



A Minyan – Why Ten

Why do we need a minyan of ten people to pray? Because of a mighty and invisible Divine power that ten Jews can bring into the world.

The Secret of Gas

The Land of Israel, without a doubt, is the national treasure of the Jewish Nation. But several years ago, it was discovered that Israel is sitting on a vast reserve of natural gas. Experts estimate that this deposit could support Israel's economy for several decades, if not longer.

Let's take a moment to talk about natural gas. One fascinating (and potentially deadly) characteristic of natural gas is that it has no taste, smell, or color. Over a hundred years ago, workers in coal mines were among the first to encounter natural gas. Because it's odorless, tasteless, and colorless, they often got poisoned without realizing it. To protect themselves, miners began bringing small pets or birds, often canaries, into the mines. If the animals died, it was a warning sign that there was gas present.

Today, we have gas detectors to alert us to the presence of natural gas, and a strong odor is added to the substance to serve as a warning tool. It took the industry a few years to learn how to harness this gas and turn it into something useful and positive, like heating.

Now, every Jew knows that if they want to say Kaddish, they need a minyan. No matter where you are—whether in an airport or any other place in the world with a synagogue—you're likely to be stopped by someone asking if you can join a minyan as the tenth man.

But where did this idea of needing a minyan, a quorum of ten, come from? What's the source for it? One source in the Torah is this week's Torah portion, the story of the Miraglim, the Spies. When they returned from scouting the Holy Land and spoke negatively about it,

G-d said to Moshe (Bamidbar 14:27), “How long shall this evil congregation exist?” Here, the word “eidah,” or group, refers to the group of ten spies. Rashi comments, “From here we learn that ‘eidah’ means [a group of] ten.”

The Talmud Yerushalmi (Tractate Berachos 6:3) gives another source, learning that a minyan is ten from the story of Yosef’s brothers. In the Torah portion of Miketz, which we read just a few weeks ago, it tells about the brothers who went down from the Holy Land to Egypt to buy food. The Torah states, “Yosef’s ten brothers went down to buy grain in Egypt” (Bereishis 42:3). The Midrash (Tanchuma, Miketz 6) asks, “Why ten? Because they have the power to push away punishment. When G-d came to destroy Sodom and Avraham asked for mercy, he requested redemption for the city in the merit of 50 good people and negotiated down to ten... because ten is an eidah... and therefore, the Torah says, ‘And Yosef’s ten brothers went down...’”

Why Ten?

Yet the question remains—why ten? Why aren’t seven Jews enough for a minyan? Or why not 12? After all, there were 12 original Tribes of Israel. What’s so special about the number ten?

So, let’s explore this for a minute. Does anyone know where we find the number ten in the Torah? [Interact with the audience.] The answer that most of us will think of right away is the famous Ten Commandments. G-d chose to give us the laws of the Torah on Mt. Sinai with ten statements, not nine or eleven. That’s one significant instance of the number ten.

Another example is the Ten Plagues. As we read in this Torah portion and the previous one, G-d struck the ancient Egyptians with ten plagues. There’s no specific reason it had to be ten plagues—G-d could have freed the Jewish people in one swift action without any plagues. Pharaoh could have just changed his mind, or G-d could have chosen any other method. Yet, for reasons beyond our full understanding, G-d chose to deliver exactly ten plagues.

But there’s another crucial reason why the number ten is special, one that not many people are aware of. In the Mishnah, in the tractate of Pirkei Avos (Ethics of the Fathers), we are taught, “The universe was created with ten utterances” (Avos 5:1). This means that when G-d created the universe, He did so with speech, with sayings. The most famous of these sayings is “Let there be light!” But there are nine other sayings that brought the universe into being: “And G-d said, ‘Let there be a firmament,’” “And G-d said, ‘Let us make man,’” and so on.

In short, G-d chose to create the universe specifically with ten statements. When we say, “G-d created the universe with ten utterances,” we mean that each of us must constantly remember that G-d created the universe. He is the One who said, “Let there be light!” and light appeared. He is the One who said, “Let us make man!” and thus we exist as human beings.

Over the generations, people forgot that there is a Creator of the universe and began worshiping idols. When G-d wanted to give the Torah, the laws by which the world should operate, there was no one who acknowledged Him—no one even knew there was a Creator. So, to remind everyone of the Ten Utterances, G-d brought about the Ten Plagues. These plagues were a “reminder” that there is indeed a Creator who made the universe with ten statements and that He is in control.

Only after this reminder did G-d give the Ten Commandments. Before humanity could follow G-d’s commandments, they first needed to recognize and know that there is a G-d. Only then could they accept His laws.

But there’s yet another interesting aspect of the number ten. According to halachah, each time the Torah is read in public, a minimum of ten verses, or pesukim, must be read. The halachah states, “Ein pos’chin may’asarah pesukim b’beis hak’nesess”—we don’t read fewer than ten verses in the synagogue.

The Talmud (Tractate Megillah 21a) discusses this: “These ten [verses] correspond to whom? Rav Yosef says, to the Ten Commandments that were spoken to Moshe at Sinai; and Rabbi Yochanan says, to the Ten Utterances with which the universe was created.” In other words, the reason we read a minimum of ten verses each time the Torah is read in public is to remind us of the Ten Utterances and the Ten Commandments. Simply put, it serves as a reminder that G-d created the universe and gave us the Torah.

We might even say that this is another reason why we need exactly ten people for a prayer service—to remind us of those very same things: that G-d created the universe and gave us the Torah.

Every Person Counts

There was a Holocaust survivor named Abba Kovner. He was one of the leaders of the Vilna Ghetto and the Polish resistance. After the Holocaust, he made aliyah to the Holy Land and became a writer and poet. Abba Kovner writes in one of his books that during his first week

in the Holy Land, he visited the Kotel HaMaaravi, the Western Wall. He approached the wall but stopped one step away from the stones—he felt that the place had no meaning for him. He felt rooted in a different experience and wasn't ready to approach the Kotel. Then, someone tugged on his sleeve and asked him to join a minyan.

So Abba Kovner, a Holocaust resistance hero who wasn't particularly religious, put on a hat and joined the prayers. Suddenly, he felt that he had arrived, that he belonged. When he finishes the story, he adds that the nine need the one and the one needs the nine—in his opinion, that is the most meaningful thing in Judaism.

Chasidic philosophy, however, illuminates the concept of ten Jews in a much loftier and more spiritual light. And here, we return to our opening theme of natural gas. In one of his letters, the Alter Rebbe writes about the greatness of the minyan. He quotes the Sages (Talmud, Tractate Sanhedrin 39a), "Upon every group of ten, the Divine Presence dwells."

This means that when ten Jews gather together—not necessarily men over the age of 13—the Shechinah (the Divine Presence) descends upon them. For instance, when ten Jewish babies are put together in one room, it may be adorably cute, but it also draws down the Divine Presence at a very high level, creating a powerful spiritual energy.

The Power

The Alter Rebbe adds, "I heard from my masters that if even one angel is found at an assembly of ten Jews, even if they are not speaking words of Torah, an endless dread and panic falls upon him because of the Shechinah resting upon them, to the point that the angel will be completely negated."

In essence, the Alter Rebbe is saying that when ten Jewish souls gather, the spiritual energy present is so intense that even an angel cannot stand firm and becomes completely negated. Just like natural gas, which has no color, taste, or smell but still exists and has powerful qualities, so too is the Shechinah. Even though it has no physical characteristics—no color, taste, smell, size, or dimensions—it exists in full strength.

And this, my friends, is the power of ten Jews gathering together. From this, we learn that a Jew should not only seek out a minyan when he needs to say Kaddish. Rather, at every possible opportunity, he should try to be in the company of other Jews instead of being alone. This also holds true for Torah study. While a person can study Torah alone,

learning in the company of ten other Jews brings the Shechinah to dwell there at an entirely different level.

Perhaps this is another reason why observant Jews aim to have ten children—because they want the Shechinah in the house all the time. And in a house full of kids, one thing is for sure—there's plenty of energy in the air.