# Torah math

Towards the end of the Book of Leviticus, we find in chapter 26 a listing of the blessings which will ensue if the people follow God's ways. Among these blessings are peace, prosperity, safety from wild animals, fertility of land and people, and victory over enemies. In today's reflection we explore a curious detail which caught the eye of the Jewish sages in this latter blessing. Read all the blessings in 26:1-13, then ponder the reference to victory over enemies in 26:7-8.

*"You shall give chase to your enemies, and they shall fall before you by the sword. Five of you shall give chase to a hundred, and a hundred of you shall give chase to ten thousand; your enemies shall fall before you by the sword"* (Lev. 26:7-8).

The sages we hear from today[*] approach this verse in terms of the spiritual struggle of virtuous people amidst a multitude who could not care less for God or the ways of the Torah. They notice something odd about the Torah's mathematics in verse 8. If five chase 100, then wouldn't it be more consistent to maintain the same ratio and say 100 shall chase 2000? Why does the ratio change so dramatically: 100 shall chase 10,000?! How do you interpret the discrepancy?

Perhaps, like Rabbi Bahya,[1] you have tried to solve the math with more math: *"Five of you shall chase a hundred, and a hundred 'fives' of you shall chase ten thousand. Thus the account is seen to match."*

But other commentators are not so impressed by this ingenious solution. If the numbers tally, what does the second phrase add to the first? Rashi[2] finds interpretative energy in the very fact that the numbers *don't* match. He says, *"You cannot compare a few [i.e., 5] who perform the commandments of the Torah to many [i.e., 100] who perform the commandments of the Torah."*

In other words, Rashi is noting that something surprising happens when virtuous people band together against wickedness. Their impact and chance of success increase in a manner disproportionate to their increase in numbers.

Gersonides (Ralbag)[3] explains it this way: In a military situation one soldier against two will not win; but 100 against 200 have a far better chance. An increased minority can even find an advantage over a larger army. With focused resources and clever strategy, a small team can outwit a larger force.

Thus the moral lesson emerging from this verse of blessing is to highlight the individual's responsibility to contribute to forces for good. Let no one say, "What difference can I, just one person, make to an already outnumbered group of Torah-observers? In fact, teach the sages, when one faithful person joins forces with a small committed group he/she strengthens that group by far more than simply one person's individual efforts.

Our Torah reflection reminds us that when even a few good people unite for good they can truly make a difference in a world that often appears indifferent to the paths of God. On our own we are like twigs which can easily be broken. But a bunch of twigs bound together is much harder to break, even though each twig in itself is fragile. Can you think of an experience when you found this to be true?

Continue to ponder this blessing of 'victory over enemies.' For instance, it is interesting that the blessing is not simply 'you will have no enemies', but that you will *overcome* your enemies even from what appears to be a weaker position. Perhaps this blessing is a one of hope, encouragement and strengthened resolve amidst struggle. •

* Source: Leibowitz, *New Studies in Vayikra* (NY, 1993). Scripture: NRSV

1. Bahya Ibn Pakuda. 11th century. Spain; wrote a Jewish ethical classic 'Duties of the Heart.'
2. Rashi: Rabbi Shelomo Yizhaki (1040-1105), France.
3. Gersonides (Ralbag): Levi ben Gershon. French philosopher (1288-1344).