

## (#21) Motley Mob, part 1

Earlier we considered composition of the group that departed in the Exodus, with many enslaved *Yisrael-ites* not leaving *Mitzrayim* while many *Mitzrayim-ites* did (see “#9: All of Us?”). The “*erevrav*” (or “*erev rav*”) who join the Exodus present a complex image crucial to explore. Sometimes translated as “motley mob” or “mixed multitude,” more in box, next page.

...Two Hebrew expressions are used untranslated here, because how to translate them is the main, open question -- hoping this is not too distracting....

We know very little about this group from the bible’s two verses on the topic:

- When *Yisrael* is escaping from *Mitzrayim*, “an *erevrav*” goes up with them (Exodus 12:38). No details and no drama described -- although do note that the *erevrav* is mentioned with the livestock, flocks, and herds.
- Later, some two years into the wilderness trek, “the ‘*asafsuf*’ has a craving [Old JPS: “fell a lusting”] for food back in *Mitzrayim*, and *Yisrael-ites* cry along with them (Numbers 11:4). This is one in a series of complaints to Moses, and challenges to God; it results in God’s ire and gruesome death to the gluttonous folks.

Some Jewish commentary, going back at least 1000 years, has equated the two expressions, *erev rav* and ‘*asaf suf*. This has the effect of giving the otherwise benign group, found in Exodus, the lustful, complaining, leadership-challenging characteristics of the group in the Book of Numbers. In addition, says Rabbi Gerry Serotta (cited above, #9), there is already an assumption within the Biblical text, that “the troublemakers and dissidents are drawn from the *eravrav*... although, of course, the worst troublemakers are the dissident Levites and Reubenites (Korach, Datan and Aviram, see Num 16ff) or even the murderous Levites themselves.”

“This represents a tendency from Israelite times to the present day, to see the Jewish people as a pure ‘ethnos’ and not an admixture of peoples,” Serotta explains. He goes on to discuss Jewish views, from ancient times until now, of intermarriage and conversion -- an important, related topic for another day.

For a host of historical reasons, those negative readings of verses in the Bible, in turn, contributed to the development of ethnocentric ideas of being *Yisrael-ite*, biblically, and Jewish, across a variety of geographic and demographic settings. In this way, what may look like a minor issue in translation and textual analysis -- around two little used expressions -- has had deep and long-lasting effects in the Jewish world and beyond. Re-examining this can have deep and long-lasting effects, too.

*v'gam erev rav* -- וגם-ערב רב

And a mixed multitude went up with them--וְגַם-עֶרְבַּ רַב, עָלָה אִתָּם  
-- Exodus 12:38

Other Jewish translations:

"a great mixture of nationalities" (*Me'Am Lo'ez*, Turkey, 1730)

"motley mob not of Israelite origin" (Cassuto, Italy, 1883–1951)

"motley throng" (Robert Alter, U.S., 2004); cites Cassuto but opts non-alliterative

King James (1611): "Mixed multitude."

Newer Christian translations: "rabble," "mixed crowd," "an ethnically diverse crowd," and "many other people"

*v'ha-asaf-suf* -- והאסףסוף

והאסףסוף אשר בקרבם, התאו תאוה

And the riffraff that was in their midst felt a craving

וישב ויבכו, גם בני ישראל, ויאמרו, מי יאכלנו בשר.

and the Israelites, too, again wept and said, "Who will feed us meat? [We remember the fish we used to eat for free, the cucumbers and the melons and...]

-- Numbers 11:4 (Alter translation)

"Riff Raff" is from Old French for "one and all."

Oxford English Dictionary:  
Persons of a disreputable character or belonging to the lowest class of a community; the scum of a community, class, etc.

Funk & Wagnalls:  
Populace or rabble.

### Always a Mixed Multitude!! ??

In 2016, Jews for Racial and Economic Justice (JFREJ) published "Mixed Multitudes: Nobody's Free 'til Everybody's Free, A Racial Justice Haggadah for Pesach." It includes this clear explanation:

The mixed multitude ["*erevrav*"] comes from Exodus 12:38. In the Israelites departure from Mitzrayim, the biblical text says: "moreover, a mixed multitude went up with them." A mixed multitude of others -- Egyptians and others living in Mitzrayim who, like the Israelites, needed to escape from the narrow place. We have always been a mixed multitude.

In recent years, "we were always a mixed multitude" has become more popular among Jewish teachers, and I fear something crucial is lost in translation: not from the Hebrew, but in the English "we."

JFREJ described "a mixed multitude" as a group who "**like the Israelites** needed to escape from the narrow place." This "we" includes *Yisrael-ites* **and** others, Jews **and** non-Jews. I love this language and find it powerful for circumstances, like community organizing, when the "we" is, e.g., "all concerned about displacement in DC." But I have also seen this idea used as an attempt to emphasize variety **within** the "*Yisrael-ite* community," biblically, and the Jewish community today. The long-term effect of the latter, I am concerned, will be to re-other historically marginalized Jews, including Mizrahi Jews and Jews of Color. In short, I worry this is unintentionally a new way of calling some Jews riff raff.

I am all for separating "Jew" from any kind of ethnic identity: "We (Jews)" are a varied group of all hues, ethnicities, cultures, and backgrounds....and Gerry Serotta suggested that maybe a re-purposing of "*erevrav*," as short-hand for that, is underway. Moreover, an old tradition sees "Jews" as growing out of a joint *Yisrael-ite/erevrav* conversion at Sinai (see #23). But I think we need language emphasizing that "we (Jews)" have always been varied **and** that we (Jews) have always lived and loved and learned within a larger, and varied, "we (wider community)." Just as "joining hands and marching" has sometimes flattened out important differences in our experiences, I think failing to distinguish between *Yisrael-ite* and *erevrav* will muddy our thinking about who is out here in this wilderness and what it means for us.

### Sefira: Counting Days & Weeks/Marking the Journey

What are your thoughts on our multitudinous nature  
as Jews and as a wider community?  
How do we speak usefully about the various 'we's to which we belong?

After nightfall, see Appendix and note --  
Yesterday we counted twenty.

## Source Pages for #15-#21

Bible translations are slightly adapted JPS, except as noted

Cassuto explains in his Commentary on the Book of Exodus that a “sexagesimal” (60-based) number system, versus the 10-based decimal system, was common in the ancient world, including Babylon. On this particular verse, he says: “the figure...comprises a round number in the sexigesimal system (360), with the addition of a multiple of seven (70)”

-- Cassuto, *Commentary on the Book of Exodus*, p.148

Some scholars go to great lengths to calculate the ages and timing of people and events in the Bible so that 430 makes sense.

### Mixed Messages

Not all Jewish commentary on “mixed multitude” has been negative. For example:

- ***Shemot Rabbah*** (compiled around 1200 CE from earlier sources) says at one point that the “proper [*kosher* ]” people of *Mitzrayim* joined *Yisrael* in making the Passover sacrifice and left with them.
- ***Me’am Lo’ez*** (18th Century CE) explains “*erev rav*” by describing at some length, and quite positively, magicians, formerly of Pharaoh’s court, among some 2.4 million converts leaving *Mitzrayim*.\*\*
- **Umberto Cassuto** (mid-20th Century) focuses on syntax and origin of the word *erevrav*, noting similarity between this and *asafsuf* (from Num 11:4) and several expressions from Isaiah. No judgement of the population.
- **Robert Alter** (late 20th, early 21st Century) focuses on literary and thematic structure of the Book of Numbers and suggests that the text is describing two kinds of gatherings around Moses -- “motley mob” vs “prophetic elders gathered” (Num 11:24) -- rather than making any kind of statement about group identity.

\*\*Note: *Me’am Lo’ez* is a compilation, also including notes about converts retaining pagan ways, being instigators when *Yisrael* sinned, and bearing the brunt of of punishment (“rind” to the desert travelers’ “fruit”). *The Torah Anthology*, p105