

COUNT US IF YOU CAN

by Rabbi Mordechai Kamenetzky

In this week's portion, Hashem challenges his loyal follower Avram to a most difficult task.

*"He took him outside and said, 'Gaze up at the heavens and count the stars if you able to.'
Then G-d said, 'thus shall be your children'" (Genesis 15:5).*

Hashem says count the stars if you can, and then concludes that thus shall be your children. What is thus referring to? If it is a reference to the amount of stars, then why did Hashem tell Avram to attempt to count them? Surely they both knew it was an impossible task for a mortal being. In addition, from the sentence structure it would appear that the word thus may actually refer to the impossible attempt to count the stars?

Many people assume that Hashem assured Avram that his children will be as numerous as the stars, but those words were never spoken. After all, there may be more stars in heaven than people on earth!

Perhaps then, it is not the actual number of stars that personify the Jews but the attempt to count and understand them. The constant curiosity and mystery that surround the galaxies are the metaphor for the Chosen People.

Rabbi Yosef Weiss, in his recently published work *Visions of Greatness*, tells the story of one Sam Goldish, an observant Jew who lives in Tulsa, Oklahoma and works for the United States Department of Defense.

Working on a major government contract, Sam was involved in a major project that needed constant defense department scrutiny. Huddled with a dozen co-workers examining structural modifications for a tank, one worker mentioned that there was a string hanging from Sam's pants. He offered to remove it, and Sam, eyes fixed on the schematics, nodded his approval. What happened next was more significant. The co-worker tugged innocently at the string and it did not yield. In fact, seven other strings followed. Sam's tzitzit were revealed. The startled workers gasped. They had never seen that sort of sartorial ornament.

For the next hour, a debate among a dozen gentile workers ensued - in the heart of the Christian Bible belt - all about whether or not Jews must wear fringes. Each worker claimed to be an authority on Jews, each said they knew the religion and were well versed in its customs -- yet no one had

heard of tzitzit! They refused to return to the meeting until Sam showed them, in a King James edition of the Bible, that one of the workers had on hand, exactly where in the Bible it stated that Jews are to wear fringes on the corners of their garments.

The fascination with the little strings far surpassed their interest in the army's latest tanks.

Perhaps Mark Twain asked it best:

"If the statistics are right, the Jews constitute but one percent of the human race. It suggests a nebulous dim puff of stardust lost in the blaze of the Milky Way. Properly the Jew ought hardly to be heard of; but he is heard of, has always been heard of. He is as prominent on the planet as any other people, and his commercial importance is extravagantly out of proportion to the smallness of his bulk. His contributions to the world's list of great names in literature, science, art, music, finance, medicine, and abstruse learning are also away out of proportion to the weakness of his numbers. He has made a marvelous fight in this world, in all the ages; and has done it with his hands tied behind him. He could be vain of himself, and be excused for it. The Egyptian, the Babylonian, and the Persian rose, filled the planet with sound and splendor, then faded to dream-stuff and passed away; the Greek and the Roman followed, and made a vast noise, and they are gone; other peoples have sprung up and held their torch high for a time, but it burned out, and they sit in twilight now, or have vanished. The Jew saw them all, beat them all, and is now what he always was, exhibiting no decadence, no infirmities of age, no weakening of his parts, no slowing of his energies, no dulling of his alert and aggressive mind. All things are mortal but the Jew; all other forces pass, but he remains. What is the secret of his immortality?"

G-d assures Avram that the interest in his kin will rival man's fixation with the starry worlds that he will never reach. The intrigue that surrounds the Jew is inversely proportional to the space he fills in the universe. No matter how tiny the glow of Judaism may seem, civilizations study it, societies try to imitate it, and mystified as they are, some nations try to destroy it.

The proverbial Hubble telescopes of the gentile world will be just as fascinated, fixated, and constantly occupied in utter mystery of the immortal and indestructible lights that twinkle past the dark clouds of civilization - the Jew. And though those gentile observers may never discover the answer to our immortality, nor understand the reason of or resilience, one thing they will surely understand - we shine.

Good Shabbos!

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