

# IT TAKES A FAMILY...

*by Rabbi Label Lam*

These were the numbers of the Levites according to their **families**: the **family** of the Gershonites from Gershon, the **family** of the Kohathites from Kohath, the **family** of the Merarites from Merari. These were the **families** of Levi: the **family** of the Libnites, the **family** of the Hebronites, the **family** of the Mahlites, the **family** of the Mushites, the **family** of the Korahites and Kehat begot Amram. (Bamidbar 26:57-58)

I think I detect a theme. In these two verses the word or some derivative of this word is used 10 times, "MISHPACHA" - "family". The Nation of Israel is built almost entirely on this single organizational principle; family. Therefore it might prove worthwhile to gain an appreciation of the meaning of that one Hebrew word, "MISHPACHA".

The word MISHPACHA is related to the word SHIFCHA which oddly means a maidservant. How does that help define a family?

A senior colleague told me that that when he was a young man pursuing his doctorate in philosophy a professor made the bold declaration; "The Jewish Bible is the source of human rights in the world!" All of the students diligently wrote it down in their notebooks but this curious fellow who was the only Jew in the class, promptly approached the teacher and challenged him, "Where is it written in the Jewish Bible any verse that promises human rights?" The professor wondered if he in fact agreed with his claim that the Jewish Bible is the source of human rights in the world. The student agreed wholeheartedly. He was merely curious as to what the source might be.

This was a case of the student giving the teacher a homework assignment. A week later he came back to class and admitted that he could not find a single verse that supported his statement. He was mystified. Everybody in the history department agreed. The literature department, and the sociology department agreed too. So he fed the question back to his student, "Maybe you have the answer!"

This budding young scholar answered as follows: "Let's take for example one verse, that great-general principle in the Torah "And you should love your neighbor as your-self!" The implication of that statement is that everyone has a right to be loved. When I walk into a room, since you are all obligated to love me, I have a right to be loved! The only difference is that the Torah never came as a "bill of rights" but rather as a "bill of responsibilities".

Imagine how much more love exists in a relationship when both parties know what they owe in love

as opposed to when each demands that their rights be met. How much more love is in the room when every member of a family knows that they are duty bound to love and happily contribute. How much greater is an entire community or a nation when it is composed of individuals who live up to this universal notion and categorical imperative to "love your neighbor as your-self"!

A family is a place where people learn to serve each other. On any given Erev Shabbos someone is sweeping and someone else is polishing shoes, while another person is peeling potatoes. Everyone contributes! A family is a microcosm of a whole world and is its most fundamental building block. How so? It is the training ground that prepares people for life in the greater community. Each home has its own signature style, and cultural flavor, but this quality of serving others is an immutable standard.

How important is a family? When my wife and I were just beginning to look for a match for our oldest son, we decided to call my Rebbe for guidelines. He is a huge Talmud scholar and he had already married off 13 children. We were ready for a long list. He answered the phone and we explained the reason for our call. He said without hesitation and emphatically, "Look for a family! A girl comes from a family!" I asked, "Is there anything else?" He said, "No! That's it! Good night!" We were stunned. Some have said "it takes a village to raise a child" but I think we can declare with certainty and appreciate the simple fact **it takes a family...**