

The Question

As I mentioned in an email a little over a week ago, I've heard people voice concern about visiting Israel now. Not due to fear of the war, but due to fear that Israelis might resent people coming from the US at this time, that we might be seen as unwelcome tourists.

In that email I included a response from my friend Rabbi David Fine, encouraging all of us to come to Israel. But now I want to share a response I noticed this week, in our parshah.

The Interruption?

Word comes back to Canaan – Yosef is still alive! Yaakov mobilizes to go see him. He arrives in Beer Sheva, where Hashem tells him he is going to die in Egypt. Nonetheless, Yaakov decamps from Beer Sheva for Egypt. He gathers his belongings and family, and after the twenty-two years of twists and turns of Parshiyot Vayeshev and Mikeitz we're about to witness the great reunion of Yaakov and Yosef! It's exciting! –

- And then we get a twenty-sentence list of the names of seventy members of Yaakov's family. Frankly, it's like reading the phone book. The story comes to a halt. It's an LIRR train rolling into a crossing when I need to get somewhere, car after car slowly trundling down the tracks while I'm seething because I have a place to be.

What is this for? Why is the Torah holding me back from seeing Yosef throw himself on his father's neck and cry? Is it meant to build suspense? Do I really need to scroll through seventy names here, right at the good part?

The poem?

In truth, this list of names is not unique. Tanach records many such lists.

- Some are in Chumash, like the censuses toward the beginning and end of Sefer Bamidbar.
- Some are in Navi, like the list of 31 Canaanite kings in the middle of Sefer Yehoshua, and the roster of Shlomo haMelech's bureaucrats in Melachim I.
- Some are in Ketuvim, like the ten sons of Haman, and the lists of Jews who returned from Bavel in Ezra and Nechemiah.

Rabbi Elhanan Samet of Yeshivat Har Etzion¹ suggests that these lists of names share a common purpose. They are not simply census records, or scribal penmanship exercises. He says they are meant as poetry, “recorded in Tanakh specifically for the purpose of introducing a more celebratory and elevated note into the ‘routine’ biblical story...”

This is a beautiful idea, and I can see it for many of the lists I just referenced –

- The lists of Jews in Bamidbar record censuses that demonstrate Hashem's love for us;
- The 31 Canaanite kings in Yehoshua reflect Hashem's miraculous support for us in defeating our enemies; likewise the ten sons of Haman;
- The roster of Shlomo's officials displays the governing acumen Hashem bestowed upon him;²
- The record of returning Jewish families in Ezra and Nechemiah highlights our national return to our land!

But then I arrive at our parshah and I am confused: what are we celebrating with these 70 names when we descend to Egypt? The division among the brothers that resulted in selling Yosef? The impending doom of a generation of Jews who will be born, struggle and perish in Egyptian slavery? Hooray, let's celebrate?

But upon further review, I realize that yes, this list is poetry. It is celebration. Our list celebrates three things: Past, Future, and Present.

Past

First, this namelist celebrates the past; it is a valedictory poem for successful completion of an ancient mission, after a period when that success was in serious peril.

¹ <https://etzion.org.il/en/tanakh/torah/sefer-bereishit/parashat-vayigash/vayigash-seventy-souls>

² This is consistent with Abarbanel to Melachim I 4:2-3

As Rabbi Samet notes, recent parshiyot saw Yaakov nearly lose both Yehudah and Yosef, the greatest pillars of the future Jewish people.

- When Yehudah's sons Er and Onan died, there was danger for his line.
- Yosef disappeared, apparently killed.
- And not only Yosef and Yehudah - we can add that Shimon was held in Egypt, and Binyamin was in a precarious position as well.

But now, the family is reunited, seventy souls! This list is a song of praise for Hashem, as all of Yaakov's sons are together, part of the family.

To write that success larger:

- This moment also completes the ancient arc that began when Avraham and Sarah arrived in Canaan without children, with no great wealth, with no reputation; now they have four generations, wealth, and a descendant who is viceroy of Egypt.
- In the beginning they set out as a small clan *כנען ויבואו ארצה כנען*. Now Yehudah leads a large and important family *להורות לפניו גושנה ויבואו ארצה גושן*.

We celebrate past success with a poem spelling out this monumental achievement.

Future

Second, this list of names is forward-thinking, celebrating the future – the vision of these seventy people as the seed for a nation that *פרו וישרצו וירבו ויעצמו במאד מאד*, that will bear fruit and multiply incredibly. As the Chizkuni said, “It enumerated them in order to speak of the wonders of Hashem; they descended to Egypt with seventy souls, and in a short time they became more than 600,000.³” And of course, 600,000 is only the men of military age.

Moshe would make this same point toward the end of the Torah, declaring, *בשבועים נפש ירדו אבותיך למצרים*, Your ancestors descended to Egypt as 70 souls, *ועתה שמך ד' אלקיך ככוכבי השמים לרוב*, now Hashem has made you like the stars in the heavens, in your multitudes. So here we mark the 70, and celebrate the growth we know is coming.

Present

But beyond a successful past and a miraculous future, I think this list also celebrates the present, Yaakov's position as he journeys from Beer Sheva to Egypt, his third international trek.

- Yaakov's passport was first stamped in Parshat Vayetze, when he fled from Esav alone, poor, vulnerable and scared. *במקלי עברתי את הירדן הזה*, Yaakov had no allies, only his walking stick.
- Yaakov's passport was stamped again in Parshat Vayishlach, when he returned to Israel with wealth and a family. Much better! But despite everything he owned, despite all of those children, *ויותר יעקב לבדו*, Yaakov crossed the Yabok alone at night, and fought a malach alone. Indeed, Rabbi Yehudah heChasid says that the prohibition against eating the *gid hanasheh* was accepted spontaneously by Yaakov's sons out of guilt for abandoning their father.⁴
- Now Yaakov embarks upon his third trip – but this time he is accompanied by his entire family. More, they carry him. The pasuk⁵ introduces the list by saying *ועקב יעקב*, “And Yaakov stood,” but then it says *וישאו בני ישראל את יעקב אביהם* – The children of Yisrael carried their father Yaakov.

Finally, at last, Yaakov is supported by his family, and so we enumerate the seventy names to celebrate this moment.

Being the Seventy

Rabbi Samet is correct; the namelist in our parshah is not a stall tactic to extend the parshah a little longer or build drama for Yaakov's meeting with Yosef. It is poetry, it is exultation.

- It is, “Appreciate all that we have overcome to arrive here, we made it!” “Appreciate that the mission of Avraham and Sarah succeeded!”
- It is, “Admire the seed of all that will sprout in the future!”
- And perhaps most of all, it is, “Celebrate the support that Yaakov has finally found in this moment.”

³ Chizkuni to Bereishit 46:8. And see Abarbanel to Bereishit 45 as well.

⁴ Sefer Chasidim 231

⁵ Bereishit 46:5

To return to my opening question, about visiting Israel – today is our opportunity to join that list of names and provide that support. Today is our opportunity to be the 70. Today is our opportunity to escort Yaakov, and to lift up and carry Yaakov.

Ideally, carrying Yaakov means going to Israel. For those who cannot visit at this time, it means continuing what we have been doing – finding ways to volunteer from afar, with donations of money and supplies; with Tehillim and mitzvot for the sake of the IDF, Israel's emergency services, the hostages and the injured; staying in touch with our family and friends in Israel to ensure that they feel our presence; lobbying Congress and the White House; taking a stand on social media and in the public square. We are the 70, and we are a list to celebrate.

Carrying and Being Carried

But let's be clear – when we carry Yaakov, the celebration is not because Yaakov needs us to carry him. Like on Yaakov's first two trips, Hashem will carry Yaakov as needed. But when we carry Yaakov, we become who we are supposed to be, we earn our title of Bnei Yisrael. That's why we celebrate with that list of names.

A midrash records the words of Rabbi Eliezer:⁶ “What did Yaakov's children really accomplish here? They had wagons! But to ensure Yaakov would not be in any pain, the sons of Yaakov made themselves into three groups, and they carried Yaakov in their arms, swapping in and out as each one tired. וישאו, they carried him in their own arms.”

Let us carry Yaakov as well, ideally in person but if not then from afar for now, and so may we merit to see what comes next in the parshah, after the namelist – ותחי רוּחַ יַעֲקֹב אֲבֵיהֶם – the spirit of Yaakov will live again.

⁶ Midrash HaGadol to Bereishit 46:5