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BEROV AM HADRAT MELEKH, DEMOCRACY, AND CHURCH-STATE ISSUES

By Rabbi Aryeh Klapper

The phrase *berov am hadrat melekh*, taken from Mishlei 14:28, is probably invoked most often in contemporary Orthodox conversations to oppose “breakaway minyanim”, or to encourage *minyan* attendance even when the *minyan* is assured; this argument has the advantage of applying equally to men and women. The assumed meaning is that G-d as king is more *badarified* by one large crowd praying than by several smaller crowds, even if the total number of participants remains the same or decreases.

The Talmud (Yoma 70a and Megillah 27b) uses the phrase in this meaning only to explain *hava aminos*, halakhic roads not taken. We might have banned selling a synagogue building to a smaller congregation, or required onlookers at one part of a ritual to stay throughout rather than moving to a second, but we don’t. Nonetheless, Magen Avraham (90:15) reasonably assumes that the principle survives the rejection of those specific applications.

Magen Avraham’s own application is surprising. He uses it to explain why a person should pray alone at home at the same time as his synagogue’s minyan rather than waiting to pray with a minyan at home. This shifts the “crowd” from the actual to the virtual, and suggests that breakaways should make sure to meet at the same time as the main shul.

In several other contexts (Sukkah 52b, Pesachim 64b; see also Rosh HaShannah 32b), the Talmud used *berov am* to explain a bias toward increasing ACTIVE participation. The *avodah* of the Temple was broken into as many pieces as possible so that each *kohen* had a role to play. This suggests that multiple simultaneous minyanim might be ideal, on the model I’ve seen several synagogues when there are multiple *chiyuvim*.

However, Berakhot 53a appears to use the phrase to promote an exactly opposite position: that it is better for one person to vicariously fulfill the obligation of a crowd rather than to have each individual fulfill it for themselves.

Oceans of ink have been spilled to reconcile and unify these meanings. But the simplest solution is that the phrase itself

has no single halakhic meaning; rather, it is invoked as a mnemonic for a variety of purposes, some of which are in tension with each other.

(Midrash Mishlei additionally cites Rabbi Chanina bar Chama as praising G-d for preferring the praises of *am* Yisroel over those of the vastly more numerous (*rivei revavot*) angels. I don’t understand how this interpretation relates to our verse.)

In all the above contexts, the *melekh* is G-d. However, RaDaK to Yechezkel 46:10 applies the verse to a human king. Yechezkel depicts the *nasi* in a future Temple as using a private entrance and exit most days, but

on festivals he must come with the *am* where they come,
and leave with them where they leave,
because all of Israel who are there came up for the *regel*,
and it is his honor/*kavod* and glory/*hadar* to come with
them and leave with them
because Scripture says “*berov am hadrat melekh*”.

RaDaK imposes an obligation on the human *nasi* to contribute to his own *hadar* by joining the crowds. It’s tempting to consider whether there are theological parallels. For example: Is this why the Shekhinah is present at every *minyan*?

Regardless, RaDaK carries the crucial implication that any halakhic obligation of *hadar* toward a king is not about the subordination of some humans to another. Indeed, it might be that the *berov am* obligation is always best understood as a bias toward joining with the crowd when you share its ideals and purposes, rather than focusing on your private experience. This obligation applies equally to king and commoner.

This democratic-tending understanding is strengthened when we consider *berov am* in tandem with the later Rabbinic-epigram אין מלך בלא עם = there is no king, i.e. there is no meaningful kingship, without an *am*. Moreover, it seems to me that this sort of interpretation is necessary if we consider the full verse Mishlei 14:28:

הַדָּרַת־מֶלֶךְ בְּרֵב־עַם
 מִחַתַּת־רִזּוֹן וּבִאֲפֶסֶס לְאֹם
 With a large *am*
 there is glory for the *melekh*
 But in the absence of a *leom*
 there is fear for the *razon*

The inverse of *hadar*/glory is not *mehitab*/fear unless we understand the presence of the people as constitutive of monarchy rather than as a mere aesthetic flourish. Rashi takes this implication on directly, but with the qualifications necessary for a theological context:

כִּרְבַּע עַם = כִּשְׁהַצְבוּר זְכָאִים –
 הַדָּרַת הַקְּדוּשׁ בְּרוּךְ הִיא:
 = וּבִאֲפֶסֶס לְאֹם
 כִּשְׂאִינָם דְּבָקִים בּוֹ

מִחַתַּת רִזּוֹן = חֶסְרוֹן רִזּוּנָתוֹ = הוּא כְּבִיכּוֹל נוֹתֵן מִכְבוּדוֹ לְאֱלֹהֵי נֹכַח
 וּמְשַׁלֵּיט אֶת הָאוֹמוֹת עַל בְּנָיו.

With a large *am* = when the community is worthy –
 there is glory for the Holy Blessed One
 But in the absence of a *leom* =
 when they are not attached to Him
 there is fear for the *razon* = as if it were possible, He gives
 some of His honor to alien gods
 and puts the other nations in power over His children

One would not need the “as if it were possible” in the context of human monarchy, nor would the transfer of honor be voluntary. RaLBaG makes this clear:

הַדָּר הַמֶּלֶךְ הוּא כְּשִׁיחִיָּה לוֹ רַבּוּי עַם, כִּי בָּם יִתְחַזַּק כִּנְגַד הַקְּמִי' עַלְיוֹ,
 וְאוֹלָם בְּהַעֲדָר הָעַם מִמֶּנּוּ - יֵשׁ לוֹ מִחַתַּת שִׁיחִיָּה לוֹ רִזּוֹן וְכַחֲשׁ בְּקוֹם עַלְיוֹ
 אָדָם לְהִלָּחֵם בּוֹ:

The glory of a king is when he has a large populace,
 because they strengthen him to stand against his enemies
 but when the nation absents itself from him
 he fears that he will have *razon* and weakness when a man
 arises to do battle with him

RaLBaG seems to be translating *razon* as thinness, perhaps based on Yeshayahu 24:16. Almost everyone else, however, more plausibly understands *razon* as in parallelism with *melekh* and referring to some sort of leader. The issue then becomes whether one prefers to interpret parallel structures as synonymous, so that *razon*=*melekh*, or to look for significance in every change. Thus Alshikh for example understands *razon* as a subordinate to a *melekh*, while Hoil Mosheh understand a *melekh* to be a just ruler, who therefore has confidence in his populace, while a *razon* is a ruler-by-

force who therefore lives in fear that the population will abandon him.

But the exemplar of the position that the second half of a parallel structure must always add meaning is Malbim. I find his interpretation of our verse politically creative, utterly fascinating, and very, very difficult to understand.

A collective that has a *melekh*/king is called an *am*, while a collective that as a unique religion/*dat* is called a *leom*.

Roznim are advisors/*sarei eitzah*,

but there is a difference between a *rozen* and a *yoetz*:
Yoatzim address political issues (עֲנִינֵי מְדִינָה) and their advice is public,

whereas *roznim* deal with hidden matters,
 and their mandate includes matters of religion and its laws
 (. . . עֲנִינֵי הַדַּת וְחֻקֶיהָ)

The *hadar* of a king happens via a large *am*, because there is a distinction between *hod* and *hadar*:
hadar is external glory, as relevant to any issue,
 and therefore the *hadar* of a king is proportional to the size of his *am*,

but the *razon* who has charge over the laws of the *dat* –
 even if there is an *am*, but no *leom*,
 meaning that there are no *baalei daat*,
 he is in fear, because he will be unable to accomplish anything.

As best I can make out, Malbim here acknowledges the “Jewish problem”, namely that we are both an *am* and a *leom*, a political and a religious collective. But I don’t understand his political solution. Why should the advice given to the king on religious matters be kept secret? Are the *roznim* and the *dat* ultimately subordinate to the *melekh*, or do they have constitutionally independent spheres of influence? What happens when an *am* contains members of many *leoms*? Any and all help you can give me in figuring this out would be greatly appreciated.

Shabbat shalom!

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