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A Minyan – Why Ten

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ר' מנחם זאב בן פנחס ז"ל
Emil W. Herman  who loved and supported Torah learning.

Vaera

A Minyan – Why Ten

The Land of Israel, of course, is the national treasure of the Jewish Nation. But it was recently discovered that Israel is sitting on a vast natural treasure of natural gas.

Experts estimate that this deposit could probably support Israel's economy for the next several decades and perhaps even further—and, regrettably, everyone is fighting over who's going to get the money, as usual.

So let's talk about natural gas for a few minutes.

What's interesting (and deadly) about natural gas is that it has no taste, no smell and no color.

Over one hundred years ago, workers in coal mines were the first to discover natural gas—and since it has no taste, smell or color, they would get poisoned by the gas without feeling anything. So to protect themselves from this danger, they started bringing small house pets or birds with them into the mines, and when the animals, often canaries, would die, it would be a warning sign that there was gas in the mine.

Today, of course, we have gas detectors that allow us to know if there's gas. But it took industry a few years to learn how to turn that gas into something useful and positive, like heating.

Now, every Jew knows that if he wants to say Kaddish, he needs a minyan. And wherever you go, whether an airport or any other place in the world where you happen to pass by a synagogue, you're likely to get stopped by someone who asks you if you can join a minyan as the tenth man.

But where did this business of needing a minyan, a quorum of ten, come from? What's the source for it?

One source in the Torah itself is the story of the Miraglim, the Spies. When they returned from scouting the Holy Land and spoke evil of it, G-d said to Moshe (Bamidbar 14:27), "How long shall this evil congregation exist?"

There, the word “eidah,” or group, is referring to the group of ten spies—on which Rashi says, “From here we learn that ‘eidah’ means [a group of] ten.”

The Talmud Yerushalmi (Tractate Brachos 6:3) says that we learn that a minyan is ten from the story of Yosef’s brothers. In the Torah portion of Miketz, which we read just a few weeks ago, we are told about the brothers who went down from the Holy Land to Egypt to buy food. The Torah tells us, “Yosef’s ten brothers went down to buy grain in Egypt” (Bereishis 42:3).

And the Midrash (Tanchuma, Miketz 6) rhetorically asks, “Why ten? Because they have the power to push away punishment, for indeed, when G-d came to destroy Sodom and Avraham asked for Heavenly Mercy for them, he asked for them to be redeemed in the merit of 50 good people and went down to ten... because ten is an eidah... and therefore, the Torah says, ‘And Yosef’s ten brother’s went down...’ ”

And the question still remains—why indeed ten? Why are seven Jews not enough for a minyan? Or how about 12? After all, 12 is also a special number as there were 12 original Tribes of Israel? What’s so special about the number ten?

So let’s explore this for a minute. Does anyone know where we find the number ten in the Torah? [Interact with audience.]

The answer that most of us will come up with off the tops of our heads is the famous Ten Commandments—G-d chose to give us the laws of the Torah on Mt. Sinai specifically with ten statements, not nine and not 11. So that’s one thing about the number ten right there.

The second thing about the number ten is this: the Ten Plagues. As we read in this Torah portion and the one before it, G-d smote the ancient Egyptians with ten plagues—and here too, there’s no specific reason for ten plagues: G-d could have just as easily taken out the Jewish Nation from Egypt in one fell swoop, in one moment, without any plagues. It would have been enough for the Pharaoh to temporarily change his mind and let the Jews go, or, alternatively, to simply die. It also could have gone in any other number of ways—but still, for whatever reason, G-d chose to mete out specifically ten plagues.

But there’s another very important reason why the number ten is special, one that not many people are aware of. In the Mishnah, in the tractate of Pirkei Avos (Ethics of the Fathers), we are taught, “The universe was created with ten utterances” (Avos 5:1).

This means that when G-d created the universe, He created it with speech, with sayings. And the most famous of these sayings is "Let there be light!"

But there are nine other sayings that brought the universe as we know it into being: "And G-d said, 'Let there be a firmament,'" "And G-d said, 'Let us make man,'" and so on.

In short, G-d chose to create the universe specifically with ten statements.

So when we say, "G-d created the universe with ten utterances," what we mean is that each individual must be constantly mindful that it is G-d Who created the universe; that G-d is the One Who said "Let there be light!" and thus there came into being light; and that He is the One Who said, "Let us make man!" and thus I exist as a human being.

But in the course of the generations, people forgot that there is a Creator to the universe and they started worshiping idols. And so when G-d wanted to give the Torah, the laws by which the world would need to conduct itself, there was no one to talk to—no one even knew that there was a Creator. And so, to remind everyone of the Ten Utterances, to remove the layers that hid the Ten Utterances, G-d gave the world the Ten Plagues—which "reminded" them that there indeed is a Creator who created the universe with ten statements, and that He is the boss.

And then, and only then, G-d gave the Ten Commandments—before that, humanity had to recognize and know that there is a G-d, and only then could they take orders from Him.

But there's yet another interesting thing that comes in the number ten.

The halachah, is that each time the Torah is read in public, a minimum of ten pesukim, or verses, must be read. "*Ein pos'chin may'asarah pesukim b'beis hak'nesess,*" says the halachah—we don't do less than ten verses in the synagogue."

On this, the Talmud (Tractate Megilah 21:2) asks, "These ten [verses] correspond to who?... Rav Yosef says, to the Ten Commandments that were spoken to Moshe at Sinai; and Rabbi Yochanan says, to the Ten Utterances with which the universe was created."

In other words, the reason that one needs to read a minimum of ten verses each time the Torah is read in public is to remind us of the Ten Utterances and the Ten Commandments. Put simply, to remind us that G-d created the universe and gave us the Torah.

We might even say that this is another reason why we need specifically ten people for a prayer services—to remind us of those very same things: that G-d created the universe and gave us the Torah.

There was a Holocaust survivor by the name of Abba Kovner. He was one of the leaders of the Vilna Ghetto and the Polish resistance. After the Holocaust, he made aliyah to the Holy Land and became a writer and poet.

Abba Kovner writes in one of his books that in his first week in the Holy Land, he went to visit the Kotel HaMaaravi, the Western Wall. He came close to the wall, but stood one step away from the stones—he felt that the place had no meaning to him. He felt rooted in a different experience; he wasn't ready to approach the Kotel. But then, someone suddenly tugged on his sleeve and asked him to join a minyan.

So Abba Kovner, a Holocaust resistance hero who was not exactly religious, put on a hat and joined the prayers.

And then, he suddenly felt that he had arrived, that he belonged.

When he finishes the story, he adds that the nine need the one and the one needs the nine—in his opinion, that is the most meaningful thing in Judaism.

But Chasidic philosophy comes along and illuminates the concept of ten Jews in a much loftier and more spiritual light—and here, finally, we get back to our opening theme of natural gas.

In one of his letters, the Alter Rebbe writes about the greatness of the minyan. And he quotes the saying of the Sages (Talmud, Tractate Sanhedrin 39a), "Upon every group of ten, the Divine Presence dwells."

This means that when ten Jews gather together, and not necessarily are we referring exclusively to men over the age of 13, the Shechina (the Divine Presence) descends upon them. In other words, when ten Jewish babies are put together in one room, it may be adorably cute, but it also draws down the Divine Presence into the room at that time at a very high level—meaning that there is a very high level of spiritual energy at the time.

And the Alter Rebbe, adds, "I heard from my masters that if even one angel is found at an assembly of ten Jews, even if they are not speaking words of the Torah, an endless dread and panic falls upon him because of the Shechina that is resting upon them, to the point that the angel will be completely negated."

What the Alter Rebbe is saying is that when ten Jewish souls gather together, there is a spiritual energy present on such a high level that even an angel cannot stand firm and becomes completely negated. And just like natural gas has no color, taste or smell but still exists and has very powerful qualities, so too is the Shechina, even though it has no physical characteristics whatsoever—no color, taste, smell, size, dimensions or whatever. Still, it exists in full strength.

And this, my friends, is the power of ten Jews gathering together.

From this we learn that a Jew should not only seek out a minyan when he needs to say Kaddish. Rather, at every possible opportunity, he should try to be in the company of other Jews instead of being alone. And this also holds true for Torah study—certainly a person can study Torah alone, but learning alone doesn't compare to learning in the company of ten other Jews, because then the Shechinah dwells there at an entirely different level.

And perhaps this is another reason why observant Jews try to have ten kids—because they want the Shechinah in the house all the time. And with a house with lots of kids, one thing is for certain—there's plenty of energy in the air...

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