

The Mixed Multitude

In this week's Torah portion, *Behaalotecha*, we read:

וַיְהִי הָעָם כְּמִתְאַנְּנִים רָע בְּאָזְנוֹי יְהוָה וַיִּשְׁמַע יְהוָה וַיִּחַר אָפוֹ וַתִּבְעַר-בָּם אֵשׁ יְהוָה וַתֹּאכַל בְּקִצָּה הַמַּחֲנֶה:
The people were looking for excuses to complain bitterly in the ears of the Lord.
The Lord heard and was incensed. A fire of the Lord broke out against them,
ravaging the *biktzeh* of the camp. [Num. 11:1]

What is the *biktzeh* of the camp?

The common translation is: The “extremes” or outskirts of the camp. But Rashi says it means the most wicked people -- extreme not in distance but in baseness. The Midrash quotes Rabbi Shim'on ben Manassia as saying that it means the most distinguished and prominent people, presumably for not having managed the people well. But it adds that some say it was the proselytes, the “mixed multitude” or *erev rav*). [Sifrei Bamidbar 85]

This “mixed multitude” is mentioned a few verses later:

But the multitude among them began to have strong cravings. Then, even the children of Israel once again began to cry, and they said, “Who will feed us meat?” [Num. 11:4]

The Midrash comments:

The multitude [in question] was the mixed multitude, which had attached themselves to Israel when they left Egypt [Sifrei Behaalotecha 1:42:4]

What is this “mixed multitude”? They are the many non-Jews who joined the Jews in the Exodus, as the Torah told us earlier:

וְגַם-עֶרְבֹב רַב עָלָה אִתָּם וַיֵּצְאוּ וַיִּבָּקֵר מִקֶּנֶה כִּבְדָּ מֵאֹד:
And a mixed multitude went up also with them... [Exod. 12:38]

The Torah doesn't tell us exactly *who* they were. Some commentators paint them in a positive light, others in a negative light.

Rashi calls them a mingling of various nations who had become proselytes. Sforino describes them as those who left Egypt with the Israelites to take up residence among them together with all their belongings. Ibn Ezra is more specific: They were Egyptians who mixed in with the Jewish people, and they were the rabble, the riffraff of Egypt.

The mixed multitude was later blamed for the sin of the Golden Calf. Indeed, after the calf was built, the Torah says:

וַיֹּאמְרוּ אֵלֶּה אֱלֹהֵינוּ יְשׁוּעָאֵל אֲשֶׁר הֵעֲלֵנוּ מֵאֶרֶץ מִצְרַיִם:
And they exclaimed, "This [Golden Calf] is your god, O Israel, who brought you out of the land of Egypt!" [Ex. 32:4]

The Midrash comments:

It says: "This is *your* god, O Israel". It does not say: "This is *our* god". Hence we may learn that it was the mixed multitude which came up from Egypt that gathered together against Aaron, and it was they who made [the Golden Calf] and afterwards led Israel astray after it. [Midrash Tanchuma, Ki Tisa 19]

The Midrash makes that same point later. The Torah says:

וַיִּדְבֹר יְהוָה אֶל־מֹשֶׁה לֵּאמֹר בֵּי שְׁתֵּת עִמָּךְ אֲשֶׁר הֵעֲלִיתָ מֵאֶרֶץ מִצְרַיִם:
The Lord spoke to Moses, "Hurry down, for your people, whom you brought out of the land of Egypt, have corrupted." [Ex. 32:7]

and the Midrash comments:

[God said:] It does not say *the* people but *your* people.
Moses exclaimed: Lord of the Universe! On what basis are they *my* people?
God replied: They are indeed your people, for when they were yet still in Egypt, I told you that I will bring forth My legions, My people, the children of Israel [Ex. 7:4]. Did I not tell you not to allow a mixed multitude to be mingled with them? But you, being humble and righteous, responded to Me, "Those who repent must always be accepted." Now, I knew what they would do [to Israel] in the future, but did I tell you that [to change your mind]? No, I fulfilled your wish, and the result was that it was *just* these people who made the [Golden] Calf, for they had been idol worshipers [before]. [Exodus Rabbah 42:6].

In commenting on this passage, Yefeh Toar, from 16th-century Turkey, adds that when the Torah says "Your people have corrupted", it means they have corrupted themselves *and* have corrupted others.

The Talmud dumps on them some more, saying Jews they disapprove of are descendents of the mixed multitude:

Rav Natan bar Abba said that Rav said: The wealthy Jews of Babylonia will descend to Gehenna because they do not have compassion on others. This is illustrated by incidents such as this: Shabbetai bar Marinus happened to come to Babylonia. He requested their participation in a business venture, to lend him money and receive half the profits in return, and they did not give it to him. Furthermore, when he asked them to sustain him with food, they likewise refused to sustain him. He said: *These wealthy people are not descendants of our forefathers, but they came from the mixed multitude*, as it is written: “And show you compassion, and have compassion upon you, and multiply you, as He has sworn to your fathers” [Deuteronomy 13:18], from which it is derived: Anyone who has compassion for God’s creatures, it is known that he is of the descendants of Abraham, our father, and anyone who does not have compassion for God’s creatures, it is known that he is not of the descendants of Abraham, our father. Since these wealthy Babylonians do not have compassion on people, clearly they are not descended from Abraham, Isaac, and Jacob, [but rather from the mixed multitude]. [Betzah 32b]

Isaac Luria, the 16th-century mystic from Tzfat, believed it was Moses’ evil inclination that allowed the mixed multitude to join Israel. This may have been another reason Moses was not allowed in the Promised Land. The Zohar, on which the Kabbalah is based, insists on the notion that the mixed multitude is the source of all the harm that later came to the Jewish people.

However, there are also kind words about them in the Sources. Elsewhere, the Midrash calls them “the proper ones of Egypt”:

The proper ones of Egypt came and made a Pessah sacrifice with the Jews and went out with them, as it is stated [Exodus 12:38], “And also a mixed multitude went out with them.” [Ex. R. 18:10]

Also, in commenting on the wicked son of the Passover Haggadah, the Baruch She’amar, from 20th-century Lithuania, says:

[The Haggadah says:] If [the wicked son] had been there, he would not have been redeemed. How is it possible that he would not have been redeemed? Even the *Erev Rav*, the mixed multitude who followed the Israelites out of Egypt were allowed to leave Egypt. This group of people, however, was not wicked; they were simply a mixed group of people from other nations who embraced the Israelites’ faith when the Israelites left Egypt. Those Israelites who were wicked, according to the Midrash, were stricken dead during the plague of darkness. [Barukh She’amar on Pesach Haggadah, Maggid, The Four Sons 3:3]

Let us put some numbers on the Exodus. The Torah says that 600,000 adult male Jews went out. The Midrash speculates that each of them had five dependents. [Targum Pseudo-Jonathan at Exod. 13:18]. This puts the number of

Jews who left Egypt at about 3.6 million. In another midrash, Rabbi Yonatan says that the “mixed multitude” outnumbered the Jews six-to-one. [Yalkut Shimoni 209] So there were 3.6 million Jews and 22 million non-Jews in the Exodus!

Many questions can be asked here. First, why did God not want proselytes in the Exodus? Did He not task us later to spread His name over all the earth and be a light unto the nations? Yes, but at that point it was too early to do that. God was saying, in effect: “Before you can teach others, you have to learn yourselves. Wait until I give you the Torah, wait until you live with it for a while and make it part of your lives, wait until you can stand firmly on your own two feet, and then you can bring strangers into the fold. Right now, the strangers are more likely to influence you than you are to influence them.” So Moses made a mistake.

All the same, is it fair to ascribe bad behavior to the influence of the converts? More generally, do sudden large numbers of newcomers change the character of a group, in ways that the original group may not want? We will discuss this in another presentation.

Shabbat shalom.