

“Star Struck”

In his first comment on Parshas Shemos, Rashi writes that although Hashem had already counted the Jews who descended to Egypt by name during their lifetimes, He did so again after they died to make known how much He loves the Jewish people, who are compared to stars that are also brought in and out by name and number. While this comparison is intended to be complimentary, Rav Aharon Leib Shteinman z”l questions what in fact is so praiseworthy about being likened to stars. If Rashi had written that we are as numerous as the stars, that would indeed be admirable, but what is so special and praiseworthy about being compared to stars? Further, what is the significance of individual stars having names, and how is this relevant to us?

Rav Aharon Leib explains that the purpose of names is to differentiate between objects. Therefore, we do not give names to items unless they are unique; when things are identical, we do not use names to distinguish between them. For example, if a person has 20 cans of Coke in front of him, they all have the same name, as there is no difference between one can of Coke and the can next to it. However, if a person has 20 different flavors of soda in front of him, then he will call one Coke, one Sprite, one diet, etc., because names are used to differentiate between items.

With this insight, we now understand that if Hashem gives names to the stars, it must be because no two stars are identical, and each star has its own unique purpose. Rav Yisroel Reisman notes that the Gemora (Berachos 59a) teaches that when Hashem wanted to bring the flood to punish Noach’s generation, He did so by removing two stars from the tail of the mazal called Kimah, and the absence of those two stars somehow set the flood and its destruction in motion. Although all stars look identical to us and we are incapable of discerning the differences between them, the fact that each has its own name teaches us that each has its own unique purpose.

Similarly, when one looks around at other Jews, especially if he lives in a sizeable community, it is easy to think that we are all the same. Although we recognize that people have their own likes and dislikes and idiosyncrasies, as far as our underlying role in the world, it sometimes feels like we all have the same job and are all doing the same thing. Rashi teaches us that this perspective is mistaken. Just like the stars, we each have our own names, because we each have our own unique mission in this world, and we should not compare ourselves to anybody else. Rav Tzaddok beautifully writes that just as there is a mitzvah to have emunah (faith) in Hashem, so too a person must also have emunah in himself and believe that he has a unique function and inimitable relationship with Hashem.

In Parshas Vayechi, when Yaakov blessed his grandsons Ephraim and Menashe, he crossed his hands in order to place his stronger right hand on the younger Ephraim and his weaker left hand on the older Menashe (Bereishis 48:14). Many commentators question why Yaakov didn’t simply switch their positions so that he could extend his hands straight across from him. Rav Reisman suggests that Yaakov was hinting to us that rather than trying to change a child to fit our needs, we must instead adapt ourselves to deal with the child as he is. Every child has his own name and mission, with his own unique talents and weaknesses, and the job of a responsible parent (or in this case, grandparent) is to adjust his hands and approach according to the child and his individual needs.

Although we often find ourselves feeling lost in the crowd, it is important to remember that Hashem does not see a crowd, but rather a collection of many individuals, each with their own unique name and purpose. To illustrate this concept, Rav Reisman notes that when a parent goes to graduation and there are 100 or more graduates on stage, the parent only focuses on his beloved child, almost as if the other children are not even there.

A few years ago, a new sukkah poster came out, displaying a panoramic image of MetLife stadium during the 2012 Siyum HaShas. The person selling the poster made an unusual offer: Anybody who could locate himself in the picture could have it for free, a task which was nearly impossible for a human, but comes easily to Hashem, Who lovingly focuses on every single one of us, with our own unique name and life mission, as if we were His only child. (*Rabbi Ozer Alport*)

