

## **THE LEAST AND THE GREATEST OF NATIONS**

by Rabbi David Algaze

*“For the L-rd your G-d has chosen you to be for Him a treasured people above all the peoples that are on the face of the earth. Not because you are more numerous than all the peoples did Hashem desire you and choose you, for you are the least of all the peoples.” (Devarim 7:6-7)*

The Sefat Emet points to an apparent redundancy in this verse. Of course, if we are the fewest of the nations, it is unnecessary to say that G-d did not choose because we are the most numerous. Furthermore, elsewhere the Torah calls Israel a “great nation.” (ib. 4:7).

The Rabbis explain that the term “least of nations” alludes not to the small number of Jews in the world but rather to the Jewish people’s capacity for reducing themselves before G-d. This is the meaning of the word, “the least”, not the fewest but rather the one who is able to “lessen” himself and become subservient to the will of G-d and does not aggrandize himself before his Creator. This gift of being able to be humble and accept the yoke of Heaven upon itself is the defining characteristic of the people of Israel.

Thus, while Israel may be small in quantity, it is great in quality. By minimizing themselves before the L-rd, they acquire greatness. Their greatness is derived from their association to greatness. As a field increases in value by its connectedness to a source of water, so does the connection of a Jew to his Maker increase one’s abilities, sensitivity and spirituality. In this fashion, while one is acting in a manner that restrains and constricts one’s powers, in reality one becomes enlarged and exalted by his association with a Universal Greatness represented by G-d. On a practical level, we can see how Israel occupies such a large role on the world scene despite their meager numbers. Additionally, Jews are represented in the sciences and other activities far more than their numbers would justify.

An instance of this phenomenon occurs in the observance of the Shabbat. The mitzvah appears in the fourth of the Ten Commandments. In the parasha of Yitro in the book of Shemot it says, “Remember (Zakhor) the day of the Shabbat to sanctify it” (Shemot 20:8) referring to the positive commandments associated with the Shabbat. In our parasha it says, “Guard (Shamor) the day of the Shabbat... and you shall remember that you were a servant in the land of Egypt and Hashem your G-d brought you out from there...”(Devarim 5:15). The latter version of the commandment refers to the prohibitions and abstentions that we must observe on the Shabbat. Rav Moshe Feinstein wonders why is it that it is the abstentions and the things we are not allowed to do that are associated with our servitude. Surely, doing

a positive act would also connote being subservient to a higher authority.

Rav Feinstein explains that many people may do things for others out of kindness or for proper behavior. Therefore, doing a positive act does not denote subservience. However, abstaining from doing an act just because someone else does not want it done implies obedience and subservience. More than doing certain acts or rituals, the abstaining from certain activities demonstrates a higher degree of the acceptance of a Higher authority.

Moshe Rabbenu entreated Hashem to allow him to enter the Land of Israel by using the argument that he wanted merely to be able to observe G-d’s commandments that are associated with the produce of the land of Israel. Yet, Hashem retorted that it was His will that Moshe do not enter the Land. By accepting this painful decision, Moshe Rabbenu elevated his obedience to G-d to an even higher level. In Jewish life, we are often reminded of our servitude to the A-mighty in a myriad of commandments that do not prescribe for us what to do but rather direct us as to what we may not do. Of the 613 commandments in the Torah, the majority of them, 365, are the negative commandments. This is a clear lesson that G-d expects that our greatness be displayed not in what we do but rather in our ability to refrain from doing and curb our initiative out of respect to His will. In this fashion, while we act in a lesser manner, diminishing ourselves in a way, we become related to His grandeur and we become more exalted in the process.

A certain woman came home one Friday afternoon too late to light the candles and she became very depressed. As she confessed her pain to her rabbi, she began to understand that her observing the laws of Shabbat and refraining from lighting the candles, she was actually honoring the Sabbath even more. Many imagine that Judaism involves certain rituals and ceremonies and that by following them they become associated with Jewish traditions. They ignore, however, the numerous laws that prevent them from engaging in certain activities, eating certain foods and so on. Judaism is not a religion of rituals, it is a religion of obedience and submission to the Will of the Creator and this entails much more respecting the prohibitions than acting out ceremonies and rituals.

This is the greatness of Israel: more than any other nation, they obey their Creator and submit their will to His will. As it says in Pirke Avot (chapter 2):”Do His will as if it were your will.” In this movement of acceptance and acknowledgement that there is something greater than our wills and desires, recognizing that there is something that transcends even our reason and logic, we become connected to something higher. Our “diminution” becomes the fountain of our greatness.