

UNIFORMS VS. UNIFORMITY

by Rabbi Yehudah Prero

We find (Shabbos 55a) that Hashem said to (the angel) Gavriel, "Go and set a 'tav' of ink upon the foreheads of the righteous, that the destroying angels may have no power over them; and a tav of blood upon the foreheads of the wicked, that the destroying angels may have power over them." . . . And why (the Hebrew letter) 'tav?' — Shmuel said: The 'tav' denotes that the merit of the Patriarchs is exhausted (tamah) [for the evil]. Rav Yochanan said: The merit of the Patriarchs will confer grace (tachon) [on the righteous].

We see from this passage in the Talmud that the merits of our forefathers cannot always be relied upon to come to our salvation. Rav Shlomo Kluger writes that we find this fact explicitly in a verse that we recite twice daily in the days leading up to the High Holidays, and continuing through until Hoshana Rabba. In Chapter 27 of Tehillim, Psalms, known as "L'Dovid," we read *"for my father and my mother have forsaken me, but Hashem will gather me in."* Rav Kluger explains that this verse means that the merits of the forefathers will not protect us from punishment - hence, we have been forsaken by our mother and father. Yet, we know, and clearly, throughout the prayers on the High Holidays, we see the theme, that the merits of our righteous forefathers and mothers do protect us. How are these conflicting messages reconciled?

A king had a beloved advisor. Throughout the king's reign, the advisor had consistently provided sound, sage advice on a gamut of subjects, from the political to the personal. The advisor, an old man, realized that his time left on this earth was rapidly dwindling. He asked for an audience with the king to make one last request. The king was more than happy to receive his trusted advisor, and he truly hoped he would be able to grant the dying wish of his dear counselor.

"Your majesty," said the advisor, "I have served you faithfully for many years. I have been devoted to you, and been there for you when ever you have needed me. I ask that you do the same for me - please be good to my children. Watch after them, make sure they are cared for, and that they be supported, as they will no longer have a father who can do such." The king replied "I will of course protect and care for your family, your children and theirs, for as long as I live. I ask for one thing. I have no way of knowing who your family members are. I ask that they always dress as you did - in the distinguished manner befitting one who appears in the king's court, with the crest of the king displayed. In this fashion, when your family members present themselves to me, I will know who they are." The advisor consented, advised his children of this vital command, and expired shortly thereafter.

For many years, the children obeyed the command of their departed father. They wore regal looking clothing, although it clearly made them stand out. People took notice of these ordinary people trying to look royal, and on occasion, made insulting comments, ridiculing these common folk for trying to look more important than they were. However, for as long as they did dress this way, the king's servants were able to keep track of them, protect them, and ensure that they were provided for.

Over time, however, the children grew tired of dressing this way. They did not want to keep on buying the expensive clothes needed to maintain the regal appearance, clothes that just drew unwanted attention from onlookers. The children decided to just dress as everyone else, melting into the crowd, becoming indistinguishable. The children soon discovered that their previous fortune was changing. Whereas in the past, they never seemed to find themselves wanting financially, money became scarce. They had never really been bothered by anyone about anything and had led a rather peaceful life, but now they faced confrontations. After pondering their situation, the children recalled the relationship their father had with the king, and decided to turn to him for assistance.

When the king heard that his departed advisor's children were requesting an audience, he immediately granted the request. However, when they were ushered in, the people standing before him did not appear as he had expected. Instead of wearing the type of clothes their father had worn, they appeared no different from any other royal subject. He was suspicious - perhaps these were not the people they claimed to be. He asked that they be escorted out from before him. They started pleading with the king, invoking the memory of their father. The king enquired as to whether they were following the command of their father - and they began to understand. They begged the king - "Please have mercy on us. Yes, we should have listened to our father, and we should have followed his instructions. Had we done so, we would not have found ourselves in this terrible predicament. Nevertheless, we still beseech you for mercy, Your Majesty, and as a merciful king, please believe us, accept us, and help us."

Our forefather Avraham was loved by G-d. Hashem promised Avraham that He would remember the good Avraham did, and care for his descendants in his merit. However, Avraham's children were to be clothed as he was. The Talmud (Yevamos 79a) tells us that the children of Avraham are recognizable as they are merciful, modest, and committed to performing acts of kindness. As long as the nation of Israel clothed itself in these traits of Avraham, they were recognizable as the children of Avraham, and merited the protection that status afforded. However, when the nation no longer cared to wear the clothes, and appeared just like anyone else, they lost that special protection. The nation pleaded to G-d that they deserved His special attention, as they are the children of Avraham. However, G-d did not want to listen - these people failed to garb themselves as they were ordered, and therefore did not warrant any special treatment.

The merits of our forefathers will not always come to our aid. We see in the Talmud that they did not help the wicked. However, G-d is merciful and loving. Although we may not deserve the protection in the merit of our forefathers, Hashem, in His mercy, extends it nonetheless to us. It is of that

kindness we read in Tehillim, and that kindness we recall, twice daily, during the time in which our fates for the coming year are sealed.