Religions are by definition intricately interwoven with masses, crowds, occasionally mobs or “leveling crowds,” by the simple fact that most of them perform, to a greater or lesser degree, a continuing and delicate dance between individual and community, visions of selfhood and collective that may or may not be at odds with the “secular” world. That religion or religious motivation draws enormous crowds is evident—according to CNN 8 million people participated in the Kumbh-Mela ceremony in Allahabad in 2001, Saudi authorities restrict the number of annual pilgrims to Mecca to 2 million, in 2001 over 6 million faithful traveled to Lourdes, from August 11 to 15, 2000 an estimated 2.5 million youths gathered in Rome for the World Youth Rally, and many more figures could be cited. Yet such religiously motivated crowds are only a part, though often a constitutive one, of “religion” and even as temporarily gathered crowds they exhibit some distinct characteristics: though conforming to most “crowd criteria,” by gathering for example temporarily like-minded persons densely packed in delineated spaces, “religious crowds” differ markedly already through their cachet, i.e. their very religiosity, which sits uneasily with the frequently negative value judgment of “crowds.” Most “crowd psychologists” or “scientists of mass behavior” accord religiously motivated crowd phenomena a position slightly apart, more often than not by proffering an uneasy truce between their assessment of the mass and that of religion, which for many of them is in essence synonymous with Catholicism. Thus, the religiously moti-
In contemporary Hebrew, the word "hamon" can be used as a noun and as a modifier meaning "many" or "a lot"; thus, "hamon tapuzim" means "a lot of oranges." The noun, however, unambiguously refers to a large group of people. An adjective, "hamoni"—the suffix -i is similar to the English suffix -some, as in troublesome—is derived from the noun, meaning "of the crowds" or "vulgar." Another meaning of the word, namely "noise," continues to be cited in contemporary dictionaries, but it is actually an archaism that contemporary users of the language are barely aware of; (modern Hebrew does retain words based upon the same root, such as "hemia" [murmur or sound] and "hama," which is a verb that describes the action of producing such a sound). At the beginning of the 20th century, however, revivers of the Hebrew language often used "hamoni" in the archaic sense.

In discussing the history of Hebrew words, one is dealing with roughly four major periods: Biblical, Talmudic, Medieval and Modern. The semantic range of the word "hamon" mapped out above appears stable from the Bible onwards. Perhaps this consistency in the semantics of the word is related to the fact that every subsequent period was intensively engaged with earlier texts, whether in the form of commentary or in the pursuit of authoritative sources for modern materials. One might, however, speculate about changes in the semantics of the word. I suggest that there may have been two shifts in the emphasis in the preferred use of the word. The first coincides with the transition to Talmudic and medieval Bible commentary; the second with the transition from this essentially religious tradition to the building of a national movement.

Conversely, the individual "crystals" or catalysts that attracted pilgrimage throughout, especially the form of pilgrimage that was not focused on great urban centers like Rome or Jerusalem but on the individuals called saints and their guardians and epigones, the ascetics and monastics, originated in the context of the one religious mass phenomenon of the ancient world that we can grasp historically: the religious games, which included gladiatorial games, and martyrdom. Interestingly, however, precisely the "mass-mobilization" of pilgrims today attracting millions every year to Lourdes, Guadalupe in Mexico, Portuguese Fatima, Aparecida in Brazil, or the tomb of Francis Xavier in Goa, represents in one specific sense a return to the very origins. Whereas until very recently, the hardship of the journey itself was a transformative moment of pilgrimage, modern means of mass tourism, planes, buses, cars and their relative comforts, now—and once again—place the "crowd," the intense, dense community at the destination, center-stage and thus grant it the transformative moment. What unites, however, despite their manifold transformations, religious crowds, both ancient and modern, are two things: the manner in which the individual’s experience in and that of a religiously motivated crowd are represented, namely as shaped by the most advanced media of the time; and each participant’s enduring human need to communicate with the “otherworldly” in the hope to obtain, as individual supported by a collective, healing, salvation and grace.

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i  Gustave Le Bon, Psychologie des foules (1895; Paris: Presses Universitaires de France / Quadrige, 1983), 41.; hereafter abbreviated as PF.

ii  On average 20 million adherents of various religions annually participate in some form of pilgrimage, which may occasionally also be tourism plain and simple. For difficulties in estimating figures and the relationship between tourism and pilgrimage more below, see also Luigi Tomasi, introduction to William H. Swatos, Jr., and Luigi Tomasi, eds., From Medieval Pilgrimage to Religious Tourism. The Social and Cultural Economics of Piety. (London: Praeger, 2002), 1-24. The figures for the Kumbh-
“Hamon” appears 81 times in the Bible. Interestingly, it was the author of Ezekiel who employed it most frequently. God’s promise to Abraham is: “Thou shalt be a father of many nations [“hamon goyim”] … for a father of many nations have I made thee” (Genesis 17:4-5). There are several other cases in which the word appears before a noun, such as: “And he desired many wives [“hamon nashim”]” of a Judean king in Chronicles II 11:23; or “the multitude of their cattle [“hamon mikneihem”]” in Jeremiah 49:32.

In the cases in which “hamon” is used to refer to sound, there are instances when this is a sound made by people: “And I will cause the noise of thy songs [“hamon shira’ich”] to cease; and the sound of thy harps shall be no more heard” (Ezekiel 26:13) or by their instruments: “the rumbling of his wheels [“hamon galgilav”]” (Jeremiah 47:3). In other cases, hamon refers to natural sounds: “there is a sound of abundance of rain [“hamon geshema”]” (Kings I 18:41), “The sea has come up upon Babylon; she is covered with the multitude of the waves thereof [“hamon galav”]” (Jeremiah 51:42). The King James is a bit interpretive in the translation of the last two cases (as are the other English translations that I have had a chance to consult). Both Even-Shoshan in his concordance of the Bible and Ben-Yehuda cite these as examples of the use of “hamon” to describe a noise. But this interpretation may not be unfounded, since the authors of these passages may have been using the double connotation of the word creatively to describe a great sound or a lot of sound. The sounds described by “hamon” are not always very loud. An interesting case is “Thy zeal and Thy strength, the sounding of Thy heart [“hamon me’echa”]” (Isaiah, 63:15). The literal translation is “the noise of thy bowels” which has traditionally been interpreted as a reference to God’s mercy.

Finally, there are several interesting things to note about the references to “hamon” as a multitude of people. First, these often appear in conjunction with a reference to a city: “He scorneth the multitude of the city [“hamon kinya”]” (Job 39:7), “the multitude of the city [“hamon ‘ir”] shall be left” (Isaiah 32:15). In Ezekiel the word appears repeatedly in reference to Egypt and to Pharaoh: “speak unto Pharaoh king of Egypt and to his multitude [“el hamon”]” (Ezekiel 31:2). Many of the references to a crowd of people seem to be playing with the ambiguity of the word, referring to the sound that the crowd makes (with words other than “hamon,” such as “kol”): “a voice of a multitude [“kol hamon”]


iii A modern handbook of psychology defines a crowd as “a great number of persons who are mostly unknown to each other, gather at the same place at the same time, crowded together in a limited space, without clear internal structure, but guided towards a common goal, whereby they orient themselves at the same values, and hence can be empirically measured for a specific time. A crowd is thus not a cross section of society.” Günter Laser, Populo et Scænae Serviendum Est: Die Bedeutung der städtischen Masse in der späten römischen Republik (Trier: Wiss. Verlag Trier, 1997), 17.

The association of crowds with sound seems consistent with the Bible’s preoccupation with sound in descriptions of the deity, often perceived as a voice, and with its commandment not to create visual images of God. Furthermore, biblical myth negotiates the relation between nature and culture through the word “hamon.” On the one hand, it associates multitudes of people with the sounds made by the sea and by rain, and, on the other, multitudes in nature with human agglomerations.

If the above disregards the complex issue of dating the cited scriptural passages, in what follows I will be sketchier still, treating texts that belong to great spans of time—from late antiquity to the late Middle Ages—and of space (from Babylonia and Palestine to Spain and France) as a single literary corpus. My hypothesis is that the tradition of Biblical commentary after the advent of Diaspora understood “hamon” as a sound. Even when “hamon” is used to describe a crowd, it is the sound of this crowd that plays the predominant role. Thus, Jewish commentators of the Bible follow the dictum to suppress visual images by embodying the notion of a Jewish nation or congregation exclusively by means of sound.

A Talmudic source quoted by Ben-Yehuda says: “Three voices reach from the end of the world to its end. And they are: the sound of the wheel of the sun, and the sound of the noise of the city ("hamona shel ha’ir"), and the sound of the soul as it leaves the body” (my translation). A commentary on the Book of Lamentation composed in Palestine in Late Antiquity explains: “Oh the sound/multitude of many peoples [“hamon ‘amim rabim” they sound like the murmur of the seas [“ke’hamot yamim yehamiun”] and the noise [“sha’on”] of many nations is like the noise of great waters” (my translation). Rashi (ca. 1040-1105) addresses the word “hamon” in several linguistic discussions. In all of these cases, either the masses could be envisaged as a crowd, which is to say, as an anonymous assemblage in which “the feelings and ideas of every individual are oriented towards a single end” (Le Bon), arising thanks to “contagion” and to the presence of a charismatic leader. Or the masses could be conceived of as a public that arises thanks to “suggestion,” understood as “the expression of certain beliefs or desires” (Tarde). A further insight, formulated by De Tocqueville, would later impose itself: “Equality gives rise to two tendencies: one spurs the individual towards new thoughts; the other spurs him to abandon thought altogether.” In the end, Franquism led me to opt for Tarde’s equation of mass and public.

My interest in politics developed late when, at age twenty-seven, having completed my undergraduate work, I went to study in Spain. Until then, my family’s social class and the fact of being a single child with a precocious commitment to the life of the mind had led to mostly sporadic contacts with the multitudes. These assumed the form of attending festivities such as soccer games and “carnaval.” As an aspiring intellectual, my formative experiences were shaped by atomized individuals and by books. It was Franco’s Spain that, in 1960 and 1961, taught me to abhor right-wing regimes and to tilt towards a Left that sought to address the needs of the masses. Admittedly, certain right-wing movements also claim to represent the masses’ interests (Franquist fascism was well aware of this). But, although I was still ignorant enough to be unaware of the difference between Le Bon’s and Tarde’s concepts of the masses, I had already developed my own intuitive understanding. Either the masses could be envisaged as a crowd, which is to say, as an anonymous assemblage in which “the feelings and ideas of every individual are oriented towards a single end” (Le Bon), arising thanks to “contagion” and to the presence of a charismatic leader. Or the masses could be conceived of as a public that arises thanks to “suggestion,” understood as “the expression of certain beliefs or desires” (Tarde). A further insight, formulated by De Tocqueville, would later impose itself: “Equality gives rise to two tendencies: one spurs the individual towards new thoughts; the other spurs him to abandon thought altogether.” In the end, Franquism led me to opt for Tarde’s equation of mass and public.

Though still ignorant in the domain of political theory, I returned to Brazil at the start of 1962 and began a phase of involvement in leftist movements. My interactions with the masses were either anonymous, the result of participation in political rallies, or they were the result of my work in the literacy campaign imagined and put into action by the educator Paolo Freire. From the latter I learned that rhetoric, contrary to the negative valences the word has retained to this day, could serve as an instrument in the service of the logic of desire (precisely as Tarde would have it).

The experience didn’t last long. In April 1964, a coup d’état took place and brought about a dictatorship that, as would later be the case in Pinochet’s Chile, carried out a modernization of traditional structures in the name of combating the Red Peril and firming up Brazil’s ties to the West. I was arrested several months later, fired...
for vocabulary that could be used in a modern language (accompanied by heated discussions concerning the relative value of different sources) and the production of a great number of neologisms. Considering the ideological context in which this project unfolded, one might expect that the masses would now become re-embodied and understood through their corporeal presence rather than through their sound. In point of fact what occurs is an apparent separation between the two meanings that had become increasingly associated in the commentaries on the Bible: namely, “sound” and “multitude.” The use of “hamon” to refer to sounds, based on biblical usage, continues for some time. Accordingly, in Bialik (1874-1934) the voices of nature are described as “the voice of the sound of the woods” (“kol hamon ha’ya’ar”) or in Uri Zvi Greenberg (1894-1981) as “the voice of the sound of dark waters” (“kol hamon mayim afelim”). At the same time, “hamon” begins to be used to describe the crowd in the modern, urban sense of the word. Interestingly, most of the references from the early wave of hebraistic literature are clearly derogatory: “the grace of the crowd” (“hamon”) is a dead/dried up spring” (Haskala writer Y. L. Gordon). This tendency was strengthened by the creation of neologisms such as himun—a verb describing “vulgarization” (used by such writers as Halkin and Shtaineman)—and “hamonai” which used by Shlonsky (1900-1973) both as a noun describing “simple and vulgar people” and as an adjective describing mass production (which he associates with America). Neither of these neologisms was incorporated into contemporary Hebrew.

**SOURCES**


Bar Ilan University, “Responsa TIRS Project” [CDROM Database Of Biblical And Rabbinic Literature]


Kna’ani, Yakov, “A Treasury of the Hebrew Language in its Different Periods,” (Tel Aviv: Masada, 1982)

Entry by Marisa Galvez

The mass = public equation became obligatory under the dictatorship, for one’s writings had to rely upon code words and secret small group assemblies were the rule. My face-to-face contact with the multitudes was limited to street demonstrations which ended in head-bashing on the part of the police and in clouds of tear gas, though there was also the occasional public protest tolerated by the regime because it was under international pressure. My passport had been revoked, so I couldn’t even dream of going abroad. And though my political activities had been modest, I found myself arrested once again in 1972, only weeks before I was to defend my doctoral thesis.

Progress had been made in the domain of repressive measures. In 1964, my torturers were mere hobbyists. In 1972, they were professionals. I was placed in a white isolation chamber. The room was sound-proofed, though sometimes one could hear the cries of torture victims, perhaps real, perhaps recorded. Temperature and light varied continuously, to the point that I lost all track of day and night. To go to the bathroom, I would have to pound on the door and be led out blindfolded. There was also a large and empty interrogation room where, since I was always blindfolded, my interrogators retained their anonymity. The only furniture was a table, bathed in shade and therefore congenial to sleep. On one occasion, I dared to try to read the inscriptions atop a series of wall sockets written in English. Some were clear, such as the word “shock.” Others were either illegible or I no longer remember them.

The day came when, blindfolded as always, I was thrust in a car by my captors, who forced me to keep my head down. The vehicle advanced for several minutes, after which the blindfold was ripped off and I found myself tossed out into the street. Dressed in a t-shirt and underpants, I viewed the urban masses anew. And what I saw was neither a “public” nor a “crowd”: just a busy agglomeration of individuals.

Translated from the Portuguese by Jeffrey T. Schnapp