



Likkutei Sichos

Volume 19 | Devarim | Sichah 3

A Thousand-Fold Blessing

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1.

RASHI, *SIFRI* AND THE MIDRASH

On the verse,¹ “May Hashem, the G-d of your forefathers, add to you a thousand times as many {descendants} as you {presently number} and bless you as He has spoken of you,” Rashi quotes in his caption the words, “add to you a thousand times as many as you,” and explains:

What is meant by saying again, “and bless you as He has spoken of you”? Rather, the Jewish people said to him, “Moshe,² you are limiting our blessings. The Holy One has already promised Avraham,³ ‘if a man will be able to count {the particles of dust of the earth, then your descendants, too, will be countable}.” Moshe said to them, “This blessing is from that which is mine, but He shall bless you as He has spoken of you.”

The source of Rashi’s comments is in *Sifri*⁴ and the Midrash.⁵ *Sifri* says:

The Jewish people said to Moshe, “We do not want you to bless us. The Holy One promised Avraham,⁶ ‘I will make your descendants as numerous as the stars of the sky,’ and,⁷ ‘I will make your descendants like the dust of the earth,’ and you are limiting our blessings.” This is analogous to a king... Moshe said to the Jewish people, “May Hashem, the G-d of your forefathers, add to you a thousand times as many as you’; this blessing is from that which is mine. {As far as your blessings are concerned:} ‘And bless you as He has spoken of you,’ to be like the sand of the seas, the plants of the land, the fish of the sea, and the stars of the sky, i.e., a multitude.”

(The Midrash says:

The Jewish people said, “Our teacher Moshe! Hashem did not limit our blessings, but you say, ‘a thousand times.” Moshe said to them, “That which I have blessed you is of my own; when the Holy One comes, He ‘will bless you as He has spoken of you.’”)

¹ *Devarim* 1:11.

² This is how it is written in our edition of Rashi. In other editions: “The Jewish people said *to* Moshe”, or “The Jewish people said, *Our teacher* Moshe.” These editions seem correct, for it is forbidden for a disciple to refer to his teacher by name without an honorific, e.g. “my master” or “my teacher”, or the like (*Sanhedrin* 100a, and Rashi ad loc).

³ *Bereishis* 13:16.

⁴ On this verse; see also *Sifri*, “*Behaaloscha*,” ch. 10, sec. 36.

⁵ *Devarim Rabbah*, ch. 1, sec. 13.

⁶ *Bereishis* 26:4.

⁷ *Bereishis* 13:16.

On the face of it, Rashi seemingly says — as do *Sifri* and the Midrash — that the Jewish people lodged the following complaint: Hashem’s blessing was unlimited; Hashem blessed the Jewish people to grow to an unlimited number. Why did Moshe bless them with a blessing (“a thousand times yourselves”) which had a number, an upper limit?

But on this basis, the following is unclear:

(a) Why does Rashi deviate from the wording of the sources by beginning with the question about the redundant blessing in the verse — “What is meant by saying again, ‘and bless you as He has spoken of you’?” Why doesn’t he begin his remarks, as *Sifri* and the Midrash do, by explaining the nature of the Jewish people’s objection to Moshe? Moreover, Rashi does not usually spell out the difficulty with a verse. Rather, as discussed many times, he usually starts by immediately explaining the difficult words in the verse.

(b) Even without the question, “What is meant by saying again...,” we would need to offer the explanation, “This blessing is from that which is mine,” so that this verse does not contradict the previous blessings, “if a man will be able to count.”

(c) Why does Rashi say that the Jewish people offered “proof” to Moshe from Hashem’s promise: “if a man will be able to count..”? This is in contrast to *Sifri*, who maintains that the proof was from the **beginning** of this promise, “I will make your descendants like the dust of the earth” (in addition to the verse, “I will make your descendants as numerous as the stars of the sky”).

(d) Since Rashi addresses only the limitation imposed by the number, “a thousand times,” why does he also quote {in his caption} the words, “add to you... as you” from the verse?

2.

THE COMMENTATORS' SOLUTIONS

Additionally, we need to clarify, and this pivotal:

As commentators⁸ ask: What did Moshe's blessing add? The blessing of “a thousand times” is certainly included, and insignificant, compared with Hashem's unlimited and immeasurable blessing (“as He has spoken of you”)! (How much more so is this true considering that “included in two hundred *dinars*⁹ are one hundred.”)¹⁰

Some commentators answer this question as follows: (a) Hashem's blessing was conditional, and only materializes if the Jewish people fulfill Torah and mitzvos. In contrast, Moshe's blessing was unconditional.¹¹ Alternatively, (b) Moshe's blessing applies in the present, whereas Hashem's blessing will only come to fruition in the Future Era.¹²

However, these answers only fit with *Sifri* and the Midrash: *Sifri* says that

...this is analogous to a king who possessed many valuables and who had a young son. The king needed to travel overseas. He thought, “If I leave my valuables in the hands of my son, he will squander them. I will appoint a guardian over him until he grows up.” When the son grew up... the guardian said to the prince, “Whatever I gave you was from my own, but what your father left for you was kept safe for you.”

From this parable, it is understood that Hashem's blessings do not materialize at the same time (and stage of the prince's life) that the blessings of the guardian — Moshe — materialize. The same is evident from the wording of the Midrash when it offers the analogy, “**when** the king **will come**,” and in the analogue, “**when** Hashem **will come**.” This shows that the two blessings will take effect at two different times.

⁸ Commentators on Rashi, *Sifri* and *Devarim Rabbah*.

⁹ {Ancient currency.}

¹⁰ *Bava Kamma* 74a.

¹¹ See *Gur Aryeh*; *Levush HaOrah*; *Be'er Mayim Chaim*; *Devek Tov*; et al.

¹² *Chiddushei UPeirushi Maharik*; *Maskil L'Dovid*; et al.

But Rashi, whose explanation is based on *pshat*,¹³ just says, “This blessing is from that which is mine, but He shall bless you as He has spoken of you.” Rashi does not even **hint** at one of the aforementioned explanations. Understandably, according to Rashi, there is a **simple** explanation to which he does not even need to allude.

3.

NO QUESTION IN THE FIRST PLACE

The explanation:

According to *pshat* (and even according to the *drush*¹⁴ of *Sifri* and the Midrash), the question, “Why did Moshe limit his blessing to a thousand times, after Hashem had blessed the Jewish people, that their number would be unlimited and immeasurable?” poses no difficulty. This is because a human being, no matter how great he may be, is still a created being with limitations.

This is similar to what is explained at length in philosophical literature:¹⁵ Finite things can never be aggregated such that they become infinite. For example, time cannot exist without an endpoint, since time is composed of seconds, hours, and days, etc. The reason for this is that were this to be true, it would turn out that one infinite entity would be greater than another infinite entity. (That is, the endless number of hours, wherein each hour contains numerous seconds, would be greater than the endless number of seconds, and so forth.) It is thus impossible for one infinite entity to be greater than another. See the referenced sources. Elaboration of this matter is beyond our scope.

¹³ {The plain meaning of Scripture. Rashi says in his commentary to *Bereishis* 3:8: “I have come only to explain the plain meaning of the Scripture.” Though there are many levels and depths of interpretation on the Torah, Rashi adopts a straightforward approach.}

¹⁴ {*Drush* is an exegetical method of commentary in which the words of a verse are used as a platform to express an ostensibly extrinsic idea.}

¹⁵ See *Sefer HaChakirah*, by Tzemach Tzedek, p. 56 ff., p. 228 ff.; *Derech Mitzvosecha*, 57a, ff.

4.

PSHAT AND THE LARGE NUMBER

In general, simply speaking, *Sifri* and the Midrash (do not discuss literal infinitude, but) discuss a very large **number**. Hashem's blessings, "I will make your descendants as numerous as the stars of the sky," and, "I will make your descendants like the dust of the earth" (without mentioning a number). In other words, the Jewish people will comprise such an enormous population that it would be very difficult to count.

This is similar to the sand of the sea (as was the promise to Avraham, "and make your descendants as numerous as... the sands on the seashore,"¹⁶ or as *Sifri* words it here, "like the sand of the seas") which has a number. But the number is so large that it cannot be counted, "which are **too numerous** to count."¹⁷

The above is like the **mandatory** explanation given concerning what it says,¹⁸ "Yosef amassed quantities of grain as abundant as the sands of the sea, until he {the treasurer} had to stop counting it, since there was too much to count." Certainly, the seven years' worth of food that Yosef amassed certainly had a limit. But since it was such a tremendous quantity, it was impossible to count, for it could not be measured. Meaning, working with the conventional numbering system used by enumerators, it could not be counted.¹⁹

This was the Jewish people's complaint (according to *Sifri* and the Midrash) to Moshe: By specifying, "a thousand times," "you placed a limit on our blessing," i.e., Moshe had restricted their blessing. The number Moshe gave was far smaller than what Hashem had said, since a thousand times is countable.

According to *pshat*, however, this question poses (almost) no difficulty. A thousand times the population of the Jewish people at that time was a **massive**

¹⁶ {*Bereishis* 22:17.}

¹⁷ *Bereishis* 32:13.

¹⁸ *Bereishis* 41:49.

¹⁹ Rashi and commentaries on Rashi, on *Bereishis* 41:49.

populace. Therefore, Rashi does not begin his explanation as *Sifri* and the Midrash do, by saying, “The Jewish people said to Moshe....”

But since the simple reading of the verse raises the question, “What is meant by saying again, ‘and bless you as He has spoken of you’?” Rashi was compelled to say, “**Rather**, the Jewish people said to Moshe,” as we will explain.

5.

NON-LITERAL TERMS

The Jewish people at that time numbered 600,000 men between the ages of twenty and sixty. Add to that men under the age of twenty and over the age of sixty, plus women and children. The total comes out to at least 2,000,000. A thousand times this total amounts to approximately 2,000,000,000 {two billion}. According to *pshat*, it makes no sense that a complaint would be lodged against Moshe: “How is it possible that the nation will number only 2,000,000,000 people?”

Additionally, and this point is pivotal: The term, “a thousand times,” is often used to mean not precisely a thousand, but many times over, including even more than one thousand. Indeed, Moshe’s words could be explained simply this way.

This is certainly true considering that the number of Jewish people who can sustainably live on earth is not as great as the number of stars in the sky and the amount of dust on the earth (the sand of the sea). Space on dry land on earth is quantifiable. (“The size of the world is six thousand parasangs.”)²⁰ Additionally, a person’s {personal space} occupies four square cubits.²¹ Thus, we could calculate how many people can live on the entire land surface of the earth. Moreover, there are, and there will be (in the Future Era) other nations, animals, houses, fields, vineyards, etc., who also live on earth. Moreover, and even more

²⁰ *Pesachim* 94a.

²¹ Rash on *Bereishis* 28:13; *Shemos* 16:29.

importantly, the Jewish people (according to the Torah) belong in the Land of Israel. Although Israel is “the land of the deer,”²² It still represents only one portion of the land on earth. Thus, the number of people who can live on our planet is a much smaller number than the vast multitude of the dust of the earth and the sand of the sea (and certainly when we add all of them together).

According to *pshat*, Moshe’s blessing, “May Hashem, the G-d of your forefathers, add to you a thousand times as many {descendants} as you {presently number},” does not contradict the other above blessings of Hashem. For the terms used to describe the multitude mentioned in Hashem’s blessings are meant figuratively, not literally: *like* the stars of the sky, the dust of the earth (and the sand of the sea). And on the flip side, “**a thousand times**” could also (be used figuratively, to) mean an uncountable number.

However, the verse repeats, “and bless you as He has spoken of you.” Thus, this proves that Moshe needed to state this in response to a complaint and question lodged against him by the Jewish people. Therefore, Rashi explains that the Jewish people said, “Moshe, you are limiting our blessings. The Holy One has already promised Avraham, ‘if a man will be able to count...’”

6.

IF A MAN WILL BE ABLE TO COUNT

On the phrase, “if a man will be able to count,” Rashi comments, “Just as it is impossible for the dust to be counted, so, too, your seed shall not be counted.” On this basis, we can presume that Hashem’s blessing did not mean that the Jewish people would become as numerous as the dust of the earth. Rather, since they will be so numerous, they will be uncountable, just as the dust of the earth is uncountable. This, then, explains the Jewish people’s question, “you are limiting our blessings”: Hashem promised that the Jewish people would be so

²² *Daniel* 11:16; *Gittin* 57a. {The Gemara says: “Land of the deer.” Just as the skin of a deer cannot hold its flesh, for after the animal is skinned, its hide shrinks, so too, with regard to the land of Israel, when it is settled, it expands, but when it is not settled, it contracts.}

numerous that to count them would be highly irregular, “your seed shall not be counted.” How, then, did Moshe come along and give a number — “**a thousand times** as many as you” — indicating that they would be counted?

Even though “a thousand times as many as you” could mean a great multitude (as discussed above, this could mean [an exaggerated idiom for] even more than a thousand times {your current number}), it is still a limit. They will be counted and measured in relation to and in comparison with the population at that time, “**a thousand times as many as you.**”

This, then, is the difference between the Midrash and *Sifri*, and Rashi:

According to *Sifri* (and the Midrash), the Jewish people complained, “You have placed a limit on our blessing,” i.e., Moshe gave a number much smaller than the vast multitude that Hashem blessed them to be — like the stars of the sky and the dust of the earth. (Therefore, *Sifri* first quotes the [later] verse, “I will make your descendants as numerous **as the stars of the sky.**” This is to clarify that the verse, “I will make your descendants like the dust of the earth” also means a vast multitude.)

According to Rashi, however, the Jewish people complained, “You have placed a limit on our blessing” not regarding the particular number, but with respect to Moshe setting a limit. Hashem, in contrast, had promised that they would become innumerable. Therefore, Rashi quotes the verse, “if a man will be able to count...,” as mentioned (and not the verses regarding the stars of the sky or the sand of the sea. These verses mention things that are subject to a number, as discussed.)

7.

MOSHE’S CAPACITIES AND HASHEM’S

To this Moshe responded: “This blessing is **from that which is mine**, but **He** shall bless you as He has spoken of you.” Moshe’s blessing also really

came from Hashem, “**May (Hashem, the G-d of your forefathers) add to you,**” but because the blessing was “**from that which is mine,**” i.e., Moshe gave it, the blessing appeared (and was said) in a limited way. “But **He** {Hashem} shall bless you as He has spoken of you” — the blessing will come into actuality in the manner that Hashem had described in His blessing, “as He spoke to you,” meaning, “if a man will be able to count...” {i.e., in an unlimited fashion}.

This can be explained based on the diction, “{May Hashem, the G-d of your forefathers add} **to you... as you**”: Moshe, a human being of flesh and blood, was limited — he existed in a particular time and space. He could not divest himself of these limitations, of the {finite} number of Jewish people that he saw — “to you.” So he conferred his blessing, “**... add to you... as you.**” This is in contrast to Hashem’s blessing, since He has no constraints at all — His promise (to Avraham) was “if a man will be able to count the dust of the earth, then your descendants too, can be counted.” Hashem saw the Jewish people then as they would be when the promise, “if a man will be able to count the dust of the earth, then your descendants, too, can be counted,” would materialize.

An **example** of this (although not precisely the same): Hashem uttered the Ten Commandments **to the Jewish people** in one pronouncement, but then the **same** Ten Commandments were repeated again, one at a time.²³

8.

WINE OF TORAH

From the wine of Torah²⁴ in Rashi’s commentary:

In the writings of the Arizal²⁵ (whose day of passing, the 5th of Av, we commemorate this *Motzei Shabbos*), this aforementioned teaching, that Moshe

²³ *Mechilta*, quoted in Rashi on *Shemos* 20:1.

²⁴ {The deeper ideas in Torah.}

²⁵ *Shaar HaPesukim* and Arizal’s *Likkutei Torah*, commenting on this verse.

said, “This blessing is from that which is mine, but He shall bless you as He has spoken of you,” is explained: “The numerical value of the word *Moshe* is equal to that of א-ל-ל-ש-ד-י” {Hashem’s holy name connoting dominion}. And when the letters are written out, in full, by their names (“like this: א”ל”ף”מ”ד”ש”י”ן”ד”ל”ת”י”ו”ד”,²⁶ and you add one to the sum, which represents the totality of them all”) “then the numerical value is one thousand. This one thousand is associated with {the *sefirah*²⁷ of} *binah*.”²⁸ With his capacities, Moshe reached “until *Imma*,²⁹ and he therefore blessed them — ‘a thousand times.’” That is why he said, “*This blessing is from that which is mine, but He shall bless you* from the level of Supernal *Abba*.”³⁰

In this matter, we also see the synthesis between *pshat* and the inner dimension of Torah:

The following is the explanation: True, the concept of immeasurable (according to the Midrash and *Sifri*), is not intended to be understood literally, innumerable, but is used in a figurative sense, as discussed. However, since the concept of innumerability is used by the Torah of truth, it must be true. Meaning, we say that the Jewish people will be like the stars of the sky, the dust of the earth, and the sand of the sea, which is a multitude “that cannot be counted because it is so large,” because in their source, that which “cannot be counted” emerges from what is truly innumerable. But as it descends into the (**limited**) world, it emerges in a way that “cannot be counted **because it is so large.**”

In other words, the “limitation imposed” upon the Jewish people to be like the stars of the sky, the dust of the earth, and the sand of the sea, is not inherent. Rather, it is imposed upon them by their having descended into the worlds, until this physical world. But, in truth, and on a deeper level, the Jewish people (their supernal source) is true innumerability.

²⁶ {Adds up to 999.}

²⁷ {*Sefiros* are Divine emanations. There are ten *sefiros*, which are various phases in the manifestation of Divinity, generally categorized by intellectual and emotional faculties.}

²⁸ {*Binah* — lit., “comprehension”; in *Chassidic* thought, the second of the ten *sefiros*.}

²⁹ {Lit., “mother,” the kabbalist term for the *partzuf* (figure) which develops from the *sefirah* of *binah* in *Atzilus*.}

³⁰ {Lit., “father,” the kabbalist term for the *partzuf* (figure) which develops from the *sefirah* of *chochmah* in *Atzilus*.}

On this basis it emerges, according to *Sifri* and the Midrash, that the *vast* multitude quality that is associated with the Jewish people — like the stars of the sky, the dust of the earth, and the sand of the sea — who cannot be counted because they are so many, derives from the Supernal realm of infinity, from the infinite worlds beyond *Atzilus*.³¹ The *limited* multitude quality, which, also in the vernacular, is called “a count,” has its supernal source in the realm of the finite — the ten *sefiros* of *Atzilus*.

9.

THE SOURCE

Even regarding the Jewish people, when they did not make up such a vast multitude, as is the opinion of Rashi, there was a difference between the blessing of Moshe and the blessing of Hashem: In Moshe’s blessing, the limitation and number was pronounced; in Hashem’s blessing, the limitation was imperceptible — like the dust of the earth, as discussed.

Since **everything** has a supernal source, it is understood that the source of these two ideas in the spiritual realms is on a level (*Atzilus*) where there are vessels.³² This level marks the beginning of all multiplicity, limitation, and, consequently, numbers. Therefore, this also extends into the world as actual limitation and number (also into *number* as the word is used in the vernacular).

[In contrast, when the source {of a blessing} is from the G-dly light beyond vessels, from a “place” where there are no vessels, it would also extend into the world in an **in**numerable manner (relative to the world), i.e., a multitude like the stars of the sky, the dust of the earth, and the sand of the sea.]

³¹ {*Atzilus* — Lit., “emanation,” the first and highest of the four spiritual worlds, the realm of spiritual existence which, although encompassing attributes which have a specific definition, is in a state of infinity and at one with the Infinite Divine Light.}

³²{In the Hebrew original, “*kelim*.” In Kabbalah, the *sefiros* (divine emanations) comprise “lights — *oros*,” channeled through “vessels — *kelim*,” that define and modulate their effect upon Creation.}

The difference between these two approaches is whether the vessels are perceptible.

Thus, Hashem's blessing, according to the explanation of *Sifri* and the Midrash, extends from the level of *keser*,³³ where there are no vessels. In contrast, according to Rashi, the blessing extends from the level of *chochmah*. On the level of *chochmah*, there are vessels, but they are barely perceptible; they are rendered insignificant by the light. For this reason, *chochmah*, in general, including its vessels, is called "His life" — lights.³⁴ Moshe's blessing, in which the concepts of limitation and number were stressed, extends from the level of *binah*, where vessels are clearly perceptible.

Torah learning needs to be in both ways — *pshat* (and generally, the revealed parts of Torah) which, in general, is the "number" of Torah;³⁵ and the inner dimension of Torah, the Arizal's Torah (as the Arizal said³⁶ that specifically, in these later generations, we are allowed, and have a mitzvah, to publicize this wisdom. And in our times, this Torah has been revealed {further} through the Torah of Chassidus, in the manner whereby people are "**satiated** by it,"³⁷ by Chassidus Chabad.) In general, this part of Torah is the *Ein Sof* of Torah, beyond the constraints of "number."³⁸ When we study both parts of Torah, in the manner of one Torah, we will merit to see the time foretold in the verse, "The **number** of the people of Israel... which can **be neither measured nor counted**,"³⁹ which will take place in the Future Era. May it be really soon.

— Based on a talk delivered on Shabbos *parshas Devarim*, 5736 (1976)

³³ {*Keser* — literally "crown," is the highest level of the *sefiros*, similar to a crown, which sits on the top of the head. In a human being, the two components of *keser* — *ratzon* and *taanug* {delight} — control and motivate the other faculties. See Rabbi J.I. Schochet, "Mystical Concepts in Chassidism" (Kehot Publication Society, Brooklyn, 1988), pp. 59-71.}

³⁴ See *Likkutei Torah*, "Matos" (87d), et al.

³⁵ *Maamar* "Bayom HaSheini 5685," (*Sefer HaMaamarim Kuntreisim*, vol. 2, 470a); et al.

³⁶ *Tanya*, "Iggeres Hakodesh," epistle 26, (142b).

³⁷ *Tikunei Zohar* (*Tikun* 6, at the end).

³⁸ *Maamar* "Bayom HaSheini 5685," (*Sefer HaMaamarim Kuntreisim*, vol. 2, 470a); et al.

³⁹ *Hoshea* 2:1.