

Parshas Lech Lecha - The Stars

Hashem took him (אברהם) outside and said, “Look toward Heaven and count the stars, if you are able to count them”—continuing, “So shall your offspring be.”

וַיֵּצֵא אֹתוֹ הַחוּצָה וַיֹּאמֶר הִבְטֵנָּה הַשָּׁמַיִמָּה
וּסְפֹר הַכּוֹכָבִים אִם-תּוּכַל לִסְפֹּר אֹתָם וַיֹּאמֶר לוֹ
כֹּה יִהְיֶה זַרְעֲךָ: (בראשית, פרק טו פסוק ה)

Your ‘ה has multiplied you until you are today as numerous as the stars in the sky.

ה' אֱלֹקֵיכֶם הִרְבָּה אֶתְכֶם וְהִנֵּכֶם הַיּוֹם כְּכּוֹכָבִי
הַשָּׁמַיִם לְרֹב: (דברים א, י)

Instructions For Teaching This Lesson:

Present to your class the comparison of כלל ישראל to the stars:

Step 1:

Explain to the students that the number of stars in the universe were assumed to be a small number. The גמרא demonstrated the true number of stars. Show the students how in the mid 1900s, science finally came to the knowledge of the same vast number of stars that the גמרא talks about.

Step 2:

Discuss with the students רש"י's explanation on how we are compared to the stars. We are eternal just like the stars.

Step 3:

Show the students how each Jew is like a star. They may seem small from a distance, but there is greatness to be seen if we look closer.

Step 4:

Show the Divine Fingerprints video. <https://weteachtoreach.com/the-number-of-stars/>

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The גמרא calculates the number of stars:

ברכות לב:

אָמַר לָהּ הַקָּדוֹשׁ בְּרוּךְ הוּא: בְּתִי, שְׁנַיִם עָשָׂר מִזְלוֹת בְּרָאֲתִי בְּרָקִיעַ, וְעַל כָּל מִזֶּל וּמִזֶּל בְּרָאֲתִי לוֹ שְׁלֹשִׁים חֵיל, וְעַל כָּל חֵיל וְחֵיל בְּרָאֲתִי לוֹ שְׁלֹשִׁים לִגִּיוֹן, וְעַל כָּל לִגִּיוֹן וְלִגִּיוֹן בְּרָאֲתִי לוֹ שְׁלֹשִׁים רֶהָטוֹן, וְעַל כָּל רֶהָטוֹן וְרֶהָטוֹן בְּרָאֲתִי לוֹ שְׁלֹשִׁים קָרְטוֹן, וְעַל כָּל קָרְטוֹן וְקָרְטוֹן בְּרָאֲתִי לוֹ שְׁלֹשִׁים גְּסָטְרָא, וְעַל כָּל גְּסָטְרָא וְגְסָטְרָא תְּלִיתִי בּוֹ שְׁלֹשׁ מֵאוֹת וְשָׁשִׁים וְחֲמִשָּׁה אֲלִפֵּי רַבּוּא כּוֹכָבִים כְּנֶגֶד יְמוֹת הַחֲמָה.

Hashem structured the universe like an army:

I created twelve constellations in the firmament,
and for each and every constellation I have created thirty hosts,
and for each and every host I have created thirty legions,
and for each and every legion I have created thirty divisions,
and for each and every division I have created thirty battalions,
and for each and every battalions I have created thirty camps,
and on each and every camp I have hung three hundred and sixty-five thousand
tens of thousands of stars

Calculate:

$1000 \times 10,000 \text{ stars} = 10,000,000$

Each camp has $365 \times 10,000,000 \text{ stars} = 3,650,000,000$

How many camps are there? $30 \text{ camps} \times 30 \text{ battalions} \times 30 \text{ divisions} \times 30$
legions $\times 30 \text{ hosts} \times 12 \text{ constellations}$

$= 291,600,000 \text{ camps}$

Total stars $= 291,600,000 \times 3,650,000,000 = 1,064,340,000,000,000,000$

Hashem promised אברהם that we would be as many as the stars in the sky. We see from the גמרא in ברכות that there are trillions and trillions of stars.

Interestingly, while well-known to תורה learners for years, this idea is relatively new to science and the secular world.

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Before the era of telescopes man looked to the sky and explored the stars with the human eye. In Ancient times, most people believed that there was a small number of stars, only the ones visible to the human eye. There are references in the Torah, however, to a very large number of stars, most notably in the פסוקים where Hashem promises Avraham that his children will be numerous like the stars in the heavens. In the גמרא ברכות, the number of stars is calculated to the figure 1.06×10^{18} .

Until 1925, astronomers believed that there were a limited amount of stars, as they didn't know of anything beyond our galaxy. They thought that the Milky Way galaxy was the entire universe. In 1925 science revised its thinking based on Einstein's theories, to a vastly larger figure than previously believed, larger than 10^{18} stars. That is nearly the same number as that in the גמרא! Today the closest estimate that scientists have is 10^{22} , which is an admittedly rough estimation. Scientists do concur, however, that there is a finite number of stars in the order of many, many billions. The number of stars in the גמרא falls within the margin of error of today's calculations (close enough to scientifically be considered correct)

Science is slowly catching up to the גמרא!.... And the Talmud was written almost 1600 years ago...

דברים א, י

ה' אֱלֹקֵיכֶם הֵרְבָּה אֶתְכֶם וְהִנֵּנֶם הַיּוֹם כְּכֹכְבֵי הַשָּׁמַיִם לְרֹב:

Your 'ה has multiplied you until you are today as numerous as the stars in the sky.

רש"י asks how this can be true if the number of the stars are so great and כלל ישראל were only 600,000 at that time.

It's interesting to notice that although the general consensus of the world in רש"י's time was that there were about 1,000 stars, the Jews always knew the true number of stars.

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רש"י: והנכם היום ככוכבי השמים. וכי ככוכבי השמים היו באותו היום, והלא לא היו אלא שששים רבוא, מהו והנכם היום? הנכם משולים כיום – קיימים לעולם כחמה וכלבנה וככוכבים (עי' ספרי):

Were they equal to the number of stars on that day? Were they not, indeed, only 600,000? What, then, is the meaning of "And, behold, you are this day"? It means: Behold you may be compared to the day (the sun), existing forever just as the sun and the moon and the stars.

We are compared to the stars because we are eternal and lasting forever. Nations come and go, countries rise and fall, but we remain forever. This is despite the fact that the nations constantly try to destroy us (as we see today) and despite the fact that we have been in גלות for so long.

סידור יעב"ץ (רב יעקב עמדין)

ואין אומה בעולם נרדפת כמונו מה רבים היו צרינו... הקמים עלינו... להשמידנו... גם לא יכלו לנו לאבדנו ולכלותינו כל האומות הקדומות העצומות אבד זכרם בטל סברם סר צלם ואנו הדבקים בה' כולנו חיים היום.... חי נפשי כי בהתבונני בנפלאות אלה גדלו אצלי יותר מכל נסים ונפלאות שעשה הש"ת לאבותינו במצרים ובמדבר ובא"י

There is no nation in the world that is oppressed like us... yet, they could not destroy us. All the previous strong empires are forgotten, but we who keep the תורה REMAIN ALIVE TODAY. I swear by my life! When I contemplated these wonders, they appeared greater to me than all the miracles and wonders that ה' performed for our forefathers in Egypt, and the wilderness, and the Land of Israel.

According to Rav Yaakov Emden, the greatest miracle in the world is the survival of the Jewish people against all odds.

Parshas Lech Lecha - The Stars

The Eternity of the Jews is such a well established fact that even the ד"ר have to acknowledge it:

In the mid-nineties, a Jewish advertising executive wondered: what if the New York Times – the “Paper of Record” – printed the Shabbos candle lighting time each week? Imagine the Jewish awareness and pride that might result from such a prominent mention of Shabbos each week. He contacted a Jewish philanthropist and sold him on the idea. It cost nearly two thousand dollars a week but he agreed to fund it. For the next five years, every Friday, Jews around the world would see ‘Jewish Women: Shabbat candle lighting time this Friday is _____’

Eventually the philanthropist had to reduce the number of projects he had been funding. And, so, in June 1999, the little Shabbos candle lighting notice made its last appearance in the New York Times. At least that’s what people thought.

On January 1, 2000, the NY Times ran a Millennium edition commemorating the paper’s 100th anniversary. It was a special issue that featured three front pages. One contained the news from January 1, 1900. The second contained the actual news of the day, January 1, 2000. And the third front page, featured projected headlines of January 1, 2100. It included such stories as a welcome to the fifty-first state, Cuba, and a debate over the issue of whether robots should be allowed to vote. And so on. And, in addition to the creative articles, there was one extra piece. Down on the bottom of the Year 2100 front page, was the candle lighting time in New York for January 1, 2100. Nobody asked for it. Nobody paid for it. It was just put in by the Times. The production manager of the New York Times – an Irish Catholic – was asked about this curious entry. His answer speaks to the eternity of our people and to the power of Jewish ritual. “We don’t know what will happen in the year 2100. It is impossible to predict the future. But of one thing you can be certain - That in the year 2100 Jewish women will be lighting Shabbos candles.”

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Parshas Lech Lecha - The Stars

The Baal Shem Tov gives another insight into how the descendants of אברהם are like stars. When we see the stars from a great distance, they appear to be mere tiny specks, but in reality in the Heaven they are gigantic. So, too, in this world many people look very small. But in reality they have greatness. Every Jew has a special נשמה given to them from Hashem. Every Jew has the potential to do great things. Every Jew has greatness inside of him. We often don't see it, but sometimes we can get a glimpse into the greatness of a simple Jew.

The Tanna Rebbi Yehoshua ben Alam was once told in a dream, "Rejoice, because you and Nanas the butcher will sit together in Gan Eden." Rebbi Yehoshua woke up alarmed. He was wondering: "Woe is me! My entire life I have always been in a state of יראת שמים, I have toiled only in Torah, never walked four אמות without תפילין or ציצית, and have eighty תלמידים. Yet all of my accomplishments are only equal to those of this simple butcher?!" He promptly sent a message to his תלמידים that he would not enter the בית מדרש until he ascertained who this butcher was. He trudged from village to village asking about Nanas the butcher until he finally arrived in his town. The townsmen were surprised that the tzaddik was interested in this ordinary individual. They set out to bring him, nevertheless, but he refused to come, not believing that the great sage was really asking to meet him. Therefore, Rebbi Yehoshua went himself to visit the butcher. When he arrived at the butcher shop, the butcher fell on his face and exclaimed, "Why is today so special that the Crown of Yisrael has come to visit his servant?" Rebbi Yehoshua told him that he wanted to hear about his conduct. The man replied, "My master! I work as a butcher, but I have two elderly parents who cannot walk themselves, so every day I dress them, feed them and wash them myself." Hearing this, Rebbi Yehoshua kissed his forehead and said, "My son! Fortunate are you and fortunate is your lot! And how fortunate is my lot that I have been found worthy of being your partner in Gan Eden!" (סדר הדורות ספר תנאים ואמוראים)

Wow! The greatness of a yid shining though!

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There is a famous story called "The Miser of Krakow," which takes place in 17th century Poland:

The richest Jew in Krakow was known to be a miser. Whenever someone would be in dire straits and in need of money, they would go to the miser's house crying, asking for money. But he never gave even a penny. This pattern repeated itself for many years.

When the miser died, he was buried in a small corner of the cemetery, a place reserved for shady characters.

When Friday came along, something strange happened. Early in the morning a poor man came knocking at the rabbi's door. "Every Friday I receive an unmarked envelope in my mailbox, containing enough money to buy food for Shabbat," the man explained. "But this week, nothing arrived." The rabbi gave the man a bit of money and sent him on his way.

A few minutes later, another man came knocking on the rabbi's door. Same story. Again and again, one by one, all the poor people of the town came with the same story: This week, their anonymous envelope did not arrive – for the first time in years.

Finally, the rabbi realized who had been secretly supporting the entire town all these years. The miser never told anyone about his philanthropy because he didn't want anyone to feel like they owed him anything.

The rabbi instructed his family that when he dies, he wants to be buried right next to the holy miser of Krakow. Until today, a visit to the old Krakow cemetery shows the rabbi and the miser, buried together in a small corner of the cemetery.

Wow! The greatness of a yid shining though!