

The Book of Numbers gives us two censuses of the population of Israelite males of fighting age: "post-exodus" and "pre-conquest." While there is a slight decline in the total population between the exodus and the conquest, (from 603,550 to 601,730), there are significant fluctuations in a number of tribes. The top three losers are the tribes of Simeon (-62.55%), Ephraim (-19.75%), and Naphtali (-14.98 %). And the top three gainers are the tribes of Manasseh (+63.33%), Benjamin (+28.81%) and Asher (+28.67%). But aside from the statistical differences between the first and second censuses, the second census is fascinating for another reason: it sprinkles in a few interesting details that refer to other stories in the Torah. There are four of them:

<p>וּבְנֵי אֶלְיָאָב וּמִוָּאֵל  וְדָתָן וְאַבִּירָם הָיוּ  דָּתָן וְאַבִּירָם קְרִיאֵי  הָעֵדָה אֲשֶׁר הָצוּ עַל  מֹשֶׁה וְעַל אֹהֲרֹן  בְּעֵדַת קֹרַח בְּהַצֹּתָם  עַל ה'. וַתִּפְתָּח הָאֲרֶץ  אֶת פִּיהָ וַתִּבְלַע אֹתָם  וְאֶת קֹרַח בָּמוֹת  הָעֵדָה בָּאֶחָל הָאֵשׁ  אֶת חֲמִשִּׁים וּמֵאוֹתָיִם  אִישׁ וְיָהִיו לְנֹס. וּבְנֵי  קֹרַח לֹא מָתוּ.  (בְּמִ' כו: ט-יא)</p>	<p><b>KORAH STORY:</b> <i>These are the same Dathan and Abiram, chosen in the assembly, who agitated against Moses and Aaron as part of Korah's band when they agitated against the LORD. Whereupon the earth opened its mouth and swallowed them up with Korah—when that band died, when the fire consumed the two hundred and fifty men—and they became an example. The sons of Korah, however, did not die.</i> Num. (26:9-11)</p>
<p>בְּנֵי יְהוּדָה עֵר וֹנָאֵן  וַיָּמָת עֵר וֹנָאֵן בְּאֶרֶץ  כְּנָעַן. (כו: יט)</p>	<p><b>JUDAH STORY:</b> <i>Born to Judah: Er and Onan. Er and Onan died in the land of Canaan.</i> (26:19)</p>
<p>וַצִּלְפֹּחֶד בֶּן חֶפֶר לֹא  הָיוּ לוֹ בָּנִים כִּי אִם  בָּנוֹת וְשֵׁם בָּנוֹת  צִלְפֹּחֶד מַחֲלָה וְנוֹחַ  חֲגִלָּה מִלְכָּה וְתִרְצָה.  (כו: לג)</p>	<p><b>DAUGHTERS OF ZEOPHEHAD STORY:</b> <i>Now Zelophehad son of Hepher had no sons, only daughters. The names of Zelophehad's daughters were Mahlah, Noah, Hoglah, Milcah, and Tirzah.</i> (26:33)</p>
<p>וְשֵׁם בֵּת אֲשֶׁר שָׂרָה.  (כו: מז)</p>	<p><b>SERAH STORY:</b> <i>The name of Asher's daughter was Serah.</i> (26:46)</p>

This is a classic example of storytelling. To take the last example, **Serah**: it is as if the storyteller here is saying, *And by the way, Serah was the daughter of Asher. Let me tell you about her...* Serah in the list piqued some curiosity. She is mentioned two other times in the Bible: in the list of Jacob's descendants who went down to Egypt, and in a genealogy in the book of Chronicles. (Gen. 46:17; 1 Chron. 7:30). No doubt, she was the subject of ancient legends and an oral folklore that probably go all the way back to the biblical era. She fits the profile of the *wise-woman* a motif

found in several cultures.<sup>1</sup> One well-known legend attributed to Serah was that when Israel was ready to leave Egypt, Moses had to fulfil the pledge to repatriate Joseph's bones but several hundred years had already gone by and nobody knew where the bones were. Serah, who according to legend was still alive at the time - as Jacob's granddaughter she was hundreds of years old, and the last living link to the original family (!) - literally knew where the bones were buried and told Moses (Sotah 13a). **Zelophehad** and his daughters are mentioned here as a foreshadowing of the story immediately following this census. Zelophehad died in the wilderness without sons, leaving only daughters. They approached Moses asking him for an allotment in the land: *Let not our father's name be lost to his clan just because he had no son! Give us a holding among our father's kinsmen!* (Num. 27:2). Moses brings the question to God, and God rules that, *The plea of Zelophehad's daughters is just: you should give them a hereditary holding among their father's kinsmen; transfer their father's share to them.* (Num. 27:7). In the context of biblical civilization, this is a remarkable moment as it accorded women rights of inheritance. The death of Er and Onan, the sons of **Judah**, hearkens back to the end of the book of Genesis. After Joseph is sold to Egypt as a slave, we digress to the story of Judah. Judah fathered three sons with a Canaanite woman: Er, Onan and Shela. He married off his son Er to a woman named Tamar. But Er died without any male offspring because *he was evil in the eyes of God*. Onan had an obligation to marry and have a child with Tamar to uphold the name of his brother, but Onan *was also evil in the eyes of God*. The story is pivotal in the life of Judah, because after losing two sons, Judah refuses to marry off his third son, Shela, to Tamar resulting a series of deceptions that resulted in Judah fathering a child with Tamar. It is a story of parental and sibling losses, rivalries, comeuppances, and transformations.

Lastly, we have the digression in the tribal story of Reuben, from whom Datan and Aviram descend. We recall those two from the story of the **Korahite** rebellion, and the text reminds us that they were part of the cohort that vanished when the *earth opened its mouth*. While we read that story three weeks ago, the midrash provides an elaborate debate about how the *earth opened its mouth* a debate that is worthy of our consideration:

וַתִּפְתָּח הָאֲרֶץ אֶת פִּיהָ.  
ר' יְהוּדָה אָמַר: בְּאוֹתָהּ שָׁעָה נִפְתְּחוּ לְאֶרֶץ הָרֶבֶה פִּיּוֹת  
שְׁנָאִמַּר: בְּקֶרֶב כָּל הָאֲרֶץ.  
א"ל רַבִּי נַחֲמִיָּה: וְהֵלֵא כְּתִיב וַתִּפְתָּח הָאֲרֶץ אֶת פִּיהָ  
וְהֵיכָד אֵתָּה מְקִיָּם בְּקֶרֶב כָּל הָאֲרֶץ?

<sup>1</sup> Stith Thompson, the famous pioneering folklorist, listed the wise woman as motif N700 in his motif index, which includes Celtic Crones, West African Griots, Greco-Roman

Sybils and Oracles, Native American Shamanesses, and Ashkenazi Bubbe's.

אֵלָא שְׁנַעֲשִׂית הָאָרֶץ כְּמַשְׁפָּד וְכָל מְקוֹם שֶׁהָיָה אֶחָד מֵהֶם אִם מְמוֹנָה מִתְגַּלְגֵּל וְכֵן וַיִּוֹרֵד עִמּוֹ וְנִמְצְאָתָּ מְקִימָם בְּקֶרֶב כָּל הָאָרֶץ וְנִמְצְאָתָּ מְקִימָם וְתַפְסַח הָאָרֶץ אֶת פִּיהָ. יְלָקוּט שְׁמַעוֹנִי תִּשְׁנֶב

*The earth opened its mouth. R. Yehuda said: In that moment, the earth actually opened up several mouths because another verse that tells us, the opening of the earth's mouth was throughout the land. (that means there were several mouths). R. Nehemia countered: But the text specifically says, the earth opened its mouth! (i.e. one mouth). According to your position, the text would have had to say its mouths!) R. Yehuda replied: So how do you explain that the mouth was throughout the land? (R. Nehemia answered:) The earth became a giant funnel and everywhere one of the rebels, or his property stood, he was jostled and whorled into the funnel and went down to the pit with it. In that way we are able to resolve the paradox of the opening being in a large area in the land, and also the earth opening its one mouth. Yalkut Shimoni 752*

R. Yehuda and R. Nehemia are known for their frequent debates. R. Yehuda tends to be more literal and stern in his interpretations, while R. Nehemia tends to be much more imaginative and expansive. We can summarize their positions as follows with the following playful rhyme:

R. Yehuda	Every personal role deserves a personal hole.
R. Nehemia	A mob-amiss deserves a collective abyss.



Rabbinic debates always contain a *deep* truth. *How true in this case of the subterranean punishment for the Korahite cohort!* However, the debate between R. Yehuda and R. Nehemia is not about the geology of sinkholes, dolines, or land subsidence,<sup>2</sup> but about individual and collective culpability in mobs, gangs, and rabble. The basic question is this: is a mob that acts maliciously a **conglomerate of**

**malevolent individuals**, or is a mob essentially a single unit that acts as **one pernicious organism**? In either view, what constitutes the appropriate punishment when a crime is committed? Does every individual deserve to be punished individually? Or should the group receive the same punishment all at the same time, since the group acted as a group? *According to R. Yehuda, each individual in a mob contributes his or her unique talents to the mob.* Next time you see a riot on the news note that each person, while part of a mob, may actually be doing different things. Sloganeers sloganize; vandals vandalize; thugs brawl. No two individual activities in a mob are equal. Some of the anti-Israel demonstrations that we have witnessed over the last two years consist of lawbreakers, people who cause damage, trespass, and commit hate crimes. Each one of those infractions deserves to be adjudicated on its own. Understandably, a person who causes thousands of dollars of damage to a building ought to be fined and penalized more than someone who was just blocking traffic. While the charismatic leader ably harnesses each individual's ugliness, according to R. Yehuda *each individual in the cohort deserves his or her own unique punishment. But according to R. Nehemia each pungent member of a mob dissolves his or her own identity for the sake of the whole, creating a community that is entirely unique in its foul repugnance.* To R. Nehemia, when a mob commits an infraction as a mob, it is impossible for a court to splice out each individual's responsibility. Since Korah's objective was to create a collective, his entire horde belonged in the same subterranean penal ward. Thus, according to R. Nehemia, *the entire cohort deserves to receive punishment as a collective.* These principles are at work in the American legal system. In general, while individuals may be participating in a mob, each individual is responsible for their own conduct. On the other hand, individuals may be held liable as a group if they acted together toward a shared criminal goal. Bottom line: *To R. Yehuda hell is to descend into your own personal pit, blaming yourself forever for stupidly believing the charlatan and swearing fealty to him. To R. Nehemia hell is to be flushed into a vortex of fellow believers and reside with them in an eternal sewer.* Question: For the murderous mobs of irredeemable Jew-haters around the globe, which version is more appropriate?

**Shabbat Shalom!**

**Day 652. We pray for an end to the war and the return of the hostages. May God comfort the bereaved, protect the IDF, and heal the wounded.**

**This Parasha Sheet is sponsored by Renee Feinblatt and family in honor of the Birthday of Stuart Feinblatt. Mazel Tov!**

<sup>2</sup>Terrain with underground formations such as caves and depressions are called "karst" landscapes. A karst landscape may include large areas dotted with sinkholes. Currently, near the Dead Sea there are many sinkholes. The development of all

karst landforms requires the presence of rock which is capable of being dissolved by surface water or ground water. From, Matt Rosenberg, Your Guide to Geography. University of Missouri-St. Louis website.