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WHAT IF WE HAD DEPORTED THE EREV RAV TO SODOM?

By Rabbi Aryeh Klapper

The children of Israel journeyed from Rameses toward
Sukkot,

around 600,000 on foot, the men, aside from the children.

Also an *erev rav* went with them,
and flocks and cattle, a very heavy amount of livestock.

What is an *erev rav* (other than a consonantal rhyme)?

Since the end of the verse deals with domestic animals, and we're not long after the plague of *arov*, it's tempting to suggest that a large mixture of wild animals exited Egypt along with the Jews, perhaps even those involved in that plague. Sekhel Tov draws the linguistic connection:

The arov = a mixture of evil beasts, and the matter is similar
to and also an *erev rav*.

However, I'm fairly certain that Sekhel Tov is using the parallel only to show that *arov* can mean a mixture whose contents are determined by literary context.

Let's assume that *erev* in fact means mixture, and that *rav* means great or numerous. That's how we get the King James translation "mixed multitude". But mixture of what, and how many is a multitude?

Let's put to one side the Zohar's assertion that there are really two *erevs*, one *rav* and one small. Let's keep in mind, however, the Zohar's connection to *erev*=evening, which literally means a mixing of light and dark. Maybe the mixed multitude is of human beings who contain both light and dark in them.

That may seem obvious – don't all human beings contain both light and dark? Indeed, Tzror Hamor comments:

This is a reference to the sinners of Israel,
who are as full of mitzvot as a pomegranate (is full of seeds).

But much of Jewish Tanakh commentary consigns the *erev rav* to the dark side. Moreover, the intent of doing so seems to be to assign all the dark in the narrative to the *erev rav*, and thereby leave the original *bnei Yisrael* as pure Children of Light. (I saw

a suggestion that *Amalek* also has an *erev rav*, which would serve the reverse function.)

So – the people who pressured Aharon into making the Golden Calf were the *erev rav*. The *asafsuf* (Bamidbar 11:4) who "desired a desire" and asked "who will feed us meat" were the *erev rav*. And so on and so forth.

The problem is that it's not only the *erev rav* who get punished for these sins. Why does G-d take his anger out on *Bnei Yisrael* if in fact the groups are distinct, i.e. if there is no *erev* of *Bnei Yisrael* and the *erev rav*?

Perhaps the simplest possibility is that the *erev rav* were the Egyptian wives and children of *Bnei Yisrael*, who lacked any relationship to Jewish religion, but were socially integrated. But then another way of asking the question is: Why were the *erev rav* allowed to come along (unlike the winnowing in the time of Ezra), and why weren't they expelled after the Golden Calf (as the *Kutim* were later)?

A standard answer to that question is that attracting and integrating the *erev rav* was an essential part of *Bnei Yisrael's* mission. Here for example is Shir Maon to Bereishit 14:21:

On Talmud Nedarim 32a they state:

"Because (Avraham) returned the people to the King of Sodom rather than bringing them under the wings of the Shekhinah – therefore his sons were enslaved in Egypt."¹

This is difficult: What is the 'measure for measure' of his punishment?

An answer: Chazal said (Pesachim 87b): "Israel was scattered amongst the nations only so that converts would be added to them" . . .

Therefore: Because Avraham Avinu returned the people of Sodom and did not convert them to bring them under the wings of the Shekhinah,

Therefore, measure, for measure, they were enslaved in Egypt in order for them to be removed from there, so that all the holy sparks in Egypt that were in Egypt amongst the terrible and licentious people would be removed along with them

¹ Note that the alternative explanations for the enslavement are either that Avraham inappropriately demanded a guarantee from G-d or that he conscripted Torah scholars. The last position is cited regularly in Israeli discourse about the conscription of Charedim; I would like to see the other two mentioned more, with the possibility that they fundamentally disagree theologically and not just about why G-d tells Avraham about the enslavement at this point in his life.

= *and also an erev rav went up along with them, who were converts,*
to repair the failure to convert the people of Sodom.
Perhaps these converts were reincarnations of the people of Sodom.

Here the light and the dark mix in fascinating ways. Sodom becomes the worst culture ever, but the people who comprised that culture could have belonged to Bnei Yisroel if only Avraham had accepted spiritual responsibility for them. If attracting the *erev rav* is part of our mission, their failure is our failure.

We should be clear, however, that the redemption of the *erev rav* consigns the rest of Egypt to total blackness. No sparks are left there at all.

Another version identifies the *erev rav* as converts but argues that they were not part of our mission. Mosheh Rabbeinu accepted them even though G-d told him not to. That's why G-d tells Mosheh at the Golden Calf: "Descend, for YOUR NATION has been destructive".

However, it isn't clear to me whether, in arguments between Mosheh and G-d, we are supposed to take G-d's side.

Perhaps the most complex version of the story emerges from a dispute in Mekhilta about the number².

And also an erev rav –
120 myriads, in the opinion of Rabbi Yishmael;
Rabbi Akiva says: 240 myriads;
Rabbi Natan says: 360 myriads.

Where do these numbers come from?

Rabbi Yishmael's position is easy: Bnei Yisrael in the previous verse are 60 myriads, so *rav* means double.

Rabbi Shlomo Ganzfried (author of *Kitzur Shulchan Arukh*) in his Biblical commentary *Apiyon* cites his son Yosef as (IMHO correctly) understanding that the number 5 is the key. Rabbi Akiva says that *Bnei Yisroel* were one fifth of the total including the *erev rav*, while Rabbi Natan says that they were one fifth of the number of the *erev rav*.

Why does the number 5 matter? Because in next week's parshah we will read that Bnei Yisroel went up from Egypt *chamushim*.

Why does that connection matter? Because a midrashic tradition translates *chamushim* to mean *cut down to a fifth*, meaning that four fifths of *Bnei Yisroel* died in Egypt (during the plague of Darkness).

In other words, the *erev rav* **replaced** unworthy born Jews (who would perhaps have made a Golden Calf?). But was the replacement successful? The *erev rav* don't seem to make it into the genealogy – they vanish, like the mysterious *souls that (Avraham and Sarah) made in Charan*.

I suggest that the *erev rav* are less important as a historical phenomenon than as a screen onto which Jews can project our anxieties about chosenness and **conversion**. The possibility of conversion, as Rabbi Yaakov Kaminetzky taught, is necessary to prevent us from perverting chosenness into a racist doctrine. (THE EREV RAV WILL NOT REPLACE US!) Yet we can't believe – it wouldn't be justice – that G-d chose us randomly, rather than as a result of some unique virtue or potential virtue. After all, isn't every human being unique, and therefore possessed of unique potential virtue?

Conversion is the immigration policy of the Jewish people. I have used that analogy in the past to help people understand why the laws of conversion are so complex in practice even though they can seem very simple in theory. I'm hoping that you'll use the analogy the other way around, and think about what this understanding of conversion can teach us about American attitudes toward immigrants.

I note in conclusion that Yechezkel 47:22 unequivocally promises converts a full share in the Land of Israel in the coming redemption. Abravanel asks: Why, then, did the *erev rav* not receive shares when Joshua distributed the Land? There are two sorts of answers: One is that they joined a bandwagon rather than first sharing in our oppression, and therefore were not ready for the responsibilities imposed by Torah; the other is that we failed to properly welcome and integrate them.

Regardless, Abravanel points out, all the Torah's commandments against oppressing converts applied to the *erev rav* as well.

Shabbat shalom!

² This one did not make it into the Haggadah, but should remind you of the dispute about the number of plagues.