

## Sh'lach lecha: Transforming the bitter into sweet

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The Minyan is without a doubt one of the more beautiful institutions of the Jewish tradition. Translated as “count” or “quorum”, it refers to the group of people required for the most important prayers of our Tefillah, as well as for the reading of the Torah. The Minyan transmits us the message that it is important to gather together in community in order to appropriately address God. Even for those who find themselves removed from prayer as a daily practice, the Minyan continues to be relevant by reminding them at the most meaningful times of their lives, in joys and sorrows both, that Jews always need their community.

The origin of the Minyan can be found in Parashat Shelach Lecha. The story is well known: in preparation for the conquest Moses sends twelve men to scout the land of Canaan. Out of this twelve, ten return with a negative and woeful report which discourages the people from fighting and inheriting the land. On the other hand only two of the explorers, Caleb and Joshua, return with a message of optimism: Although the mission will not be bereft of challenges, it is certainly worthy of risk and devotion. But despite the efforts of these two men, the people let themselves be carried away by their fears, and the mission of inheriting the Promised Land seems destined to fail. The consequence: God decides that this generation must die in the wilderness, and only the next one will have a new chance.

But what does the story of the twelve spies have to do with the Minyan? Using a method of traditional interpretation known as G'zerah shavah (equivalence of expressions), the sages compared a verse in our parashah with other two verses (one from the book of Vayikra and another that also appears in the book of Bamidvar), concluding that the minimum number in order to establish a “congregation” corresponded to the group of ten scouts who caused the catastrophe of that generation:

1. When referring to the group of ten scouts in our parashah, God says: “How much longer shall that wicked **congregation** keep muttering against Me?” (Bamidvar 14:27).
2. In the episode of Korah’s tragic revolt against Moses’ leadership, God says

something similar advising the people to remove themselves from the group of rebels: “Stand back from **the midst** of this **congregation**...!” (Bemidvar 16:21).

3. Finally, the rabbis compared these two verses with a third one that appears in Vayikra: “I may be sanctified in **the midst** of the Israelite people” (Vayikra 22:32).

By logically relating “congregation” with “sanctified”, and under the understanding that in the context of the twelve scouts “congregation” is equivalent to a group of ten, the rabbis determined that in order to sanctify God in prayer, a number of no less than ten people was required (the Minyan).

This is an interesting logical analysis; however, I wouldn't like it to be restricted to just the strictly legal, so that we may draw some teaching for our life.

It always stroke me that from two events of such a dark and tragic nature in our history (the twelve spies and Korah's revolt), our rabbis were able to learn something as valuable as the Minyan, which emphasizes the importance of our gathering together in community to pray and sanctify God. How can it be that from two stories of internal rivalries and divisions, the rabbis could rescue such a message of unity and equality, expressed every day in the Minyan?

I believe we can find the answer in the heart of Jewish history itself: as of ancient times, overcoming has been part of the DNA of the Jewish people. We learned to transform the bitter into sweet and the profane into sacred. From the slavery in Egypt we moved on to receive the Torah. Later on, we were exiled from our land and our holy city was destroyed, but even in the sadness of the Diaspora, our people developed their creativity, writing the fundamental works that inspire us to this day. Centuries later we were expelled from Spain, but we arrived in Israel and our people were reborn in Tzfat in the 16th century. We suffered the horrors of the Shoah, but with that same inexhaustible spirit of overcoming, we were able to reestablish the State of Israel.

Each generation of our people faces the same challenge: to take on its failures and tragedies as an opportunity for personal growth and the growth of its entire population. The success and transcendence of a mission can only be gained after several falls and after reflecting on what we can do about them. May God then grant us that, before each challenge that our people will have to face in the future,

we know how to transform the bitter into sweet and, thus, continue to be the keepers of that overcoming spirit. Only in this manner will we fulfill our historical aspirations: to be a holy people and a light for the nations.

Shabbat Shalom!

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