



The Pardes Parsha Discussion by Rabbi Alex Israel

The Parsha Discussion: Bechukotai – The Power of Many

Bechukotai opens with the extraordinary national “blessings” – security, economic prosperity, population growth, peace, a direct connection with God – that are promised to Israel “if you follow My laws”. The vision presented by these verses is uplifting and inspirational. Amongst these wonderful prospects, we read about Israel’s military supremacy:

I will grant peace in the land, and you sleep untroubled...and no sword shall cross your land. You shall give chase to your enemies...Five of you shall give chase to a hundred, and a hundred of you shall give chase to ten thousand; your enemies shall fall before you by the sword. (26:6-8)

One observation is that even while blessed by peace on the domestic front – in the best of times – there will still be a need for a military, and the army will be busy fending off threats from our enemies. Peace, in this vision, is not absolute.

But the observant reader is bothered by the math. “Five...shall give chase to a hundred, and a hundred shall give chase to ten thousand.” The multiple of the first is twenty; the multiple of the second is one-hundred! Which of them is accurate? Why mention the first scenario if the second example is so much better?

But is this calculation correct? Should Scripture not have written here: “and a hundred of you will pursue two thousand”? But, there is no comparison between a few who observe the Torah and many who observe the Torah. (Rashi, based on the Sifra)

Professor Nechama Leibowitz explains:

In other words, the vitality, influence and virtue of the few faithful does not increase in strict mathematical proportion to their numbers, but gains momentum out of all proportion to the increase.

In short, the sum is much more powerful than its parts, and whereas five people have a certain power, one-hundred people leverage power which is exponentially greater.

One might argue that the idea of a *minyan* expresses this very well. The sense is that until nine people, the group is just a collection of individuals, but after the threshold of “ten” is reached there is a community. The communal entity bears greater power and significance.

So let's discuss:

- Do you feel that Rashi's answer is a good solution to the problem?
- Have you ever found power in a mass-event, experiencing a surge in energy by the collaboration of many people into a group?
- Or does it sometimes work in the opposite way? - In a small group, people pull their weight; in a large group many individuals slack-off.
- What determines whether the group-power works or not? How is a “collective” mobilized to maximise its power?

Nechama Leibowitz concludes:

Our text with its lack of mathematical correspondence emphasizes the great responsibility that rests on each individual. One should not argue: What good is my influence if I join the small band of those who observe Torah? Our sages taught us that the addition of one individual swells the power of the group many more times his or her quantitative worth. (Nechama Leibowitz, Studies in Leviticus pg 279-281)

Shabbat Shalom!