

Parshat Shemot
Counting Stars
Rabbanit Yael Smooha - Class of 2021

The story of the Exodus begins with a recounting of the journey of Jacob's sons and their families from Canaan to Egypt, listing their names and their census.

Rashi points out that this information has already been shared with us in ספר בראשית. Why would the Torah repeat this information? To explain the need for this repetition, he draws on the midrash in the following comment:

NOW THESE ARE THE NAMES OF THE CHILDREN OF ISRAEL —

Although Scripture has already enumerated them by name while they were living, when they went down into Egypt (Genesis 46:8-27), it again enumerates them when it tells us of their death, thus showing how dear they were to God.

ואלה שמות בני ישראל.
 אע"פ ששמןאן בחייהם בשמותם, חזר
 ומנאם במיתתם, להודיע חבתם

According to the midrash which Rashi quotes, the Torah repeats the names of the tribes, and their numbers, to teach us how dear they are to God. I found this idea beautiful, uplifting, relatable. We retell the stories of the people who are dear to us, in their lifetimes, and after they are gone.

But then Rashi continues to quote the midrash, and this time I'm scratching my head.

— for they [Bnei Yisrael] are compared to the stars which God brings out and brings in by number and name, as it is said, (Isaiah 40:26) "He bringeth out their host by number, He calleth them all by name" (Exodus Rabbah 1:3; Tanchuma Yashan 1:1:2).

שנמשלו לכוכבים, שמוציאם ומכניסם
 במספר ובשמותם,
 שנאמר "המוציא במספר צבאם לכלם
 בשם יקרא" (ישעיהו מ')

Rashi is bringing a proof that God loves the children of Israel because...he counts them just as he counts and names the stars? I needed to understand this, so I decided to look up the verse from Isaiah to see the context. The full verse reads:

Lift high your eyes and see: Who created these?

שאנו מרום עיניכם וראו מי-ברא אלה

He who sends out their host by **count**, Who calls them each by **name**:

המוציא במספר צבאם לכלם בשם יקרא

מרב אונים ואמץ כח

Because of His great might and vast power,

איש לא נעדר:

Not one fails to appear.

The passage in Isaiah is describing the expansiveness of God in his care for the details of the universe. The midrash draws a parallel between the naming and counting of stars in this passage to the Children of Israel, who are counted and named twice as the Torah relates their arrival in Egypt. Just as God carefully names and counts each star, so too does God carefully name and count each member of Yaakov's family.

There lies a deeper connection as well. This is not the first time that בני ישראל are compared to stars. Its first appearance is in לך לך, when God promises Avraham that his children will be numerous.

This story takes place in two parts. In the first part, Avraham complains to God that he is childless, and God promises Avraham that this will not be the case forever:

He took him outside and said, “Look toward heaven and count the stars, if you are able to count them.”

וַיֹּצֵא אֱלֹהִים הַחוּצָה וַיֹּאמֶר הִבְטֵנָה הַשָּׁמַיִם וסֹפְרֵי הַכּוֹכָבִים אִם-תּוּכְלֵ לְסַפֵּר אֹתָם

וַיֹּאמֶר לוֹ כֹּה יִהְיֶה זְרַעְךָ: (בראשית טו:ה)

And He added, “So shall your offspring be.” (Bereishit 15:5)

Later, however, Avraham is told a troubling prophecy regarding his descendants:

And He said to Abram, “Know well that your offspring shall be strangers in a land not theirs, and they shall be enslaved and oppressed four hundred years;

וַיֹּאמֶר לְאַבְרָם יָדַע תֵּדַע כִּי-גֵר יִהְיֶה זְרַעְךָ בְּאֶרֶץ לֹא לָהֶם וְעַבְדִּים וְעָנִים אֲתָם אַרְבַּע מֵאוֹת שָׁנָה:

but I will execute judgment on the nation they shall serve, and in the end they shall go free with great wealth. (Bereishit 15:13-14)

וְגַם אֶת-הַגּוֹי אֲשֶׁר יַעֲבֹדוּ דָן אֲנִי וְאַחֲרֵי-כֵן יֵצְאוּ בְרַכְשׁ גָּדוֹל: (בראשית טו:יג-יד)

The stars in the midrash play an important role in the telling of the story of the Exodus. They hearken back to a prophecy that life will be very hard for the Jews for a long while, but in the end they will not only survive but prosper.

Stars are great in number, yes. And impossible to count, that too. But more than anything, stars are only visible some of the time. Now you see it, now you don't. How fitting for a story as painful as Egyptian bondage, in which Moshe and the Jewish people experience steep ups and downs of faith and hopelessness. Sometimes God seems right beside them, sometimes nowhere to be found. The midrash not only reminds us of God's love, as the pain is about to begin, but indirectly alludes to a prophecy that foretold that in the end, we would come out alive.

Andy Puddicombe, a meditation teacher and co-founder of Headspace, speaks often in his meditation app of something he likes to call the “blue sky” - the idea that deep within us there is always a sense of serenity, even in the most trying times. Much like gray clouds on an overcast day. There is actually a blue sky behind those clouds, and the sun is shining just as brightly. It's just that those clouds are preventing us from enjoying the sunlight.

I'd like to extend this analogy to the stars: They are always there. In the middle of a sunny day, they are there. We simply don't see them because the light of the sun is preventing us from seeing them.

For many of us, this has been a year of suffering losses. Some of us have lost beloved friends and family. For some, they have been financial losses, losses of personal time,

personal space, and often, a sense of purpose. For many of us, it seems that we have lost our very selves.

This Shabbat, may we remind ourselves and each other that despite these losses, our stardom has never ceased to exist. That at our core, we are beings of eternal light, whether by night or by day, just as the stars shine their light unnoticed in the daytime. That, just like Bnei Yisrael, God calls us individually by name, daily, bringing us in, taking us out, reminding us that each and every one of us counts.



Rabbanit Yael Smooha came to Maharat after nearly two decades of teaching in both Jewish Day Schools and NYC public schools, and receiving an MA in Childhood Education from Teachers College, Columbia University. Yael's passion for deepening Jewish spirituality drives her to facilitate meaningful connections among her students through personal reflection, discussion, and artistic expression, as Director of the Jspace Family Hebrew School program at the Bayit, as intern at the Mt. Freedom Jewish Center in Randolph, NJ, and currently as a middle school educator at Kinneret Day School in Riverdale, NY.