

# Communications

*TRADITION welcomes and encourages letters to the editor. Letters, which should be brief and to the point, should not ordinarily exceed 1000 words. They should be sent on disk, together with a double-spaced hard copy, to Rabbi Emanuel Feldman, Editor, Congregation Beth Jacob, 1855 LaVista Road NE, Atlanta, GA.*

## WOMEN AND ORTHODOXY

TO THE EDITOR:

Although there is a vanishingly small percentage of Orthodox women who declare themselves feminists and a tiny number of women's *tefilla* groups that mostly meet on an occasional Shabbat or *Rosh Hodesh* world-wide, for the last two years an inordinate number of pages in your journal have been devoted to these subjects. Feminism has been castigated for violating the sacred principle of "*Kol kevuda bat melekh penima*" and destroying the traditional Jewish family by encouraging women to leave (abandon) their homes for the marketplace and for roles in the public domain.

And yet, during the same time period, I have not come across a single article, editorial or communication in your journal about the relatively new phenomenon in the Orthodox community which has affected a significant proportion (majority?) of Orthodoxy, has had a cataclysmic impact on the traditional Jewish family and has severely affected almost every member of the extended Orthodox family.

When I was growing up in the 1940's and 1950's, the expectation in the Orthodox family was that young men and women would marry. The wife would stay home and take care of the house and children, while the husband would go to work to support the family. One or two evenings a week, or more frequently if he desired, the husband would go to a *shiur* in his *bet midrash*. It was expected that as the children left the home to begin their own families, their father could retire and be free to spend his full time learning, if he so desired.

Today, there is a new phenomenon. Our sons are being taught that the only Torah-true life is full-time study, and our daughters are being taught that the only man worthy to marry is one who occupies himself in full-time learning. This life-style mandates that the woman leave home for the marketplace as someone has to provide money to feed,

clothe and send the children to *yeshiva* for their education. Since we still live in a world where most women get paid less for the same job than their male counterparts and cannot advance as far or as rapidly, few women, if any, can earn enough to support their larger families. This has required grandmothers to take on full-time child care of their grandchildren instead of being able to finally take life a little slower. Grand-fathers are likewise forced to continue working full-time to support their children's and grandchildren's lifestyles, instead of being able to retire and engage in full-time learning. Whole segments of Orthodoxy are living at or below the poverty level and are on welfare.

Who is destroying the principle of "*Kol kevuda bat melekh penima*"? Where are all the articles, editorials or communications on this new phenomenon of full-time learning for all, which is having a much more profound impact on the "traditional" Jewish family than feminism ever will have? The silence is deafening!

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## THE DIVISION OF THE TRIBES ON GERIZIM AND EVAL

TO THE EDITOR:

We have carefully read Broyde and Weiner's response to our analysis of the division of the tribes on Gerizim and Eval in *Tradition* 33:3 (Spring 1999).<sup>1</sup> In this letter, we wish to highlight the fundamental differences in our diverging approaches and add several new insights. This should clarify the major thrust of our paper, i.e., not the solution to the Gerizim-Eval problem, but rather the manner in which one mathematically analyzes and uses Biblical texts.

### *Issue 1—Numerical Precision*

Broyde and Weiner's methodology yields population differences between the mountains of 1 and 20. While these minute differences naturally make us pause and take notice, the census data indicates that this level of precision is mathematically meaningless. The population of twenty-three of the twenty-four tribes, listed in both censuses in Numbers, are recorded in multiples of 50. The probability of such an outcome is effectively zero. Based on similar considerations, R. Yaakov Kamenetsky (*Emet le-Yaakov* to *Numbers* 26:8)<sup>2</sup> concludes that the population of the tribes

are rounded to the nearest 50, and are not exact figures.<sup>3</sup> If the precision of the tribal numbers is in multiples of 50, combining these numbers cannot yield precision on the order 1 and 20.

*Issue 2—Incomplete Data*

Broyde and Weiner argue that

The issues our critics raise concerning the Levites being counted from the age of 30 days, and everyone else from year 20, is an excellent one. For reasons that we do not comprehend, the Torah chose to do that, and we assume that when numerical balance in the tribes were sought, these same figures were used, even if we cannot explain why they were counted in that exact way. . . . Rather, these were the authorized numbers used throughout the Torah for counting purposes, and it is reasonable to assume that one would use them for computational purposes here as well. . . .

One cannot admit to not comprehending why the Torah in a particular instance included certain age groups and still assume that these same figures and age groups should be used in all calculations. This is particularly true in our situation where it is Broyde and Weiner who suggest that we should be counting the population on both mountains. Nowhere does the Torah, neither explicitly nor implicitly, combine or compare these population groups, or require us to do so.

A similar objection concerning age discrepancy and a census projection argument appears in the Ibn Ezra. Rashi in *Numbers* 3:39, citing the *Gemara*, attributes a mathematical discrepancy in the text to the omission of 300 Levite first-born, left out because the verse only enumerates Levites who could replace the Israelite first-born. Ibn Ezra says that Yehuda HaParsi corroborates that only 300 of the 22,300 Levites were first-born as follows:

The first born of the Levites were 1/734 of the Levites. When you take this ratio from the count of the Israelites,<sup>5</sup> and then take the count of the Levites in the work force,<sup>6</sup> against the total Levite count, they will be close.<sup>7</sup>

Ibn Ezra responds:

He has said nothing, because the Israelites were counted from 20 years of age without an upper limit, and the Levites were counted from 30 to 50, and there is a big difference between them. Rather, we will rely on tradition.

Ibn Ezra is unwilling to combine these differing age groups, even though it would confirm the desired result.

*Issue 3—Changing Conditions*

In response to our comment that all of the tribes were not fully represented at Gerizim-Eval, Broyde and Weiner suggest:

So too, their observations . . . reflect changes in the composition of the Jewish nation from the time of divine directive to bear witness on the mountains, and the subsequent decision of some tribes to stay on the east bank of the Jordan river. This result, a direct violation of the agreement these two tribes made with Moses found in Numbers 32:26-27, was not desired or considered proper by God, and was not contemplated in the tribal division.

Broyde and Weiner are, thus, comfortable with a division that may very well not have minimized population differences at the time of implementation. According to this perspective, it is the prevailing realities at the time the instructions were prescribed, and not at the time of the ceremony, which are controlling. Alternatively, they speculate<sup>8</sup> that the ultimate division may not have been the one prescribed in *Deuteronomy*, but rather a division that preserved population equality in Joshua's time.

Considering the specificity of the instructions and Hashem's all encompassing knowledge, we reject both of these alternatives. We prefer to believe that Joshua implemented the ceremony as given, and that the ceremony memorialized the realities of the time of the ceremony or later, not the past. In this vein they say:

Third, there is the problem of the location of the tribe of Dan. . . . While these writers respond by noting that Dan moved 100 years later, that explanation rings as forced.

We, respectfully, disagree.

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NOTES

1. See "The Division of The Tribes on Gerizim and Eval," *Tradition* 33:3 (Spring 1999), pp. 34-53.
2. *Meshekh Hokhma* (*Numbers* 3:19) suggests it is in multiples of 10.
3. Since 22 of the 24 tribal populations are given in multiples of 100, it is more likely that the rounding is to the nearest 100, not 50. R. Kamenetsky offers an explanation for the one exception according to his system. We can similarly develop reasons for the two exceptions in our system. The greater the rounding that is necessitated, the less meaningful Broyde and Weiner's precision becomes.
4. I.e.,  $300/22,000$
5. I.e.,  $603,550/73=8,268$ .
6. 8,580 (*Numbers* 4:48).
7. I.e., the Levite work force exceeds the number of Israelite first-born by a little more than 300 (i.e.,  $8,580-8,268=312$ ).
8. Footnote 1: "We might speculate that . . . the division of the tribes found in *Deuteronomy* 27 was no longer the optimal division and perhaps (but no more than perhaps) one could even assert that in reality the tribes were divided differently because of population changes, or because of the lack of full participation of some of the tribes."

MICHAEL BROYDE AND STEVEN WEINER RESPOND:

Our *devar torah* (*Tradition* 27:1, Fall 1993) offers the hypothesis that the tribes of Israel were allocated in the Bible between Mount Gerizim and Mount Eval in a manner that distributed populations by size as equally as possible. Why is this an appealing and persuasive *devar torah*? In the first place, because (as we have previously explained) it conveys an ethical teaching consistent with the context and teachings of *Deuteronomy* regarding blessings and curses. As *Hazal* have urged, each individual Israelite must visualize himself (or herself, even though women appear not to "count" in this counting) as facing a world poised in delicate balance between good and evil, blessing and curse, with the opportunity and responsibility to "tip the balance" by choosing to follow the ways of the Torah. An explanation—like that proposed by Epstein, Dickman and Wilamowsky (*Tradition* 33:3, Spring 1999)—which seeks to somehow align "blessed" tribes and "cursed" tribes with the eventual fate of their descendants, undermines the ethical message of free choice and personal responsibility by implying that ultimate destiny is predetermined based upon which of two mountains one's ancestors stood upon. Such explanations, therefore, seem ill-suited to the central context and theme of the Gerizim/Eval episode.

Second, the census numbers provided in the Torah corroborate and support our equal-population hypothesis. Briefly, what our article observes is that if the census data that the Torah records are applied to the groupings on Eval and Gerizim, and missing information is filled in by using the closest available ratios (and the like) as reference points, then what emerges is—as our critics have themselves noted—the “striking” result that the tribal allocation prescribed in the Torah indeed appears to most closely equalize the population distribution.

Now—as made clear in our article and elaborated on in the responses to it—there is not sufficient numerical data recorded in the Bible to support a statistical proof of exactly how many people stood on each of the two mountains when the blessings and curses were pronounced. For example, no census data is available for the day when the tribes actually stood on those mountains; the census data that breaks down the percentage of Levites into the relevant sub-groups is some 39 years old; the census numbers that are given in the Bible may or may not have been rounded off, and so on. Statistical imprecision abounds.

Still, our point remains that the limited census data which the Torah does disclose, taken at face value, points strikingly in favor of the equal-population hypothesis. The logical appeal of the equal-population *devar torah* as an explanation that perfectly complements the ethical context of the Gerizim-Eval episode makes our explanation an attractive one.

Based on the above, one can readily respond to the specific objections pressed by Epstein *et al.* Their first objection is that the numbers presented by the Torah are not to be taken too precisely, and thus cannot be used to justify claiming that one division of the tribes is more equally balanced than another. We find this objection unconvincing.<sup>1</sup> These are the numbers provided by the Biblical text. No matter whether they are accurate to the first, second or third digit, it is reasonable to assume that these specific numbers found in the text are more accurate than any other numbers. Thus, when the Torah states (*Num.* 26:7) that there were 43,730 Reubenites, the Bible expects us to use that number when considering how many Reubenites there are. Using the numbers provided by the text leads one to conclude that the tribes were divided in this unique manner to promote balance between the number of people on each side of the mountain. Whether that balance is precise, accurate only to the third digit (a plus/minus number of 50, or one fifth of one percent or the smallest tribe) or somewhere between is not relevant. The division of the tribes found in the text of the Torah is the most accurate division of the tribes possible given the numbers presented by the Bible.

The same response is applicable to their second objection—the use of the numbers given in the Torah for the Levites. One has no choice but to use the numbers given—and using those given numbers creates mathematical balance better than any other division possible, and seems more reasonable than any other proposed division, including one grounded in geography. More than that we will not claim.

The third area of disagreement is the changing conditions from the time that these Biblical directives were given to the actual implementation in the Book of Joshua. It is difficult for us to accept that the Biblical directive for how to divide the tribes were given presupposing that two and a half tribes would refuse to enter the land God gave them and that the tribe of Dan would not settle in the area God designated for them; neither of these two events was positive or expected. God conceived of this event presupposing compliance with the Divine will, rather than defiance or failure. To adopt the alternative view assumes that both at the time Moses directed this division and when it actually occurred in the time of Joshua, this division was unintelligible, as the explanation for the division of the tribes grounded in geography is clear 100 years after the ceremony on the mountain—long after anyone is around to understand its symbolism. Indeed, it even poses theological problems of free will. Thus, an explanation for a division that would have been inexplicable to those engaged in the ceremony seems unnecessarily forced.

The question still remaining is how the decision of two-and-a-half tribes to reside on the eastern side of the Jordan impacted on the events at Gerizim and Eval. Three answers are possible; (1) All of *Reuven, Gad* and *Menashe* went to the ceremony on the mountains and then left to the east bank of Jordan. *Tosafot Sotah* 36a s.v. *mai ve-ha-hetsyo* adopt this view. (2) All of *Reuven, Gad* and *Menashe* did not appear at the ceremony on the mountains, and there was imbalance; that imbalance would remind the people that the conduct of these tribes was wrong and contrary to God's will. (3) All of *Reuven, Gad* and *Menashe* did not appear at the ceremony on the mountains, and the division of the tribes was recast at the actual event itself so as to create balance. That would explain why *Joshua* 8:33 states that “half of them in front of Mount Gerizim and half in front of Mount Eval as Moses the servant of God had commanded at first to bless the people of Israel.” We are inclined to the first answer, but further analysis is required.

Our initial article was an attempt to explain the anomalous division of the twelve tribes and the role of the Levites during the ceremony on

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Mt. Gerizim and Eval. At that ceremony, the tribes are divided in a unique way—never before or thereafter duplicated—and the Levites have a role and are counted both on Mt. Gerizim and in the valley. Thus, the text itself poses two problems: (1) Why this unique tribal division, and (2) why a dual role for the *Levi'im*? We suggested a single solution to both of these problems, namely that an attempt was made to divide the Israelite population into two equal portions (half on each side of the mountain, with some in the middle). This is consistent with the recounting in *Joshua* 8:33 of the actual incident which simply states that the tribes were divided “in half”. This proposed solution remains, in our view, the best explanation of these two textual problems. Of course, each reader must reach his or her own judgment on how compelling our proposed *devar torah* is, and whether it is more appealing than the alternative explanations.

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## NOTES

1. The broader issue of how precisely the Torah records numbers requires a great deal of further analysis and is beyond the provenance of this letter. When the Torah states (*Num.* 26:7) that there were 43,730 Reubenites, our critics accept that this is not an exact figure. To evaluate the correctness of this proposal (which cannot be proven simply by stating that it is found in a very recent homiletical commentary on the Torah) requires a great deal more analysis and proof texts than were provided. Is there a plus/minus range in the Biblical numerology, and, if there is some range in the Biblical census data, when else is it present? What about the counting of 70/69 who entered Egypt (*Gen.* 46:27)? What about the countings found in *Judges* 20:14-20, *Ezra* 2:64-70 and I *Chronicles* 7:2-13, as well as in a host of other texts? The issue of how one mathematically analyzes and uses Biblical texts must await further analysis by us, by our critics or by others.