

'WHO GOES HITHER...FRIEND OR FOE'

by Rabbi Naftali Reich

This week's Torah portion details the numerous varied gifts that were lovingly dedicated to the Mishkan by the Jewish people and describes how, following the Divine instruction plan, the people crafted a magnificent Mishkan from the raw materials. The sages tell us that the Mishkan reflected a miniature of the entire cosmos, woven and bonded together by the supreme dedication of the entire Jewish people, whose service of the Creator sustains the world.

The ultimate purpose of this complex construction was to connect heaven and earth, a goal that was realized when by all the individual pieces finally came together and 'the Mishkan was one' (Exodus; Chap 36 V.13). The Mishkan reflected the perfect unity of His Divine heavenly presence in our material world. The fusion of the entire nation's collective energies towards this Divine task ensured the realization of this exalted goal.

This past week, I paid a shiva call to my brother-in-law, Rabbi Yonasan Tendler, shlita, who was sitting shiva for his beloved father, Rabbi Yosef Tendler, o.b.m., the revered mashgiach and director of Mesivta Ner Israel of Baltimore. Rabbi Tendler o.b.m. led the Mesivta for over fifty years, guiding, mentoring, molding and inspiring many thousands of his young charges. Although I, along with thousands of others, appreciated his personal greatness and towering personality during his lifetime, it was only upon leaving the shiva house that his true stature and the full scope of his accomplishments crystallized for me.

I was wondering what lies behind this frequently experienced phenomenon of a delayed grasp of the true dimensions of someone's greatness. While our contemporaries, leaders, and community greats are alive, we often can't fully absorb their singular contributions and personal stature to the fullest extent. Only upon their passing do we begin to realize what we have lost. Why can't we fully appreciate what we have while we have it?

On a simple plane, this human lapse is probably a reflection of the tendency to take our blessings and gifts for granted. Only once something special is taken from us do we suddenly perceive its true value. We actually feel more attached to it in its absence than we did while it was a part of our day to day lives.

It's also possible that something deeper and more subtle is at play. The egotistical strains of our human nature are sometimes so deeply embedded that we may not be fully conscious of them. One of the deepest human instincts that color our feelings is that of self-preservation. This instinct relates

not only to the need to secure our material sustenance and vital needs but to preserve our status, self-respect and personal dignity.

In our initial encounter with another person, our minds are subconsciously processing and assessing hundreds of calculations to determine if the other is a "friend or foe," and what level of protection we need to employ to safeguard our status and resources. All our subliminal emotional glands reinforce those instinctive appraisals, and we approach the other based on those intuitive "findings."

An essential byproduct of this "self-preservation-first" instinct is that we cannot accord the people in our environment a full-bodied appreciation of their greatness, for it may somewhat compromise or diminish our own sense of self-worth. For many of us, our fragile natures are built around these self-protective tendencies which compel us to downplay others' qualities and accomplishments in an effort to shore up our own self-regard.

The lesson gleaned from the construction of the Mishkan is that the Divine presence only resides among and within us when we find true common ground with our fellow Jews and wholehearted appreciation for their respective virtues and talents.

When we recognize that although we each pride ourselves on a sense of uniqueness, our true success can only be achieved when we pool our collective resources and suspend the fears and pettiness that make us feel threatened by our fellow Jew's strengths and accomplishments.

Only then will we succeed in bringing the Divine presence to rest upon the Jewish people as it did in the days of the Mishkan, when Heaven and earth were united and Hashem's shechinah infused the world.

Wishing you a wonderful Shabbos,

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