

Pekudei

Kol Beit Yisrael: On the Familial Character of the Jewish Nation

I.

The story of Sefer Shemot is about the transformation of the Jewish people from a family of seventy into a nation of millions. The Sefer begins with the words, *et Ya'akov ish u'veto ba'u*, with Yaakov, each man and his household came down. *Va-yagur sham b'mtei mi'at*, it was an intimate family indeed.

It is completely typical, as groups expand over generations, for the level of connection, those precious familial bonds, to loosen, and eventually, to evaporate. The intimate and natural bonds of family, defined by personal relationships and shared experience, do not withstand linear, and certainly not, geometric expansion. Relation by blood, an abstract genealogical concept, is no replacement for shared experience¹.

If this is the typical pattern of group expansions, the conclusion of Sefer Shemot tells us a completely different story. The last words of the Sefer, which take us back to those very opening words, introduce a new concept: *ki anan Hashem al ha-Mishkan yomam, v'esh tihiyeh layla bo, l'einei kol beit Yisrael, b'chol maseibem*, 'the cloud of Hashem was on the Mishkan by day, and in a fire by night, before the eyes of the entire House of Israel, in all of their travels.'

The Torah is introducing a fundamentally new category: *kol beit Yisrael*, the House of Israel. We succeeded in going from a displaced family of seventy to a nation of millions, without sacrificing our sense of belonging to the same basic household. Yaakov, ish u'veto, an intimate family of seventy, defined by the word *bayit*, is transformed into *kol beit Yisrael*, an extended family of millions, still defined, remarkably, by the same basic unit: the *bayit*.

The implications of the trajectory of Sefer Shemot, and the retention of the centrality of the *bayit*, even as we move from family to nation, are far reaching in scope, and dramatic in nature. We are not a nation that can be compared to other nations. We exist as an extended family, as an expanded *bayit*, in a *sui generis* anthropological-halakhic category, the family-nation.

¹ The Torah itself seems to acknowledge this reality in Sefer Shemot, with Yitro's introduction of a robust judiciary to alleviate both Moshe, as well as the Jewish people, of the burdens that are part and parcel of their massive growth.

II.

The very expression, *kol beit Yisrael*, which appears only three times in Chumash, provides strong evidence for the concept of a family-nation. After the tragic deaths of Nadav and Avihu on the very day of the inauguration of the Mishkan, whilst Aharon and his surviving sons, Elazar and Itamar, are proscribed from engaging in any outward manifestations of mourning. On the other hand, Moshe tells them, “*va’acheichem, kol beit Yisrael, yivku et ha’sereifah asher saraf Hashem*”, “your brethren, the entire House of Israel, will weep for the fire which Hashem has caused to burn.” In lieu of the halakhic mourners, the immediate relatives, being able to mourn, the family-nation emerges in their places as mourners.

Likewise, when Aharon himself passed, the Torah tells us that he was mourned by the entire House of Israel for thirty days, “*va-yivku et Aharon kol beit Yisrael shloshim yom.*” In this context, the clear indication, as described so powerfully by Chazal, is that the sheer force of Aharon’s persona, and not merely his formal role as Kohen Gadol, was itself part and parcel of what generated the cohesion, unity, and familial quality of a nation of millions. The ‘lover of peace and pursuer of peace’ par excellence spent his life repairing rifts that had emerged, at all strata of society, in the collective *kol beit Yisrael*². In particular, Aharon’s role in preserving and strengthening nuclear families that comprised the core units of the national entity, *kol beit Yisrael*, was of inestimable value.

In our immediate context, the term *kol beit Yisrael* also reinforces this basic premise of family-nation. Despite the enormous number of Jews in the desert, a basic familial sense was preserved, as the entire people camped around the Mishkan, and were witness to the same miraculous phenomenon, “for the cloud of Hashem was above the Mishkan by day, and a fire by night, in front of the entire House of Israel...” Building a home for Hashem, while primarily a vehicle for ensuring a locus for the Divine presence to inhabit, had the reciprocal impact of consolidating the House of Israel, *kol beit Yisrael*.

III.

If the basic premise is indeed correct, we are left to wonder, from a mechanistic standpoint, as to how it was possible, in defiance of the anthropological norm, for the Jewish nation to retain its familial quality.

It seems that the critical moment may well have been the very moment when one might argue the Jewish nation, as such, was formed: the night of the fifteenth of Nissan. As described later in the

² Avot 1:12; Avot D’Rebbe Nattan 12:1-4.

Torah, on that evening, the Almighty wrought an unprecedented miracle, “*lakachat lo goy mi’kerev goy*”, to take one nation from amidst another nation. While the Jewish nation certainly could not be considered fully formed until revelation at Har Sinai, it is the Korban Pesach, when the Jewish people consciously repudiated the idolatry of Egypt, and cast their lot with their Redeemer, which seems to be the defining moment.

It is striking to note that even as the Torah presents the Korban Pesach as largely a family matter, “*seh l’veit avot seh la-bayit*”, a sheep for each house and family, reinforced by a stricture against leaving the home for the duration of the evening, “*v’atem lo tetzu ish m’petach beto ad boker*”, the centrality of the familial home is balanced with mechanisms linking each home to the next.

If one home had insufficient numbers to consume an entire Korban Pesach, and with the prohibition of *notar*, leaving over from the sacramental meat looming³, the Torah advised, “*v’im yimat ha-bayit mihiyot mi-seh v’lakach hu u’shecheno ha’karov el beito b’michsat nefashot*,” “if the house does not suffice for a lamb, he should take, along with his neighbor close to his house, in accordance with the numbers of souls.” The Korban Pesach had the capacity to link each Jewish home to the next, and to the next, forming a critical bridge between the level of nuclear family- *seh la’bayit*- and the entire nation, *kahal adat Yisrael*, referenced in the slaughtering of the lamb⁴.

As such, if it is indeed correct to argue that the Korban Pesach was the formative moment for the Jewish nation, it is absolutely striking that we emerged as a nation in a series of interlinked *batim*, family units. This reading of the importance of Korban Pesach in establishing the familial character of the nascent Jewish nation is perhaps buttressed by the parallel experience which the Egyptians were undergoing at that very moment: the humbling of an entire nation, one family at a time, “*ki ein bayit asher ein sham met*,” “there was not even a single home in which someone was not dead.”

IV.

The concept of the family-nation inherent in the term *kol beit Yisrael* is replete with halakhic significance. It speaks to specific, normative obligations which are not merely consequential, but definitional, with respect to establishing the fundamental character and ethos of the extended Jewish family-nation. This point can be instantiated by investigating the three distinct contexts in which Rambam appeals to the term *kol beit Yisrael*.

³ See Rashi to Shemot 12:4.

⁴ The interlocking of different homes in the context of korban Pesach is itself part of a broader motif of *areivut*, co-dependence, which is intrinsic to this context. Likewise, the emergence of the halakhic institution of *shelichut*, predicated on a basic connection which exists exclusively amongst members of “*bnei brit*”, reflects an emerging sense of national cohesion (See Talmud Bavli Kiddushin 41b).

First, in Sefer Ha-Madda, in Hilkhhot Yesodei Ha-Torah, Rambam famously begins his presentation of the mitzvah of kiddush Hashem with the celebrated phrase, “*kol beit yisrael metzuvin al kiddush ha-Shem ha-Gadol ha-zeh*”⁵. The mitzvah of kiddush Hashem, and its corollary, chillul Hashem, are granted unparalleled significance in the world of halakha⁶, and may require, in defiance of the overarching mandate of preserving life, *va'chai ba'hem*, sacrifice of life itself.

The mitzvah of kiddush Hashem is both definitional of the Jewish national character, and, strikingly, is even impacted by the presence of other members of the Jewish people. Indeed, a sin for which one would not be obliged, and even forbidden, to lay down one's life can indeed rise to the level of *yehareg v'al ya'avor* if the context of the sin changes to a public one, in the presence of ten members of the Jewish people, *b'farhesya*.

Second, also in Sefer Ha-Madda, in Hilkhhot Teshuva⁷, Rambam references the practice of *kol beit Yisrael* to intensify our contributions to tzedaka, *ma'asim tovim*, mitzvot, and engagement in heartfelt prayer during the *aseret yemei teshuva*. Once again, it is clear from context that Rambam is not merely describing a mitzvah of consequence, but one which defines the fundamental character of the Jewish family-nation⁸ striving to rehabilitate their relationship with the King of all flesh.

In the most immediate sense, each member of the Jewish people is marshalling all of his spiritual resources on behalf of himself and his family. At the next plane, this individual is banding together with *kol beit Yisrael* to repent on behalf of the overall welfare of the Jewish people. Most ambitiously, *kol beit Yisrael* engage in this most intensive period of ten days of repentance on behalf of the entire world. In this context, Rambam develops the notion of *tzadik yesod olam*, that one positive deed can not only tip the scales on behalf of an individual, or family, but of the entire world itself. Part of the national ethos of the Jewish people, since the days of Avraham Avinu, has been a visceral sense of spiritual responsibility for the entire world.

⁵ Mishneh Torah, Sefer Ha-Madda, Hilkhhot Yesodei Ha-Torah 5:1. See also Rambam Sefer Ha'Mitzvot, Positive Commandment 9, where Rambam stresses the national element of the mitzvah, and the collective humiliation generated by mass failure in this cardinal area.

⁶ See Mishneh Torah Hilkhhot Teshuva 1:4 regarding sins of Chillul Hashem requiring death for purposes of expiation. See also Rambam Hilkhhot Yesodei Ha-Torah 10:4 where Rambam speaks of the unrivaled elevation of those who lay down their lives in sanctification of His name, *ein l'ma'aleh al ma'alatan*, and the converse, those who desecrate his name, *yordin l'madregah tachtona shel gebinom*.

⁷ Mishneh Torah, Sefer Ha-Madda, Hilkhhot Teshuva 3:4.

⁸ This point is confirmed by Rambam's earlier statement that Yom Kippur, to which the ten days of repentance lead, is a time for repentance for all, the individual and the nation. Rambam Hilkhhot Teshuva 2:7.

Third, in Sefer Ahava, Rambam codifies his version of birkhot ha-Torah⁹. There, in the second of the three brachot¹⁰, Rambam refers to the petitioner's request that not only he himself, nor his descendents alone, but rather, the offspring of *kol beit Yisrael*, shall be immersed in Torah. The idea that Talmud Torah, *morasha kehillat Ya'akov*, is the defining mitzvah of the Jewish nation, is axiomatic. And yet, what is particularly compelling about the use of *kol beit Yisrael* in the context of this mitzvah relates to the extent to which this mitzvah is meant to be achieved both within particular families, and across families.

While one's primary obligation pertains to instructing one's own children, and then grandchildren, in Torah, the very same verse, in Rambam's ruling, establishes the obligation to teach children from other families¹¹. Talmud Torah, in this regard, uniquely highlights the notion of a family-nation.

While Rambam does not directly appeal to the term *kol beit Yisrael* in the context of the mitzvah of tzedakah, the impact of family-nation ethos is especially prominent in this area of halakha. The Torah consistently shifts from the familiar term *re'acha* with *achicha*¹², specifically as it relates to tzedakah, and Rambam echoes this familial motif by noting that indigent Jews can only fully rely on their "brethren", rather than often hostile outsiders, in their times of distress¹³. Indeed, Rambam's emphasis on the fraternal nature of the entire Jewish people is overwhelming, referencing the status of all Jew as brothers no less than four times in the space of a single halakha.

While, as was the case for Talmud Torah, biological family takes priority in sequence over other members of the family-nation, *l'achicha la'aniyecha u'lievyoncha asher b'artzecha*¹⁴, the same fundamental principles of an expanded definition of family which define Talmud Torah apply equally in the realm of tzedakah.

V.

If Sefer Shemot is indeed correctly understood as the story of the formation of the Jewish nation, it is critical to understand that we never surrendered the basic familial character which defined

⁹ See Hilkhot Tefillah 7:10.

¹⁰ Rabbenu Tam diverged from Rambam on this point, and argued that there were only two brachot. See Tosafot Brachot 46a s.v. kol ha'brachot.

¹¹ See Rambam Hilkhot Talmud Torah 1:2.

¹² See, for just a limited number of examples, Devarim 15:2, 15:3, 15:7, 15:9, 15:11.

¹³ Rambam Hilkhot Matanot Aniyim 10:2.

¹⁴ See Rambam Hilkhot Matanot Aniyim 7:13.

Sefer Bereishit¹⁵. Our national structure remains predicated on the integrity and significance of each individual *bayit*, which plays a crucial role in the formation of the superstructure of *kol beit Yisrael*.

The unique halakhic anthropology of Jewish nationhood was generated through the interlocking of distinct *batim*, family units, through the mitzvah of Korban Pesach.

Subsequently, its cohesion was ensured both through the shared project of constructing the mishkan, and through the singular contribution of Aharon Ha-Kohen to sustaining particular Jewish families as well as expiating the nation as a whole.

As a nuclear family is defined by certain values, the Jewish extended family-nation, kol beit Yisrael, is equally defined by certain controlling halakhic principles: kiddush Hashem, annual rehabilitation of our relationship with the Almighty, tzedakah, and, at the very apex of the national ethos, Talmud Torah.

Sefer Shemot is rightly conceived of as the story of the birth of a nation, but one, in both its structure as extended family, and in the establishment of its core principles, which defies comparison: *mi k'amcha Yisrael, goy echad ba'aretz*.

¹⁵ This observation lends another layer of interpretation to both Ramban and Netziv's respective contentions regarding Sefer Shemot, in which they argue, albeit for different reasons, that the second Sefer is a continuation of the first. Amongst other indications, the "*vav ha'chibbur*" at the outset of the Sefer is cited as evidence of this relationship. Our approach provides an alternative possibility concerning the continuity between these two sefarim.