

ARMED BY ORPHANS

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The Bnei Yisrael were chamushim/armed when they went up from Egypt.

Be'er Yosef: The Targumim offer different understandings of the word chamushim. Targum Yonoson sees it related to the word chamishah/ five. Each adult male left with five children in tow. Targum Yerushalmi opts for the conventional, simple translation of the word: armed. But it argues that it was with mitzvos that the Bnei Yisrael were armed!

Both of these approaches are puzzling. Let's look at the Targum Yonoson first. The six hundred thousand males who left Egypt ranged in age over a forty year span - from twenty to sixty. Does it make sense that despite the great disparity in age, each of them had exactly five children in his family - no more, no less?

Targum Yerushalmi is equally mystifying. When and where did they manage to accrue a surfeit of mitzvos? We speak of them in the Haggadah as being naked, bereft of the merit of any mitzvos. For that reason, Hashem had to jump-start their mitzvah collection by giving them two mitzvos - milah and the korban Pesach - just prior to the Exodus so that they would have sufficient mitzvah capital to be redeemed! How did they do a mitzvah rags-to-riches transformation in the space of a single day?

We can shed some light on these Targumim with the help of yet another approach to the word chamushim. The Mechilta (cited by Rashi) also relates the word to the number five. The Bnei Yisrael who left Egypt amounted to only one in five of those who could have left. Four-fifths did not wish to leave. They died during the three days of intense darkness in the penultimate plague.

Now, there is no reason to believe that anyone died other than those who refused Moshe's offer to head out to the wilderness. The children of all those evildoers were guiltless. The numbers were staggering. Four fifths of the Jewish children had been recently orphaned! What became of those children?

It was Hashem's will that not a single Jew remain alive in Egypt. That is why the evildoers had to die during the plague of darkness. The burden of the recently-orphaned children fell upon the one-fifth of the Bnei Yisrael who were faithful to Hashem. Every person reached out and took responsibility for the children of four other families. Together with his own natural children, it could be stated (and this is what Targum Yonoson means) that every man took with him five (groups of) children - one group of his own, and four more groups, each one composed of the survivors of someone who had

elected not to leave, and therefore had died.

The Targumim help illuminate the Mechilta. If our pasuk means to let us know that only a fraction of the Jews of Egypt left, why would the Torah join this fact to the description of the circuitous route that the Bnei Yisrael took heading out of the country? A more appropriate place would have been in Parshas Bo, where the Torah gave the number of those who left.² The Torah should have told us that the 600,000 did not include the greater number who died during the plague of darkness.

The explanation, however, is as follows. People who go on a day-trip, a leisurely family outing, will sometimes take an orphan along with them when their compassion is moved. Embarking on an arduous journey to an unknown destination, however, they will not include a stranger. They see themselves as overly burdened with the needs of their own families, and unable to deal with additional needs and problems.

The Torah waited until this point to allude to the great number of deaths during the plague of darkness in order to showcase the compassion and the greatness of the Bnei Yisrael. It is only here that the Torah speaks of the projected route of travel. The plans called for the people to skip the main highway, and struggle through a hostile wilderness. This did not look like the kind of outing to which people invited strangers, even if well-deserving! The Torah wishes to make a point about the righteousness of the Bnei Yisrael, whose compassion knew no bounds. All of them took charge of the orphaned children.

Looking back at the three approaches to our pasuk, we can say that they are all intertwined. Four-fifths of the Bnei Yisrael died. They left behind a huge number of orphans. They were adopted by those who left Egypt, so that each family exited with their own children, plus four other groups of children. The merit of all of this chesed was the secret weapon with which the Bnei Yisrael armed themselves to prepare for the coming battles. Thus, all the approaches are complementary, and come together.

Sources:

1. Based on Be'er Yosef, Shemos 13:18
 2. Shemos 12:37
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