

Parshat Yitro Is All Unity Created Equal?

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"On the third new moon after the Bnei Yisrael had gone forth from the land of Egypt, on that day, they came to the wilderness of Sinai. And they journeyed from Refidim, and they came to the wilderness of Sinai and encamped in the wilderness. And Yisrael camped (וַיִּחַן) there opposite the mountain."¹ Chazal famously point out the conspicuous mismatch in the usage of the verb "camped (וַיִּחַן)" which is formulated in the singular when it is referring to an action taken by a plurality, Yisrael. While Chazal seem to highlight this as an oddity deserving of attention, it is certainly not an isolated instance of this phenomenon. The Tanach is replete with examples of this nonparallel structure whereby a verb describing the activities of a plurality is conjugated in the singular, especially when it comes to nations.² So why then did Chazal highlight this instance for special attention?

There are two indications in the verse that the usage of the singular verb in this instance is not the typical phrasing that is found in other Pesukim. Firstly, contextually, the singular verb in the verse has three other plural verbs that proceed it; "And they journeyed (וַיִּסְעוּ)...and they came (וַיָּבֹאוּ)...and encamped (וַיִּחַנוּ)...And Yisrael camped (וַיִּחַן)." That contrast would suggest that the verse is intentionally highlighting that something is unusual about the appearance of this singular verb. In addition, the subject of all the plural verbs is Bnei Yisrael which is found in the previous Pasuk along with another plural verb; "...Bnei Yisrael (בְּנֵי-יִשְׂרָאֵל)...came (בָּאוּ) to the wilderness of Sinai." Whereas, the subject of the singular verb is Yisrael (יִשְׂרָאֵל) found at the end of the verse.³ This use of Yisrael without the usual prefix of Bnei Yisrael would reinforce that the Torah is describing a plurality that is being viewed or is presenting itself as a singular entity. These two nuances are likely what contribute to Chazal's focus on and interpretation of this unusual phrasing (וַיִּחַן) in the verse.

Rashi, citing Chazal, suggests that this idiosyncrasy of the singular conjugation portrays the unusual unity of the people in this particular encampment preceding the theophany at Har Sinai. It indicates that they camped "as one person with one heart (כְּאִישׁ אֶחָד בְּלֵב אֶחָד) as opposed to all their other encampments where they engaged in murmuring and discord."⁴ As Rashi notes, their departure from Refidim, where they faced their archenemy Amalek in battle, and their subsequent arrival in the wilderness of Sinai were abounding with repentance for their previous discordant behavior.⁵ The positive and successful divine response to Bnei Yisrael's complaints in last week's Parsha and their astounding God and Moshe assisted victory over Amalek led the people to rally around God and their leadership. Bnei Yisrael now felt a sense of unified divine mission which is what allows them to enter a covenant with God to be His treasured people (סֻגְלָה), a kingdom of priests and holy nation (מְמַלְכֶת כֹּהֲנִים וְגוֹי קְדוֹשׁ) and experience the revelation at Sinai. Their newfound commonality of purpose facilitates their ability to forget about or overlook their differences and present a unified face which leads them to be regarded as a singular entity.

It is surprising that this well-known Rashi and Midrash Chazal have taken such a prominent place within the Jewish tradition (including being made into a song) since the exact same interpretation is presented on a verse in last week's Parsha without all the fanfare and distinction that is afforded to its appearance in this week's Parsha. "God strengthened the heart of Paraoth, king of Egypt, and he gave chase to Bnei Yisrael. And Bnei Yisrael were departing (וַיִּצְאוּ) defiantly. The Egyptians gave chase (וַיִּרְדְּפוּ) to them, and all the chariots and horses of Paraoth, his riders and his army overtook (וַיִּשְׁיגוּ) them encamped (וַיִּחַנוּ) by the sea, near Pi-HaCherot, before Ba'al-Tzephon. As Pharaoh drew near, and Bnei Yisrael lifted (וַיִּשְׂאוּ) their eyes and behold the Egyptians were advancing (וַיִּבְטְעוּ) upon them. They were greatly frightened (וַיִּירָאוּ), and Bnei Yisrael cried out (וַיִּצְעֲקוּ) to God."⁶ Once again here,

¹ בַּחֹדֶשׁ הַשְּׁלִישִׁי לָצֵאת בְּנֵי-יִשְׂרָאֵל מֵאֶרֶץ מִצְרָיִם בַּיּוֹם הַזֶּה בָּאוּ מִדְבַּר סִינַי: וַיִּסְעוּ מִרְפִּידִים וַיָּבֹאוּ מִדְבַּר סִינַי וַיִּחַנוּ בְּמִדְבַּר יִשְׂרָאֵל נֶגֶד הָהָר: (שמות ט, א-ב)

² וישאו בני ישראל את עיניהם והנה מצרים נסע אחריהם – דרך המקרא לקראות הגוי לשון יחיד, כדכתיב ויאמר מצרים אנוסה (שמות יד, כה), ישראל נשע בה' (ישעי' מה, יז), וכל דומיהן... (שכל טוב שמות יד, י) והנה מצרים נסע אחריהם – הכתוב קורא אותם בלשון יחיד, כמו ויבא עד חברון (במדבר יג, כב), וכן והאורב קם מהרה ממקומו (יהושע ח, ט), והם היו חמשת אלפים. (חזקוני שמות יד, י)

³ ויחנו במדבר... נגד ההר – משפט זה יכול היה להיאמר בדרך פשוטה: ויחנו במדבר נגד ההר, והוא מתחלק כאן לשני משפטים רק כדי לאפשר לעבור מלשון רבים ללשון יחיד – תחילה "ויחנו" ואחר – "ויחנו". "ויחנו" כמו שני הפעלים הקודמים

"ויסעו... ויבאו", מוסב על בני ישראל המוזכרים בפסוק א, בעוד שנושאו של הפועל "ויחן" מחייב נושא חדש – "ישראל", נושא שבו מתואר עם ישראל כיחידה אחת. ובדין מעירים כאן כמה מן המפרשים, שלשון-יחיד זה בא לסמן את אחדותם של ישראל בצפייתם לקבלת מצוות ה' (רד"ץ הופמן שמות ט, ב)

⁴ ויחן שם ישראל – כאיש אחד בלב אחד, אבל שאר כל החניות בתרעומת ובמחלוקת: (רש"י שמות ט, ב)

⁵ ויסעו מרפידים – למה הוצרך לחזור ולפרש מהיכן נסעו, והלא כבר כתב שברפידים היו חונים, בידוע שמשם נסעו, אלא להקיש נסיעתן מרפידים לביאתן למדבר סיני, מה ביאתן למדבר סיני בתשובה, אף נסיעתן מרפידים בתשובה: (רש"י שמות ט, ב)

⁶ ויחזק יקוץ את-לב פרעה מלך מצרים וירדף אחרי בני ישראל ובני ישראל יצאים יבד רמה: וירדפו מצרים אחריהם וישיו אותם חנים עליהם כליסו רבך פרעה

throughout the verses, the actions of Bnei Yisrael and the Egyptians are described utilizing plural verbs with one exception. When the Pasuk tells of Bnei Yisrael witnessing the Egyptian's chasing after them, it chronicles their impending approach with a verb conjugated in the singular form; "and behold the Egyptians were advancing (בִּנְסַע) upon them." Rashi, leaning on Chazal, proffers the exact same succinct solution to this anomaly. The use of the singular form of the verb to describe the action of a plurality indicates that they, the Egyptians, traveled after them **"with one heart as one person (בלב אחד כאיש אחד)**".⁷ In both instances, the source for Rashi's explanations are found in the Mechilta, the Midrash Halacha for Sefer Shmot. Why then was the identical interpretation offered here marginalized while its parallel appearance in Yitro gained so much prominence? An easy solution might be to suggest that the natural proclivity of the exegetes, teachers and people was to emphasize the unity of Bnei Yisrael while glossing over the same trait found in the Egyptians. One could even enhance this proposition by noting that, at least from Bnei Yisrael's vantage point, the unity of the Egyptians was a negative demonstration of togetherness while Bnei Yisrael's united front was manifest with a more positive orientation. The explanation of the differing attitudes towards the same phenomenon could be as simple as that, nevertheless, it seems that there is a more fundamental reason for this difference.

The source for Rashi's glosses on both these verses derive from the Mechilta, which is known as the Midrash Halacha on Sefer Shmot. With regards to the Egyptians giving chase to Bnei Yisrael it says: "and, behold, the Egyptians were advancing (בִּנְסַע) upon them": It is not written 'Nosim' (נוסעים), but 'Nose'a' (נוסע), that demonstrates or indicates that they formed squadrons, like one man (כְּאִישׁ אֶחָד) — from here the kingdom (likely the Romans) learned to lead their men into battle in squadrons.⁸ With respect to Bnei Yisrael's encampment in Midbar Sinai, the Mechilta opines: "And Yisrael encamped (וַיִּחַן) there": Elsewhere it is written 'and they journeyed

(וַיִּחַנו) 'and they encamped (plural וַיִּחַנו) — they journeyed in quarrel and encamped in discord. Though here, they were all of one heart (הָשׂוּ כֹלָם לֵב אֶחָד) — wherefore it is written 'and they encamped (singular וַיִּחַן) opposite the mountain.'⁹

What becomes clear from looking at the sources in the Mechilta is that Rashi took some artistic liberties and conflated the two Midrashim. Concerning the Egyptians, the Midrash indicates that they were "like one man (כְּאִישׁ אֶחָד)," whereas with regards to Bnei Yisrael, it reflects that "they were all of one heart (הָשׂוּ כֹלָם לֵב אֶחָד)." Rashi took the answer offered in each case for the use of the singular verb and combined them to form a phrase (כְּאִישׁ אֶחָד בִּלְבָב אֶחָד) that he presents as the identical solution to the anomaly in each case. Clearly, the Midrash saw these as distinct and independent solutions by the mere fact that it does not utilize the same phraseology in its proposed solution to the oddity of the use of the singular verb found in each of these verses.

It would seem that the imagery of the squadron that is presented by the Midrash to describe the unity of the Egyptians in their pursuit of Bnei Yisrael also reveals something about their underlying togetherness. They are joined as one (כְּאִישׁ אֶחָד) in their quest to retrieve their possessions and slaves as well as their desire to succeed militarily. It is akin to political foes joining forces to defeat their common opponent. They are unified and resolute about routing their shared adversary, but beyond that there is little to nothing that binds them together. Their common goal causes them to temporarily put aside their differences in order to accomplish their objective. If they are successful, divisiveness and discordance will reign since the one thing that bound them together has now been removed. It is a union of convenience, a matter of strategy and not of deep-rooted connection.

On the other hand, Bnei Yisrael's unity derived from a deep-seated bond (הָשׂוּ כֹלָם לֵב אֶחָד). Through the prism of their common service of God, they were able to overcome their

וּפְרָשׁוּ וַיִּחַלוּ עַל-פִּי הַחִירָת לִפְנֵי בַעַל צֶפֶן: וּפְרָעָה הַקְּרִיב וַיִּשְׁאַרְוּ בְּנֵי-יִשְׂרָאֵל אֶת-עֵינֵיהֶם וַהֲנִה מִצְרַיִם נֹסְעִים אַחֲרֵיהֶם וַיִּרְאוּ מֵאֵד וַיִּצְעֲקוּ בְּנֵי-יִשְׂרָאֵל אֶל-יְהוָה: (שמות יד, ח-י)

⁷ נסע אחריהם - בלב אחד כאיש אחד. דבר אחר והנה מצרים נוסע אחריהם, ראו ש של מצרים נוסע מן השמים לעזור למצרים. (רש"י שמות יד, י)

⁸ והנה מצרים נוסע אחריהם - נוסעים אין כתיב כאן, אלא "נוסע". מגיד שנעשו כלן טורמיות טורמיות כאיש אחד. מן למדה המלכות להיות מנהגת טורמיות טורמיות. (מכילתא דרבי ישמעאל בשלח - מסכתא דויהי פרשה ב) \\\ והנה מצרים נוסעים אחריהם - אין כתיב כאן אלא נוסע אחריהם. מגיד הכתוב שנעשו כולן טורמאות

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⁹ וַיִּחַן שֵׁם יִשְׂרָאֵל - כָּל מְקוֹם שֶׁהוּא אוֹמֵר וַיִּסְעוּ וַיִּחַנוּ נֹסְעִים בְּמַחֲלֶקֶת וְחוּנִים בְּמַחֲלֶקֶת אָבֵל כֵּן הָשׂוּ כֹלָם לֵב אֶחָד, לְכָךְ נֶאֱמַר: "וַיִּחַן שֵׁם יִשְׂרָאֵל נֶגֶד הַהָר" (מכילתא דרבי ישמעאל יתרו - מסכתא דבחדש פרשה א) \\\ ויחן שם ישראל נגד הַר - ולהלן הוא אומר ויסעו בני ישראל ויחנו בני ישראל נוסעים במחלוקת וחונוים במחלוקת וכאן הוא אומר ויחן שם חנייה אחת ניתן בלבם כדי שיאהבו זה את זה ויקבלו את התורה. (מכילתא דרשב"י שמות יט, ב)

differences. The Midrash does not suggest that they eliminated or suppressed their differences, but rather that they quashed their discordant behavior. Their unity in this instance is contrasted with their quarreling (מְחַלְקֵת) in other situations. They stopped focusing on that which made them different. Instead, emphasizing their common purpose as God's messengers allowed them to celebrate, rather than suppress their differences. It is the realization that each person is distinct and diverse and has their own unique contribution to offer and be treasured. It was a transformation of perspective. They went from being a self-centered and self-absorbed people (פרשת בשלח) to a singular, selfless nation gathered around the mountain of God, committed to becoming a priestly and holy nation in service of God. This is borne out by the wording in the alternate version of the Mechilta (מכילתא דרשב"י) which has a small elucidating addition, "they had a heartfelt belief in a singular encampment in order that they should love each other and receive the Torah (את התורה חנייה אחת ניתן בלבם כדי שיאהבו זה את זה ויקבלו)." It was not a suppression of their differences, but rather a sincere effort to love those that were different that facilitated this transformation and laid the groundwork for them to receive the Torah. This approach (השוו כולם) of viewing each other as partners and their differences as assets had the ability to forge a long lasting unity amongst Bnei Yisrael since their bond was not just the result of some fleeting union of convenience, but rather a heartfelt love for each other.

It is possible to suggest that while Rashi did combine the two Midrashim that he still maintained their distinction in a nuanced difference in his commentary. With regards to the Egyptian unity Rashi states that the Egyptians, traveled after them **"with one heart as one person (בלב אחד כאיש אחד)."** In respect to Bnei Yisrael, he indicates that they camped **"as one person with one heart (כאיש אחד בלב אחד).** Notice the difference in the order of the one heart and the one person in each of these instances. Concerning the Egyptians, Rashi might be indicating that their feeling of unity (בלב אחד) derived from their common interests and goals (כאיש אחד). Whereas, relating to Bnei Yisrael, the order is reversed to indicate that

their unified face and presentation as a singular entity (כאיש אחד) derived from their underlying love and respect for each other (בלב אחד).

This brings us to a much overlooked Rashi found later in the Parsha, also based on the Mechilta, which is an indispensable and inseparable companion to the earlier discussed Rashi; "And Yisrael camped (וַיִּחַן) there opposite the mountain – **as one person with one heart (כאיש אחד בלב אחד).**" In the prelude to the revelation at Sinai, God instructs Moshe a number of times to warn the people from coming too close to the mountain during the theophany. It is in order to protect Bnei Yisrael from the dire results of not complying with this directive. "And God said to Moshe, 'Go down, warn the people not to break through towards God to gaze, lest many of them perish (וַנִּפֹּל מִמֶּנּוּ רַב).'" Once again here, the Torah utilizes a singular verb (וַנִּפֹּל) to describe something that will happen to the many.¹⁰ In order to explain this anomaly, Rashi suggests that "Any number of them it may be that falls, even though it may only be a single individual (וַנִּפֹּל), it will be regarded by Me as many (רַב)."¹¹ The Mechilta which is the source of Rashi's comments is even more dramatic. "And God said to Moshe, "Go down, warn the people" lest they break their bounds to see, 'lest many of them perish (וַנִּפֹּל מִמֶּנּוּ רַב): ...Even if one of them falls, it is (to Me) as if they all have fallen (הָרַי הוּא עָלַי כְּכֻלָּם); the one detracts from the many (שָׂאֵף אֶחָד מִמֶּעַט עַל יְדֵי כָלָן). Also: One of them who falls is reckoned against the entire act of creation (הָרַי הוּא עָלַי כְּנִגְדָּ כָּל מַעֲשֵׂה) (בְּרֵאשִׁית...)"¹² This interpretation places a high value on the individual even within the context of the unified nation. God makes it clear that even the loss of one individual undermines the value of the entire nation.

As discussed above, having a singular and unified nation (השוו כולם לב אחד) is of paramount importance and value. The Torah emphasizes this point by highlighting the uniqueness and the desirability of this type of unity (וַיִּחַן יִשְׂרָאֵל) as well as the pivotal role it played in facilitating the revelation at Har Sinai. Though, there is a risk that the importance of the singularity of the nation is such an intoxicating vision that it can lead to the erasure of or disregard for the individuals who comprise this

¹⁰ ואפילו הוא יחידיו כו'. דאם לא כן היה לו למימר ונפלו, לכן פירש כל מה וכו'. (שפת חכמים שמות יט, כא)

¹¹ העד בעם - התרה בהם שלא לעלות בהר: פן יהרסו וגו' - שלא יהרסו את מצבם על ידי שתאותם אל ה' לראות ויקרבו לצד ההר: ונפל ממנו רב - כל מה שיפול מהם ואפילו הוא יחידיו חשוב לפני רב: יהרסו - כל הריסה מפרדת אסיפת הבנוי, אף הנפרדין ממצב אנשים הורסים את המצב: (רש"י שמות יט, כא)

¹² ויאמר ה' אל משה: רד העד בעם - הפקד בהם! 'פן יהרסו אל ה'. שמה ידחקו לראות, 'ונפול ממנו רב.' מלמד שנתנה רשות לשלוחים לחבל. דבר אחר: אפלו רב אחד מהם שיפול, הרי הוא עלי ככלם מלמד שאף אחד ממעט על ידי כלן דבר אחר: יחידיו שיפול מהם, הרי הוא עלי כנגד כל מעשה בראשית, שנאמר (זכריה ט, א): 'כי לה' עין אדם וכל שבטי ישראל' (מכילתא דרבי ישמעאל יתרו - מסכתא דבחדש פרשה ד)

nation. In that mistaken conception, the people are viewed simply as cogs towards the betterment and success of the nation (communism). It is somewhat akin to a long term version of the unity displayed by the Egyptians which suppressed the individual's differences for a united and common purpose. It is the sacrifice of the individual on the altar of unity. The Torah's antidote to that misconception is God's declaration "lest many of them perish (וְנִפְלַ מִמֶּנּוּ רַב)." Every individual is of paramount importance and the loss of even one person is on par with the loss of the whole nation and ruins the standing of the nation. As noted above, true unity is one of respect and love for each person and their differences (כַּאִישׁ אֶחָד) not the suppressing or sacrificing of individuals. Obviously, there is a dialectic tension between the individual's love for others and the need to compromise that underlies and is the foundation of the nation's unity and the recognizing and acknowledgment of the person's need for self-expression and realization (see Parshat Bamidbar – Everyone

Counts). The two anomalous singular verbs found in this week's Parsha promote and challenge us to find the ideal delicate balance between these two competing principles.

וַיִּחַן־שָׁם יִשְׂרָאֵל נֶגְדַ הַהָר - כַּאִישׁ אֶחָד בְּלִב אֶחָד

וְנִפְלַ מִמֶּנּוּ רַב - וַאֲפִילוּ הוּא יַחֲדֵי חֲשׁוֹב לִפְנֵי רַב

Our nation's challenge at this time is to ensure that the unity forged out of the devastation we have experienced is of a lasting impact. That it be a unity of love (הַשׁוּוֹ כּוֹלֵם לֵב אֶחָד), appreciation for one and another and shared destiny and not just an alliance of convenience to suppress a common enemy (כַּאִישׁ אֶחָד). An everlasting bond that elevates both the nation and the individual.

Shabbat Shalom

לעילוי נשמת הנרצחים ז"ל בארץ ישראל, לרפואה שלימה לפצועים, לגאולה קרובה לנעדרים ולשבויים, והצלחה ושמירה ובשורות טובות וישועות ונחמות לכל כלל ישראל ובמיוחד לחיילי צה"ל העומדים על משמר ארצנו וערי אלקינו