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**The Case for Large Families**

**By Rabbi Levi Avtzon**



 “You have *how many* siblings and cousins!?”

 Great conversation material. It has never let me down.

 Growing up in Brooklyn, I never considered large families unusual. Many of my classmates came from big families. Although having four first cousins in my grade was unique even by local standards, I never gave it much thought. Big families were fun, dynamic and *normal*.

 Over the years, as I found myself mixing in different circles, I became aware that large families are really the exception, not the rule. There aren’t many people with more than 10 siblings and hundreds of first cousins. *Who knew?*

 This has led to endless Shabbat-table discussions:

 “Must’ve been absolutely berserk growing up in that home!” *Actually, my mom ran a tight ship and had everything under control.*

 “I’m sure you got less love than families with a few kids . . .” *Honestly, I never felt unloved. Somehow, there is enough love in the heart and time in the day to bestow to lots of needy little people.*

 “Do you even know all the names of your first cousins?” *Mostly, yes.*

 “Weddings and *simchahs* must be HUGE.” *Thank G‑d!*

 People seem to be fascinated by large families in the same way they are fascinated by exotic animals or the possibility of life on other planets. I often feel like an alien trying to share what life in a faraway galaxy is like.

**Large Families are Not that Different from Small Families**

 The truth is that large families are not that different from small families. There’s just a lot more of everything. Lots of food. Lots of beds. Lots of bickering. Lots of drama. Lots of love, tears, hugs and people to share your experiences with.

When I was growing up, we’d welcome a new baby into our home every few years. We learned how to share, perform housework, change a diaper and manage conflict. By the time we got married and had children of our own, we didn’t perceive babies as foreign, fragile creatures. We didn’t need to take any parenting courses. It was life as we knew it. It was *natural*.

 Childbirth—the first topic of the Torah portion Tazria—is central to Jewish life.

 My late grandfather, Rabbi Meir Avtzon, used to refer to himself as a billionaire. And believe me, it wasn’t in dollars. He saw children, grandchildren and great-grandchildren as true wealth. He saw me as worth billions. What a perspective on children!

 I know that there are many people who do not have the opportunity to have children for a variety of reasons. To me, that drives home the need to take advantage of the gift that some of us do have: the ability to bring more life into the world.

**The Miracle of Large Families**

 The miracle of large families became even more potent to me when I recently sat *shiva* for my late father.

 It would not be an exaggeration to say that this *shiva* was huge. *Shiva*, the traditional seven-day mourning period, is observed by the parents, siblings, spouse and children of the deceased.

 Ready for some math?

 My father is one of fifteen. His 14 siblings sat *shiva*.

 My parents were blessed with 12 children.

 So including my mother, there was a total of 27 immediate family members who sat for a week of mourning and reflection for one individual. The cloud of death had a thick silver lining.

 In a world where loneliness has reached epidemic levels,1 having so many immediate relatives (plus hundreds of nephews, nieces, in-laws etc.) who love and miss my father is an incredible legacy and gift. Can anything compare?

 My two sets of grandparents were both blessed with very large families, each having more than a dozen kids. And no, they were not well-off financially.

 My mother’s parents raised their 13 children in Communist Russia, waiting in bread lines to bring home a few crusty loaves, all while never working on Shabbat, which made earning even a meager living difficult.

**Did the Children Resent It?**

 Did the children resent it? Actions speak. They went on to collectively have over 100 children.

 Here is a story about my paternal grandparents:

 Mrs. Cheyena Avtzon had given birth to six children in Europe. When she and her husband, Rabbi Meir Avtzon, came to the U.S., she expected to receive a more advanced and patient-oriented approach to medical treatment.

 How surprised was she that upon a visit to a gynecologist, he adamantly told her she should never consider having another child!

 Mrs. Avtzon tenaciously told the doctor that his job was to help women have children, not to count them or try to prevent them from having more. When she told the Rebbe, of righteous memory, about the doctor’s prognosis of the dangers that might arise in future pregnancies, the Rebbe answered with a vigorous blessing, promising her that she would have many more children.

 Which she did. Nine more children subsequently joined the Avtzon family.

 My father was the eighth in the family.

 *But it is so expensive! It is so challenging!*

**The Story Continues**

 The story continues:

 During one meeting with the Rebbe, Rabbi Avtzon told the Rebbe that his children were reaching marriageable age. He and his wife had never worried about their own finances, but he wanted to be able to provide the children with at least a modest wedding and dowry.

 The Rebbe replied, “Material *nadden* (dowry) comes and goes; spiritual *nadden* stays forever. G‑d gave you the unique gift to offer your children spiritual *nadden*. This is genuine *nadden*. You can tell this to your prospective in-laws in my name when you sit down to discuss the wedding details.”

 With G‑d’s blessings, it worked. Over 120 grandchildren and hundreds of great-grandchildren later, the wealth continues through the generations.

 The Rebbe writes, “Jewish wealth is not houses and money. Jewish wealth, which is eternal, is the observance of Torah and mitzvahs, and bringing children and grandchildren into the world who will observe the Torah and its mitzvahs.”

 For those of us who have the opportunity to have large families but are plagued with doubts—*Will they get enough love? What about tuition costs? How will I handle it?*—I say: You will never regret the children you do have. A large family is such an incredible gift to yourself, your kids, your community and the world. Go for it! G‑d will help—really! He’s the third partner in your marriage and He will do His part.



 When my wife and I got married, we knew that children were a blessing. It was only after we began having them that we truly appreciated the message the Rebbe would often share, that each child comes with a bundle of blessings from G‑d. We have merited to see it tangibly. Each child came with incredible gifts for the family, including financial blessings.

 On a very personal note, I must add that each child has opened my heart wider, not only to that child but to the others as well. Each child makes me a better parent to all of our children.

 And an extra bonus: According to tradition, each child we bring into this world brings the era of Moshiach even closer. It really is a win-win.

 What do you think?

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**Story #1175**

**The Possible Third**

**From the desk of Yerachmiel Tilles**

**editor@ascentofsafed.com**

*[I usually don’t use “Don’t know if it is true or not true but in any case certainly it could be true”stories, but this one I was unable to resist because of its weekly reading connection.  --YT]*

 Years ago [In the 19th century], the Jewish settlement in the Land of Israel was entirely dependent on the generosity of its brethren in the Diaspora. To that end, special emissaries would travel throughout Europe collecting donations, visiting local Jews and soliciting funds.

 One time an emissary arrived in a certain city and was given a warm welcome. All of the townspeople came to the synagogue to hear him deliver his appeal. At the end of the speech, a prominent member of the local community volunteered to accompany him on his rounds from house to house.

 The two men walked through the Jewish section knocking on doors and asking for donations. Not one family refused to contribute. The contributions varied according to financial circumstance, but everyone was happy to give at least something.

**Noticing the Skipped Mansion**

 Then the emissary noticed that they had skipped a mansion, and asked his companion why.

 "It would be a waste of effort," he was told. "The man who lives there is a miser. He has never given even a penny to charity."

 "But we have to try," the emissary insisted. "Who knows? Maybe our words will penetrate his heart."

 They knocked on the door, which was opened by the wealthy miser himself. "Good day!" the emissary said cheerfully. "May we speak with you for a minute?"

 "You may certainly speak, but if you've come for a donation of money you're wasting your time," the miser said dryly.

 But the emissary would not give up. "You're obviously a wealthy man. Don't you want to help support the poor and hungry Jews of the Holy Land ? Everyone else in town is contributing generously."

  "My money belongs to me," the miser declared sharply. "I worked very hard for it, and saved every penny. I refuse to give the fruit of my labors to someone who didn't expend the effort."

 The emissary looked at him with pity in his eyes. "You're right, it's your money and your decision," he conceded. But before he left he added under his breath, "It looks as if you're going to be the third."

**The Emissary’s Words Echoing in the Miser’s Ears**

 The miser closed the door with the emissary's words echoing in his ears. What did he mean? A whole day he couldn't get the comment out of his head, and that night he tossed and turned in bed. "It looks as if you're going to be the third." The third what? He had to find out.

 The next day the miser searched the city until he found the emissary from Israel . "I must know," he pleaded with him. "What did you mean when you said that I would be the third?"

 The emissary smiled. "Yesterday I honored your principle of not giving away any of your hard-earned money. So how can you expect me to share my wisdom with you for nothing? I also worked very hard to acquire it."

 The miser acknowledged that he was right, and agreed to pay for the answer. The emissary insisted on a sum three times what he usually asked of the rich, and the transaction was made.

 "Now I will tell you a story," the emissary began. "Many years ago there lived a very wealthy man who was as stingy as he was rich. He was even miserly when it came to himself. He even refused to marry, lest a wife and children drain his finances.

**Even After Death He Refused to Part from His Riches**

 "The man worked very hard his whole life and eventually amassed a fortune. Before he passed away, he instructed the Burial Society to bury him with all his money. Even after death he refused to part from his riches.

 "His final wishes were carried out, and not one cent remained above ground. When the grave was filled, the angel in charge of the deceased came to accompany him to the Heavenly Court .

 "'Did you study Torah?' the man was asked. 'No,' he replied, 'I was a businessman.'

 "'Then certainly you supported those who did with your charity. Tell us,' the judges urged him, 'which good deeds did you perform with all your money?'

 "'Look, there's nothing to talk about,' the man answered. 'I brought all my money with me. Do whatever you want with it.'

 "'You don't understand,' they explained. 'Here money has no value. The currency is *mitzvot*-commandments.' The man's fate hung in the balance.

 "After much discussion the judges realized that there was only one precedent in history, when the wealthy, rebellious Korach had been swallowed up by the earth with all his riches. In the end it was decided that the miser, who had also been buried with all his money, should be sent to keep him company. The lonely Korach would no doubt be delighted.

 "But it's very hard to spend such a long time with even two people," the emissary continued. "I'm sure that Korach and his friend are very bored by now, and would welcome a third conversationalist into their group. When I met you I thought to myself, 'Who knows? Maybe their boredom will soon be alleviated. Now though, that you've given me your donation, I think that Korach and his friend will have to wait a while longer."

 From that day on the former miser was always the first to contribute to every charitable cause that came his way.

*Source* : Reprinted from *LChaimWeekly*.org (#879) with permission

*Reprinted from the Parshat Shelach 5780 email of KabbalaOnline.org, a project of Ascent of Safed* *ascent@ascentofsafed.com*

**Rabbi Yehuda Hanassi**

 Rabbi Yehudah Hanassi, known also as Rebbi (teacher) or Rabbeinu Hakadosh (our holy teacher), was the son of Rabban Shimon Ben Gamliel. He was born on the very day that Rabbi Akiva was murdered by the Romans. Rebbi lived a long life and served as Nassi for many years.

 Rebbi is most famous for compiling the Mishna. He realised that people were for getting Torah Sheb’al Peh, so he brought all of the Chachamim together to resolve disputes and record all the halachos in a single system. He ­finished compiling the Mishna in the year 3948, 120 years after the destruction of the second Beis Hamikdash.

 Before his passing, Rebbi assured his family that he would return home every Friday night and asked them to prepare the candles, table, and his bed as before. So it was, even after his passing, Rebbi came home each week to make kiddush for his family.

 This continued until it happened that a neighbour was visiting, and bore witness to the amazing scene. After that Rebbi did not return, out of concern that other tzaddikim - who did not share the privilege of returning to their homes after their passing - shouldn’t seem less righteous.

*Reprinted from the Parshas Beha’alosecha 5780 email of Oneg Shabbos (London, UK.)*

**The Father and**

**The Draft Board**

 Once a chasid went to his Rebbe and cried, "My son is about to be drafted to serve in the Czar's army! I have been informed that the draft board this time will be comprised of people from a different town.

 If a father brings a note from a doctor that his son is ill, the boy receives a three month reprieve. I will bring a note saying my son is ill. In three months, when he has to appear before the board again, it will be comprised of local people with whom I am close and they will easily exempt him."

 The Rebbe listened and then said, "I understand your plan, but I think your son should appear at this hearing."

 The chasid left the Rebbe's room bewildered, for his plan was completely logical. He went home and decided to continue as planned. He procured a doctor's note and appeared at the scheduled hearing. Upon entering the room he nearly fainted: it was the local board! He had no choice but to hand them the note and receive the three month grace period. But he knew that when he appeared in three months time before the board of strangers, his son would surely be taken.

 The distraught father came to the Rebbe again and pleaded with the Rebbe for help. "Have pity on a poor fool. Should my innocent son suffer because he has a father such as me?" he wailed. The Rebbe thought for some time and then said, "Get your son a false passport and send him far away."

 The father nodded. "But that leaves me with another big problem," he related. "When a draftee runs away, the father is fined three hundred rubles, which I don't have! They will take my small children as hostages, until I pay."

 The Rebbe fell deep into thought again, then answered: "Don't worry. There is a project in the works."

 The chasid was relieved. He bought a passport on the black market and sent his son off to safety. But what of the fine, he wondered. He tried to put his questions and doubts out of his mind.

 Three months passed. A soldier came to his store, and handed him many official-looking papers, announcing: "Sign these and appear at the bureau in twenty-four hours."

 The chasid was shaking as he entered the lawyer's office. He could not read Russian, and so he been unable to peruse the documents. The lawyer, a local Jew, studied the pages closely. Then he looked up with a smile. "Do you know that they have given you their entire file on your son? Were you to throw them into the fire, nothing would be left; it would be over."

 With that, he tossed the papers into the fire, and the chasid suddenly understood his Rebbe's words which had been so unintelligible at the time: "There is a project in the works."

*Reprinted from the Parshat Korach 5755 edition of L’Chaim Weekly.*

**A Great Host**

**By Rabbi Meir Sultan**



 The great Mir Rosh Yeshiva Rav Chaim Shmuelevitz Zt”l spent most of the World War II years in Shanghai, after his yeshiva relocated to Tsuruga, Japan , and then to Shanghai.

 He talked of how, during his time there, he met a wealthy Jew who lived in [China in] absurd luxury, with multiple servants and employees at his beck and call. He was a fine person who would support Torah institutions.

 After the war, the yeshiva moved to Jerusalem. Sometime later, the Rosh Yeshiva heard that the wealthy man had also made aliyah. He tracked down the address and went to visit him. To his shock and dismay, he found the rich man in a rundown apartment in a dicey part of town.

 Instead of being embarrassed about his turn of fortune, the formerly wealthy man greeted the Rav warmly, took the Rav through his new abode, and made him tea.

 At first, Rav Chaim felt sorry for his host’s obvious setback, but later used him as an example of a man who needed no pity. Instead, he always described his host as a great person, in full control of himself.

 During the years that he had been wealthy, the man had controlled his money, rather than letting his wealth control him. Now that he was impoverished, he still exercised control over that which was possible, and did not let the difference in his circumstances dictate his happiness.

 “This is a great person!” declared the Rav.

*Reprinted from the Parshat Shelach 5780 email of Oneg Shabbos (London, U.K.)*

**Rabbi Yonoson Ben Uziel**

**By Rabbi Yisroel Rose**

 Last month (26 Sivan) marked the Yartzeit (memorial anniversary) of one of the greatest Rabbis of the Tanaic era (1st-3rd centuries CE); Rabbi Yonosan Ben Uziel. His greatness, relative even to his own generation, is described in the Talmud (Maseches Sukkah).

 It states that among the great sage Hillel’s students, he had eighty elite disciples; thirty of them were said to have had as much Divine Presence as Moshe Rabainu; another thirty were said to be great enough to have stopped the sun in its path as was done for Yehoshua; the remaining twenty were “in the middle”.

**The Greatest of them All**

 This indicates Rabbi Yonosan Ben Uziel’s true greatness, as the Talmud states that he was the greatest of them all. It is related that when a bird would fly above the head of Rabbi Yonoson ben Uziel whilst he was learning Torah, it would immediately burst into flames (Talmud Sukkah).

 He is most famous for his translation into Aramaic, of the Torah and also on the Prophets. His work differs from the standard translation, Targum Onkelos. This is because Onkelos sticks to the simple meaning and understanding of the words, whereas Targum Yonoson Ben Uziel explains the verses as allusions to events and other periods.

 The Talmud writes that when he wrote his translation, the land of Israel trembled and a heavenly voice called out: “Who has revealed My secrets to mankind?”

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**Tomb of Rabbi Yonoson Ben Uziel**

**In Order to Avoid Quarrels Among the People**

 Immediately, Rabbi Yonoson Ben Uziel arose and proclaimed, “It is I who have revealed Your secrets. You know that I did not do it for my honour; rather for Your honour, to avoid all quarrels among the people”.

 When, however, he came to translate the Kesuvim, a heavenly voice came out and said, “That is enough!”, since in the Kesuvim there are allusions to the coming of Mashiach.

 Rabbi Yonoson Ben Uziel is buried in Amuka in the Galilee. It is among the most visited tombs in Israel, and every year, about half a million people go to pray at his tomb. There is a tradition that by praying at his grave, the gates of heavens are opened with regard to finding a good spouse and having children.

*Reprinted from the Parshat Shelach 5780 email of Oneg Shabbos (London, U.K.)*

**Every 12,196 Osios (Letters)**

 There was once a rabbi who hosted a young woman who was no longer affiliated with religion. Over Shabbat, he told a *devar Torah* that he had heard from Rabbi Michoel-Dov Weissmandl about *Megillat Esther*, since Purim was approaching. He said, “There are 12,196 letters in *Megillat Esther*. It’s not random. Open the *Tanach* and look for the first *alef* in the Torah. You’ll find it in the first word, *Beresheet*.”



 “Start from that first *alef* and count exactly 12,196 letters. The letter you land on will be a *samech*. Count 12,196 from there and you’ll find a *taf*. Do it once more and you will get to the letter *resh*, completing the spelling of Esther (*alef - samech - taf - resh*).” The woman was blown away. She couldn’t believe how counting the letters in one book, and then bringing that number to the Torah, would spell out Esther!

 The rabbi continued, “Now do the same for Mordechai. The *gemara* explains that there is a hint to Mordechai “*mor deror*” which Onkelos translates into Aramaic as “*mira dichya,*” the same consonants in the same order as Mordechai.

 Now, count forward from the letter *mem* in *mor dror* the number of letters in the Megillah, and you come to a *resh*. And if you keep counting 12,196 letters successively you will get a *daled* and then a *chof* and then a *yud* from there, spelling out Mordechai!” The woman was visibly shaken, very interested in the *chiddush*.

 The next morning, the girl came down to the table with bloodshot eyes, and she looked like she hadn’t slept. The rabbi and his wife apologized, afraid she was uncomfortable in their house. The guest told them, “I work with statistics and numbers. I was up all night trying to calculate the odds of the letters in the Torah lining up like that, to spell out Mordechai and Esther. I came to the conclusion that the odds of that happening are zero! The Torah is *emet*.”

 Baruch Hashem, the girl made complete *teshuvah*, grew spiritually, and became religious again because she witnessed the unbelievable Hand of Hashem that orchestrated this entire thing. This story would have been incredible if it ended there. But what’s even more incredible is that she found a *shidduch* and got married to a man named Mordechai. And her name was Esther.

*Reprinted from the Parshat Ki Tissa 5780 email of Rabbi Amram Sananes as written by Jack E. Rahmey.*

**Greeting the Non-Jewish Secretary**

**By Rabbi Reuven Semah**



 Rabbi David Trenk, zt”l, would visit an office every once in a while. The receptionist at this company was a non-Jewish woman named Maria. Each time Rav Trenk visited the office, he would, with his characteristic exuberance and energy, greet Maria.

 If anyone has mastered the art of greeting people with a nice smile, it was Rav Trenk, who greets others – Jew and Gentile, it makes no difference – with excitement and genuine concern. And so, upon arriving, Rav Trenk would bellow, “Good Morning, Maria! So nice to see you! How’s everything?”

           During one visit, Rav Trenk entered the office and expressed his greeting to Maria as he always did. After he concluded, the boss, who was present in the room, approached Rav Trenk.

           “Rabbi, what are you doing?” he asked.

           “What do you mean? I’m saying ‘Good morning’ to the secretary.”

           “Well, Rabbi, Maria is not here today. Who are you greeting?”

           Rav Trenk proceeded to take his eyeglasses out of his pocket and put them on. Now able to see, he observed that, indeed, the receptionist was not there. He had been speaking to an empty chair.

           The boss was bewildered. Rav Trenk explained that he felt that it was correct conduct to greet the receptionist properly each time he visited, but he didn’t want the way she dressed, especially during the summer, to affect his neshamah negatively.

 “I take off my glasses before entering. Then I greet Maria and only put on my glasses once I am in the next room. I therefore had no idea that the receptionist was not there.”

           Like Rav Trenk, we practice the halachah of guarding our eyes. However, we must learn from Rav Trenk never to look down upon the people; he never did.

Reprinted from the Parshat Shelach 5780 email of the Jersey Shore Torah Bulletin.

**The Most Brightly Burning Shabbos Candles Ever**

 A woman once came to the Rav of Lodz, Rav Eliyahu Chaim Meisel, and complained about her poverty. She simply had no money to support her family. Her daughter was a Kallah, and it was impossible for them to make any arrangements for the wedding because of their situation.

 Rav Eliyahu Chaim’s heart went out to her, and he wanted very much to help her, but he himself also had no money at the time. He looked around the house for something to give the woman that she might be able to sell and use the money to help make the Chasunah.

 He took out his wife’s silver candlesticks, and gave them to her with a full heart. The Rav explained that it was just a loan so that she could use the candlesticks to borrow money, and when he had the money, he would redeem them from her. The woman at first refused to take them, but the Rav was able to convince her.

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**Rav Eliyahu Chaim Meisels, zt”l**

 On Erev Shabbos, when the Rebbetzin went to get her silver candlesticks, she was shocked to see that they were missing! She looked everywhere, but when she couldn’t find them, she told her husband. Rav Eliyahu Chaim explained that he had lent them to a poor woman so she could make wedding preparations for her daughter, and he would soon get them back for her.

 The Rebbetzin was happy that they were being used for a Mitzvah, but she asked her husband what she should use to light Shabbos candles? After thinking for a few moments, the Rav said, “We can use apples! I will carve holes to hold the candles, and they will be our candlesticks!” That Shabbos, the candles burned more brightly than they ever did before! (Ma’asei Tzaddikim, p. 55)

*Reprinted from the Parshas Tzav 5780 email of Torah U’Tefilah: A Collection of Inspiring Insights compiled by Rabbi Yehuda Winzelberg.*