

How Many Left?

by: Rabbi Jeremy Rosen

“And they left Ramses to head towards Sucot, six hundred thousand men on foot, not counting children.” Tradition tells us that there were 600,000 people who left Egypt. But if we take this text at face value you would have to double the number to include women and again to include children. Could there really have been nearly two million? It’s even more difficult to understand if we were to accept the Midrash that says that only one fifth of the Children of Israel left Egypt. The rest preferred to stay behind. The sums do not add up.

Former Israeli Prime Minister, Ben Gurion, though not at all religious, loved studying Bible. He pointed out that the word for one thousand ALeF could just as well mean AluF meaning a family group. So perhaps there were only 600 extended families. That gets the numbers down but doesn’t really explain why so few slaves were worth making such a fuss of.

The other unknown is the Eyrev Rav, the mixed multitude who, according to the Torah, went out with the Children of Israel (and were welcomed). They will have been other slaves, dissidents and refugees. The Midrash often blames them when things go wrong. How many were there?

The fact is that we cannot know exactly whether the Torah meant those figures to be literal, approximate or even symbolic, Like the number 40 that recurs throughout the Bible. 40 days and nights, 40 years and reigns not to mention 400. Perhaps 40 was a general number for say “a generation,” or “lots” as opposed to “a few.” Could there have been precisely 600,000? Doesn’t it look as if the number was rounded up?

The point of the story is not to give an accountant’s report on the business. It was to describe the miraculous events, the escape, the creation of a new nation and its constitution. It’s the broad picture that is so impressive. It would be silly to reject it just because different times used numbers in different ways. I am not saying there were or were not meant precisely. Only that we cannot know. In fact, our tradition, the Midrash, has always included different ways of understanding the narratives in the Torah.

Faith is a wonderful way of keeping the message without getting bogged down in too much detail.