? The words "Yaakov and his sons" are a counter-balance or replacement for the words, "the children of Israel who came to Egypt:" "the children of Israel" means the tribe that goes by that name, including within it both Yaakov himself and his children. Therefore Yaakov should be included within the first, biggest and most important group of his children – the children of Leah who, together with him, number 33.

In contrast, we read in the verse concluding the list of those who descend to Egypt:

(26) "All the souls who came to Yaakov to Egypt, who came out of his loins... all the souls were sixty-six."

Such a formulation cannot be meant to include Yaakov, for Yaakov is not among those "who came out of his loins, who came TO HIM in Egypt." Yaakov's exclusion from this summary is meant, according to the Midrash, to allow for his counting in the total number of seventy, as the person who compYoand his sons.

E. WOMEN WHO ARE INCLUDED IN THE LIST AND WOMEN WHO ARE NOT

Clearly, the actual number of people who came down to Egypt was greater than seventy, for the wives of Yaakov's sons are not included, as is stated explicitly in verse 26:

"All the souls who came to Yaakov in Egypt, who came from his loins, ASIDE FROM THE WIVES OF YAAKOV'S SONS..."

It would appear, therefore, that the list does not include women. But this is not entirely true: two women are indeed included, both by name and as completing the total number: Dina, daughter of Yaakov and Leah (verse 15), and Serach, daughter of Asher (verse 17). Why are these two mentioned, while the wives of Yaakov's sons are not?

The list theoretically numbers men only, while the women – Yaakov's daughters-in-law ("daughters") and granddaughters ("daughters of his sons") are not included in the list of the seventy souls. Why are the daughters of Yaakov's sons not included? Because those of them who married within Yaakov's family, i.e., who married their cousins, or the young girls who would eventually marry their cousins, are included in the number through their husbands, since "a man's wife is like himself." Those who had married, or would eventually marry, outside of the family (if such a thing happened) would not be counted, since they would no longer be considered part of "Yaakov's family."

This may also explain the mention of Dina in the list: following the incident of Shekhem, Dina apparently remained a spinster in Yaakov's house, and therefore the above reasons for exclusion from the list did not apply to her. The reason for the inclusion of Serach, daughter of Asher, is difficult to fathom, but it may follow similar reasoning: Serach may also have been an adult daughter who was not married.

F. WERE THE SONS OF PERETZ AMONG THOSE WHO CAME TO EGYPT?

In the list of the seventy souls who come to Egypt, we find two pairs of Yaakov's great-grandchildren: Chever and Malkiel, grandchildren of Asher (17), and Chetzron and Chamul, grandchildren of Yehuda (12). At the time of the descent to Egypt, were Yaakov's children of an age where they already could have had grandchildren? Yehuda's two grandchildren are children not of Shela but rather of Peretz. But in light of what we concluded in the two previous shiurim, this is impossible. The story of the establishment of seed in Yehuda's family (chapter 38) took place over the course of about twenty years, corresponding to the twenty years during which Yosef was in

Egypt up until the beginning of the famine. Peretz and Zerach must have been born, then, close to the time when the family came to Egypt, and would have been young infants at that time. Peretz could certainly not have been the father of two children.

G. CASSUTO'S EXPLANATION OF THIS QUESTION

In 1929, Prof. Umberto Cassuto devoted an article to this problem ("The Story of Judah and Tamar," appearing in his collection of articles, *Biblical and Oriental Studies*, vol. 1). The crux of his theory is as follows:

"Let us begin with the statement in [Bereishit 46](#). If we examine that section carefully, we shall observe that when the Bible proceeds to mention Chetzron and Chamul, it uses special phraseology, different from that employed in regard to the other descendants of Israel. As a rule, Scripture states, 'u-vene'i ploni,' 'and the sons of a certain man'... but here it is written, 'VAYIHIYU benei Peretz,' 'and the sons of Peretz WERE,' etc. This external variation creates the impression that the Bible wished to give us here some special information that was different from what it desired to impart relative to the other descendants of Israel... Since under the formula 'and the sons of a certain man' the names of those who immigrated to Egypt are listed, we may suppose that, when the Bible dropped this formula and used the expression 'vayihyu benei Peretz,' it intended to inform us thereby that the sons of Peretz were not among those who went down to Egypt, but are mentioned here for some other reason. This is corroborated by the fact that Yosef's sons were also not of those who immigrated into Egypt, and they, too, are mentioned here by a different formula. We must now investigate for what reason and with what intent Scripture comes to tell us that Chetzron and Chamul were born to Peretz in the land of Egypt.

We must take note of the fact that Er and Onan are also mentioned here. Why was it necessary to refer to them, seeing that they had already died before Yaakov and his children and grandchildren went down to Egypt?...

It is probable that the "seventy sons of Yaakov," like the seventy families, was a fixed number... a kind of sacred figure... In the traditional number of the seventy descendants of Israel, the sons and grandsons of the patriarch Yaakov, Er and Onan were also incorporated, as sons of one of the tribes, and when the Bible proceeds to detail the names of the children of Israel who went down into Egypt after the death of these sons of Yehuda, obviously it had to find a way

of maintaining the total of seventy... Nevertheless, it is not to be supposed that Chetzron and Chamul were included simply to make up the deficiency, for in that case it is still difficult to understand why the names of Er and Onan remain in their place, and there is further difficulty: what does the Bible gain by mentioning Chetzron and Chamul, seeing that, according to our statement above, they were born only in Egypt?

In order to understand the matter clearly, we must bear in mind the purpose of the law of yibbum, on which the whole story of Tamar hinges. The aim of yibbum (levirate marriage) is to perpetuate the name of the deceased in Israel: 'And it shall be that the first son whom she bears shall succeed the name of his brother (i.e. of the levir), who is dead, that his name may not be blotted out of Israel' (Devarim 25:6). In our case, since there were two deceased, the first two sons, and not the first-born only, had to succeed the name of the dead; consequently, if Shela had married Tamar in accordance with yibbum, his first-born son would have been regarded as taking the place of Er and his second son as the successor of Onan. However, Tamar was not given in marriage to her brother-in-law Shela... but to Yehuda, the father of her dead husbands... It is obvious that there was a great difference between the son of the deceased's brother and the son of his father. In the family tree, the son of the dead man's brother has the same status as the sons of the deceased, had they been born, would have had, and hence it is right that he should take their place. However, the son of the dead man's father ranks with the deceased himself and not with his sons, and the importance of this difference is considerable in the case under discussion...

Each one of the sons of the tribes had the right to establish a family of his own in Israel, a family that would bear his name, and therefore Peretz and Zerach, too, as sons of Yehuda, possessed this right. Yehuda, seeing that he begot five sons - Er, Onan, Shela, Peretz and Zerach - was entitled to five families, and it would have been wrong to deprive him of this privilege. However, if Peretz and Zerach had replaced Er and Onan, the families of the sons of Yehuda would have profited on the one hand he would have lost on the other. In order to fill the place of the deceased sons in a manner that would not diminish the number of the families constituting the tribe, it was necessary for two special families to be founded, apart from the three remaining sons of Yehuda. Hence not Peretz and Zerach, who were the brothers of Er and Onan and stood on a par with them in the genealogical chart, succeeded to the

name of the dead, but the first two sons of Peretz, namely, Chetzron and Chamul, the grandsons of Yehuda, who would have ranked equally with the sons of Er and Onan, took their uncles' place...

In this way there was fulfilled, in regard to Er and Onan, the precept 'that his name may not be blotted out of Israel,' for although both of them died childless, their names were not expunged from the genealogical records of the tribe of Yehuda...

Not it is clear to us whEr and Onan are mentioned in Bereishit 46:12 and Bemidbar 26:19. We also understand why Chetzron and Chamul are listed in Bereishit 46:12 although at the time of the immigration to Egypt they had not yet been born; it was necessary to inform us at this stage that these two sons, who represented Er and Onan, were born to Peretz, in order to justify the inclusion of the names of the deceased in the roll. The meaning of the passage in Bereishit 46:12, which appeared, at the first blush, obscure and surprising, now becomes self-evident in all its details: 'The sons of Yehuda: Er, Onan, Shelah, Peretz and Zerach,' that is to say, these five were born to Yehuda, before he went down to Egypt; 'but Er and Onan died in the land of Canaan,' that is, although these two sons, Er and Onan, died in the land of Canaan, and consequently were not among those who emigrated to Egypt, nevertheless, 'there were the sons of Peretz, Chetzron and Chamul,' who represented Er and Onan, and consequently they retained their place among the sons of Yehuda. It is self-understood that Chetzron and Chamul are not included in the number given at the end of verse 15, but Er and Onan are, for the reason that I have stated above..."

[Cassuto's entire interpretation of this difficult verse (46:12) exists already in the Or Ha-chaim's interpretation, aside from one central aspect. The Or Ha-chaim does not utilize his explanation of the verse to understand the chronology of the birth of Chetzron and Chamul. Cassuto's great innovation lies in utilizing this interpretation of the verse to resolve the chronological difficulty in accordance with a literal understanding of the text.]

Now Cassuto explains how the events of chapter 38 indeed fit into those same twenty-two years between the selling of Yosef and the descent of the family to Egypt in the second year of the famine: "Together with the rest of the family, the two children - Chetzron and Chamul - were also brought to Egypt, at the age of a few months." Cassuto concludes his article as follows:

"As a result of a careful examination of the texts, we have thus succeeded in understanding the intention of the author and

in convincing ourselves that our chapter accords, in the simplest manner, with what is stated in Bereishit 46, removing at the same time the chronological difficulty that militated against the comprehension of the narrative as a unitary composition. This study clearly shows that the arguments that at first sight appear strongest against the unity of the Biblical stories are sometimes easily demolished when we carefully investigate the wording of the text, without preconceived ideas."

(Translated by Kaeren Fish)

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