

THE STRENGTH OF DIVERSITY

by Rabbi Pinchas Avruch

Parshas Beshalach

The Strength of Diversity

By Rabbi Elly Broch

*"And they came to Elim and there were twelve springs of water and seventy date palms."
(Shemos/Exodus 15:27)*

The Torah informs us that while the Jewish nation journeyed from Egypt they encountered a place called Elim where, Rashi explains, the twelve springs they found corresponded to the twelve tribes of Israel - the families of the twelve sons of Yaakov (Jacob) - and the seventy date palms were one for each of the seventy learned elders of Israel. Rabbeinu Bachya (1) elucidates that they were placed there to show individual honor to each of them.

Rabbi Avigdor Miller (2) notes that the number of springs signified G-d's plan to encourage each tribe to maintain its individuality. As they came to draw water, each tribe frequented its own spring placed there to honor them. The Talmud enumerates that the tribe of Zevulun had a disposition to sailing and commerce whereas the tribe of Yissachar were sages and scribes. The Torah clearly testifies to G-d's will that differences should persist. When the People of Israel stood at Mount Sinai, Moshe was commanded to erect twelve monuments corresponding to the twelve tribes, and throughout their journeys in the wilderness they encamped separately, each tribe under its own flag. Further, when Moshe was commanded to make the garments for the High Priest, certain garments had the names of the twelve tribes engraved on them.

Every tribe possessed its peculiar characteristics that were a key component to its contributions to the Jewish nation. These characteristics were G-d given and, therefore, mandated maintenance and cultivation. Thus, like a single body needs different limbs and organ systems each performing its own function according to its makeup to enable the survival of the entire organism, so too the tribes, although unified as one body in brotherhood, had different talents and proclivities. An additional purpose in maintaining the individual status of the tribes was that it reduced the chance of a disloyal

innovator seizing power and turning the nation away from G-d. Since each tribe later possessed its own land and talents this would prevent a renegade tribe from influencing the rest of the Children of Israel.

Rabbi Miller concludes that because of this principle, they respected each other's customs and idiosyncrasies, and they learned to refrain from making light of the manners or practices of the other tribes. It was obvious to them that G-d favored these differences and they were united by loyalty to one G-d and His law.

It is commonly observed that there are still differences between groups of loyal Jews in their traditions concerning nuances of Hebrew pronunciation, garb, and details of their outlooks on issues. Some of these differences may find their way back to those differences expressed by differing tribes. However, even for those not traced back to the twelve tribes, we still understand that there is nothing wrong with differences in tradition as long as they were established and in accordance with loyalty to G-d and His law. Some groups of Jews excel in Torah study, others in prayer, others in act of chessed (loving kindness) and we must learn to appreciate the talents of all of the groups. We are like one unified body with different limbs. It would be unthinkable that one should appreciate one of the organs in the human body but not another. Every aspect of the body is necessary and purposeful. So, too, with the people of Israel.

Have a Good Shabbos!

(1) 1263-1340; author of a Biblical commentary containing all four modes of interpretation: simple text definition, and midrashic, philosophical and kabbalistic exegeses

(2) 1908-2001; a prolific author and popular speaker who specialized in mussar (introspective Jewish self-improvement) and Jewish history, Rabbi Miller commanded a worldwide following through his books and tapes: of the tens of thousands of Torah lectures he delivered, more than 2,000 were preserved on cassettes

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