

Ben-Zion Fischler (Jerusalem)

Ten Batlanim (= Ten Men of Leisure)

To Prof. J. Allerhand [Now: Emeritus]:
Otium cum dignitate!

Prolegomenon

In the Roman world (i. e. Latin language) one word, *otium*, serves to express two (almost) contradictory concepts. On the one hand, it means idleness, laziness, inactivity; on the other hand, it serves as an expression for rest and relaxation after years of work – the comfort of retirement after years of service (mainly in the area of politics),¹ along the lines of the Hebrew-Aramaic saying: “acharey tircha – etnach” (= after labor comes rest). This is what Cicero recommends (perhaps somewhat wickedly) to his colleague, namely to retire from politics and public life and enjoy his free time (without the responsibility and obligations which rest on a public figure): “*Otium cum dignitate*” – “Retirement (that you deserve) with dignity”.

By way of contrast, Ovidius states: “*Omnium malorum origo otium*” – “Idleness is the source of all evil”.

This, apparently, was the prevailing perception prior to the spread of Christianity throughout Europe: to him who works hard all his life, inactivity provides a well-deserved rest; but to a lazy good-for-nothing it brings evils, crimes and sins. In the course of time, the two concepts, which used to reside, as it were, in the same basket (i.e. in the same dictionary entry), parted from one another, and the semantic field of inactivity = “*otium*” was set aside (in the proverb) exclusively for its negative meaning: the source of evil, the root of wickedness. It is not for nothing that Wagner² cites the following sentence as an example of medieval Latin: “*Turpe est otuari*” (“Idleness is a shameful [or: disgraceful] thing”), and in his French translation: “*la paresse est choseonteuse*”.

It is therefore not surprising that Ignatius,³ founder of the Jesuit order, warns his brothers in the constitution of the new order: (in Spanish) “...porque el ocio que es origen de todos los males...” (= for idleness is the source of all evils). This dictum was later translated into Latin:⁴ “...(ne) *otium malorum omnium origo*...”

This official seal of approval undoubtedly helped this saying to be absorbed among the people, though Ignatius was not the first to use it: long before him it was well known in other parts of Europe, too.

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I

In the course of an extensive and comprehensive article due to be published shortly, which deals with various types of inactivity and its consequences according to the Bible and the Sayings of the Sages, I also discussed two concepts belonging to this semantic field, namely “idlers” and “batlanim”. Both of these dictionary entries have negative connotations. The first indicates inactivity not only because of unavoidable circumstances but – perhaps mainly? – out of free will and choice. The second, which also points to abstention from work, has a touch of indulgence about it – hence the Yiddish expression “A Yid a batlan”, meaning that the person in question does not understand matters of business or how to earn his livelihood, and he is far removed from the practical world of action.

We shall devote this brief article not to ordinary batlanim but to an institution (yes, this is the right name) unparalleled among the civilizations where we dwelt in the course of our history – namely: “Ten Batlanim”.

II

In the Mishna (Megillah I, 3) it is taught: “...What is considered a large town? – One which has in it ten Batlanim...” And where do they meet (lit. reside)? According to the Gemara (Tractate Megillah 5a): “...Ten Batlanim in the synagogue...” Although the function of this *Minyan* (quorum of ten adult Jews) is not properly defined, we learn about the importance of this “institution” from what is reflected in our various sources, e. g. in the Talmudic Tractate Sanhedrin 17b: “...What must the population of a town be in order that it may qualify for a Sanhedrin (= High Court)? – A hundred and twenty!...” Here follows a list of functionaries without whom a town cannot qualify to be called “town”. Among those functionaries are “...ten Batlanim of the synagogue...” Rashi explains: “...ten people who refrain from doing any work, so that they should be available for morning and evening synagogue (religious) services...”

Concerning their great importance among the various functionaries we learn from a citation in the Talmudic Tractate Megillah 3b: “...Rabbi Joshua ben Levi said: A city that was laid waste but was eventually re-settled is considered a city... What is meant by ‘laid waste’? – Laid waste of its ten Batlanim...”

Some attribute only a minor function to these Ten Batlanim namely to be present in the synagogue for the purpose of ‘populating’ it. Thus, Rabbi Yohanan said (Talmud, Tractate Berachot 6b): “...Whenever the Holy One, blessed be He, comes into a synagogue and does not find ten persons there, he immediately becomes angry. For it is said ‘Why, when I

came, was there no man? When I called, there was none that answered (Isaiah 50: 2)'..." However, about the high value of the Ten Batlanim we learn from another citation (Jerusalem Talmud, Tractate Megillah, chapter 1, Halacha 6): "...It has been taught, ten men that refrain from doing any work, so that they should be present in the synagogue. Rabbi Judah said: for example, we (viz. scholars) who are not dependent on our learning to earn our livelihood..."

From here and from various other sources we can infer that the Ten Batlanim were scholars (and apparently also wealthy men) of high social standing who did not need to work and enjoyed plenty of spare time. Furthermore, from these citations we can draw an approximate picture concerning the range and character of their function in the community and their engagement in public affairs.⁵ Thus Rabbi Joshua ben Hananiah expounded the verse "And let them judge the people at all times" (Exodus 18: 22) i. e. "...people who refrain from doing their work, so that they could judge the people at all times".⁶

III

We do not know until which period, in which localities and under which status this institution functioned. About its existence as late as the 12th century we read in the book of the travels of Rabbi Benjamin of Tudela⁷ in his account of his visit to Baghdad:

...R. Zakkai, the son of Bostanai the Nasi, is the Head (Baal) of the Sium.⁸ These are the ten Batlanim, and they do not engage in any other work than communal administration; and all the days of the week they judge the Jews, their countrymen, except on the second day of the week, when they all appear before the chief rabbi Samuel, the head of the Yeshiva, Gaon (Jacob), who in conjunction with the other Batlanim judges all those that appear before him...

IV

Many believed, and still believe, that the Ten Batlanim are mentioned in the Bible. Here are examples reflecting the belief that this 'institution' has its roots in biblical times:⁹

...He (Ezra the Scribe, 5th century B. C.) came and ordained that three men should read ten verses, corresponding to the Ten Batlanim...

The text is a mixture of Aramaic and Hebrew. Rabbi Eybeschütz in his Ethical (Moral) Reproof, between Rosh Hashana and Yom Kippur (Metz 1745) translated it into Hebrew (so that the congregation may better understand it). Here is the English rendition:¹⁰

...Likewise, he (Ezra) ordained that on Mondays and Thursdays ten (Torah) verses should be read (during the morning service in the synagogue), corresponding to the Batlanim who refrain from engaging in work, and instead engage in the study of the divine Law (Torah)...

V

During the centuries preceding ours, the character of this 'institution' as well as its functions and composition underwent considerable changes. It was no longer a matter of taking care of the needs of the community or finding solutions for individuals in quandary requiring counselling and decisions. Likewise, it was no longer the high status enjoyed by the (former) Batlanim thanks to their scholarship, and probably also because of their wealth, seeing that they did not have to worry about sustenance and earning a livelihood. Their place was taken by poor aged persons who would spend most of the day in the synagogue, and the community would take care of their maintenance as well as of the needs of their families.

Of course, the transition from the ancient institution of Ten Batlanim to the groups of ten Batlanim in our age was not a sudden one in the sense of an upheaval in the perception of the religious world. This argument will be proven by the following examples.

1) This is what the writer Lilienblum¹¹ writes in his memoirs:

...My father's mother always used to say that she was a granddaughter of two great and wealthy Rabbis (possibly even Geonim), namely Rabbi Mordecai of Tiktin, at whose table ten idle scholars were always seated, and they engaged in the study of the Torah...

2) Concerning Rabbi Pinchas (son of Rabbi Avraham Shapira, one of the disciples of the Baal Shem-Tov) of Koritz it is told:¹²

...Rabbi Pinchas used to keep in his Beth Midrash ten Batlanim, and every Friday (= on Sabbath-eve) he used to distribute a rouble (= Russian monetary coin) to each one, and so he always handed 10 roubles to his pupil, Rabbi Jacob Batlan...

3) In a short article, with the heading "A large town and ten Batlanim",¹³ we read as follows:

...Within this narrow framework we must mention that the city of Lemberg was saturated with 'holy societies'. One of them, which had been founded by the city's (Chief) Rabbi, Rabbi J. S. Nathanson, of blessed memory, was 'the Holy Society, the Men of the Maamad'. The members of this society spent the entire day studying Torah and praying, and their livelihood was provided out of community funds. This society was based on the teaching in the Mishna: '...What is reckoned a large town? – One

which has in it ten Batlanim...' These Batlanim who were selected by the Chief Rabbi of the city and its communal leaders, were the glory of Lemberg, and following the example of this society, other societies were founded such as 'the Society for the maintenance of Torah study', etc...

4) Our last citation is from a story entitled "A Stepmother", from a Yemenite festival prayer book (in manuscript; 18th century?) at the Jewish Theological Seminary in New York:¹⁴

...Afterwards she built a synagogue, and acquired for it beautiful choice objects as well as Torah scrolls. She appointed ten elderly (learned) men to stay with her in order to engage in the study of Torah and to teach her son Torah...

This description agrees with Yehuda Razhabi's definition in his *Otzar Leshon ha-Kodesh she-li-Vney Teyman* [Yemenite Thesaurus of the Holy Tongue] (Tel-Aviv 1978, p. 30):

...Batlanim – Elderly (learned) men who are studying Torah in the synagogues and are supported out of community funds.

VI

I want to conclude this note with the personal testimony of Dr Michael Riegler, former Director of the Judaic Studies Reading Room at The National and University Library in Jerusalem, who served as a teacher at the Moshav (agricultural settlement) Sharsheret during the 1950's – as well as with the information provided to me by Prof. (Emeritus) Moshe Aberbach who served as Professor of Bible and Jewish History at Baltimore Hebrew College (now: University):

1) "...In the early days of the State of Israel, when settlements for immigrants were founded all over the country, many of the immigrants came from North Africa. In one of these settlements 'Sharsheret', in the north of the Western Negev, and in the neighboring township "Azzata" (today: 'Netivot'), there were elderly men for whom agricultural work was beyond their physical strength. In order to find some sort of occupation for them, at least for a few hours of the day, they used to place them in the local synagogues where they occupied themselves reading the Book of Psalms and studying Torah. Such groups were nicknamed by their 'younger' associates: 'the ten Batlanim', in accordance with the ancient meaning of this concept, namely that they should at all times be available for making up a quorum of ten, as is indicated in the Talmud Tractate of Berachot 6b..."

2) "...I recall that as late as the 1950's the London Spanish and Portuguese (Sephardi) Congregation maintained a Beth Midrash (House of Study) at Ramsgate, near the (Moses) Montefiore mausoleum, where Ten Batlanim, mostly elderly scholars, were maintained on the income provided by a fund left by Montefiore. Their task was

to study Torah full-time for the repose of his soul. Occasionally, one or the other published a contribution to Jewish religious literature.

Eventually, with the decline of Sephardi scholars who were eligible to join the ten Batlanim and due to other unfavourable circumstances, the Congregation transferred the library from Ramsgate to London and assigned the Montefiore fund for other educational purposes..."

Epilogos

Specially favored in the Jewish world were the formulistic numbers 7 (seven) and 13 (thirteen); but the formulistic number 10 (ten) also occupied a place of honor, as the following examples will testify:

- 1) "The Ten Commandments" (i. e. the ten precepts given to Israel by the Almighty on Mount Sinai);
- 2) The "minyan" (quorum of ten adult Jews whose presence is required for reciting certain public prayers [such as the Kaddish – prayer for the dead]);
- 3) "The Ten Martyrs" (put to death by the Roman authorities) – ten sages, leading Jewish scholars, who died for the sanctification of God's name;
- 4) "The Ten Lost Tribes" (the ten tribes of the of the kingdom of Israel who were exiled, and no trace of them could and cannot be found);
- 5) "The Ten Spheres" (a Kabbalistic term for the ten degrees of divine emanation with which the world was created);
- 6) "The Ten days of Penitence" (= the ten days from Rosh Hashana to Yom Kippur (the Day of Atonement) during which every Jew is commended to do some serious soul-searching and undergo (undertake) complete repentance;
- 7) "Ten Measures" (ten parts) as in the saying: 'Ten measures (lit.kabbim) of beauty descended to the world: nine were taken by Jerusalem and one by the rest of the world' (Talmud, Tractate Kiddushin 49b);
- 8) "The Ten Sayings" (lit.maamarot) "With ten (divine) Sayings was the World created"(Mishna, Avot 5, 1);
- 9) "The Ten Plagues" (suffered by the Egyptians because of their refusal to free the Israelites from slavery).

Now we may also add to this very short (and incomplete) list:

- 10) "The Ten Batlanim" – the title and contents of this article.

It is worth mentioning that Thompson in his famous Motif-Index¹⁵ does not list the number 10 among the important and well-known formulistic numbers; even more so: when he finally mentions the number ten (at the end of his list) the only example he cites is "The Ten Plagues (of Egypt)", failing to mention "The Ten Commandments" = The Mosaic Decalogue which had and still has a much greater impact on morality, behavior and principles the world over.

Notes

1. On "otium" as a political concept. see C. Wirszubski, "Mechkarim be-Musgey ha-Publitsistika ha-Romit", *Tarbiz* XXII, 3-4, Jerusalem 5711 (1951), pp. 157-166.
2. P. F. Wagner. *Lexicon Latinum* (see Corpus Phraseologiae) (Bruges, 1828), p. 505.
3. *Monumenta Ignatiana* (Tom. Sec./ Textus Hispanus) (Roma, 1936), p. 345.
4. Sancti Ignatii de Loyola. *Constitutiones Societatis Jesu* (Roma 1938), T. III, p. 79.
5. See also R. Shapira-Hutner, "Ten Batlanim", *Yavneh* 1, Nissan 5706 (1946), pp. 21-24, 37.
6. *Mechilta de-Rabbi Simon ben Jochai* (ed. D. Hoffmann) (Frankfurt, 1905), p. 90.
7. M. N. Adler. *The Itinerary of Benjamin of Tudela* (London, 1907), p. 39. The Latin text of this passage in *Itinerarium Benjaminis*, 1633 reads: "...denique D. Zachaeus filius Bustanaei generalis ipsorum quaestor, praeses est decimi synedrii. Hi ociosi dicuntur: quia non occupantur ulla in re, nisi in necessariis populi negotiis..."
8. On "Baal Sium" see D. Rosenthal, "Rabbanan deSiuma and Bnei Sium", *Tarbiz* 49, fasc. 1-4, 1979-1980, pp. 52-61.
9. Rabbenu Yitzchak Aboab. *Menorat ha-Muor* (re-edited according to early printed versions: Yehudah Fries-Horeb) (Jerusalem, 1961). The Third Light, Rule 3, ch. 2 (par. 130), p. 280. The Eshkol edition, Jerusalem 1969, includes the Commentary "Nefesh Yehuda" by Rabbi Moshe Frankfurt: "...Ten Batlanim i. e. ten honest (lit. decent) men who refrain from doing their own work in order to take care of the needs of the community..."
10. Rabbi Jonathan Eybeschütz. *Sefer Ya'rot Devash* (Jerusalem, 1983), part 1, Sermon 6, p. 137, col. 1.
11. M. L. Lilienblum. *Chatoth Neurim* (Vienna, 1876), p. 91; *Kol Kitvey...* (= Collected Works) (Krakow, 1912), p. 205.
12. Rabbi Menachem Gutman (in Hebrew). *Torah u-Maasim Tovim* (Jerusalem, 1996), part 2, p. 82.
13. *Todaa* (a Shabbat pamphlet) No. 252, Weekly Torah Portion, Miketz, 5756 (1996), p. 4.
14. Louis Ginsberg. "Haggadah Fragments", *Ha-Goren: Anthology of Jewish Scholarship*, Book 9 (Berlin, 1923; Jerusalem, 1971), p. 37.
15. Stith Thompson. *Motif-Index of Folk-Literature* (Copenhagen 1957), Vol. V, Z 71 (16. 2), p. 557.

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