

# THE NATION OF BROTHERLY LOVE

*by Rabbi Naftali Reich*

In this week's Torah portion, we read the final chapter leading up to the exodus from Egypt. The ninth plague was a pivotal moment in the unfolding saga for it was during its execution that a striking distinction-obvious to all-was made between the Egyptians and the Jewish people. It was during the course of this plague that the unique and separate identity of the Jewish nation emerged.

The Torah tells us that in the thick darkness that descended upon the land during this plague, "No man could see his brother. Yet for all the children of Israel, there was light in their dwellings." Apparently it was this feature -light amidst paralyzing darkness- that determined the essential difference between the Jewish people and the Egyptians.

Why does the Torah stress the inability of each Egyptian to see his brother? Was that the most acute aspect of the affliction? One would imagine there were even more frightening consequences brought about this devastating plague in which people must have felt as if they were suddenly going blind.

Perhaps, herein lies the essential difference between the Egyptian nation and the Jews. The Egyptians were steeped in the pursuit of materialism. The more immersed we are in the pursuit of the material, the less we are able to truly care and feel for our fellow man. We become more absorbed in our needs and desires, thinking in terms of "I need," "I want," "I deserve." This self-preoccupation isolates and distances a person from others.

Disengaging from this all-consuming pursuit affords us the opportunity to see the other and to connect with him, to feel and empathize with our fellow man. It encourages us to recognize that we are essentially one with humankind, a single collective consciousness attached to the Heavenly throne.

The plague of darkness highlighted the core difference between the Jewish and Egyptian nations in that the darkness represented the all-consuming self-preoccupation of the Egyptians.

The Jewish people on the other hand, embraced their spiritual connectivity to one another, preparing themselves to become one nation defined by their service to the Creator.

The great Ponevezher Rov, Rav Kahaneman was a visionary builder of Torah life in Israel. To support his network of Torah institutions, he traveled the world raising significant funds on behalf his Yeshiva, orphanage and network of schools.

On a visit to South Africa, he attempted to raise funds in a community where the rabbi was unsympathetic to his religious cause. The rabbi denied him the opportunity to address the congregation and solicit their support for the Yeshiva. The Ponovez Rov asked the rabbi if he could simply wish the congregants "sholom aleichem." Unable to turn down this innocuous request, the rabbi assented.

The Rov ascended the podium and gazed intently at the faces before him. "Sholom aliechem, sholom aleichim, sholom aleichem!" he declared. "I welcome you three times, just as we say "Sholom Aleichem" three times during Kiddush Levanah, when we recite a blessing over the new moon each month. That is interesting," continued the Rav. "Why do we say "sholom aleichem" when we are blessing the new moon? Hmm. I would love to answer, but the rabbi has restricted me from saying anything more than "sholom aleichim."

With that, he stepped away from the podium. The community leaders swirled toward him, begging him to answer the intriguing question. The Rav looked questioningly at the rabbi, who had no choice but to nod his assent. Whereupon the Rav ascended the podium once again and addressed the congregation.

"My friends," he said, "let me share with you a story that took place not long ago. Two nations were pitted in a territorial battle against one another. Their armies amassed on both sides of a river and were poised to attack. One side sent out spies in the dead of night to reconnoiter the enemies' camp, to detect where they were most vulnerable. Stealthily, they stepped into enemy territory and started recording their findings.

All of sudden, they became aware of soldiers facing them with guns cocked. Terrified at having been discovered, they grasped their revolvers to defend themselves. Before they could shoot, the clouds abruptly parted and the moon shone in its full force. In that sudden burst of light, they spies saw that the "enemies" were simply another group of spies that had been sent by their general to spy out the enemy camp.

"Friends!" they called out, falling into one another's arms in a warm embrace, "Sholom Aleichem!" they cried out to each other.

"My friends!" declared the Ponovez Rov from the podium. "We are all one camp, we are one people, united in one mission to preserve our sacred Torah and tradition!"

As we know, the destruction of the Second Temple came about through *sinas chinom*, groundless hatred and it will be restored through the power of *ahavas chinom*, "groundless" love-love that needs no rationale or excuse for its existence. When we recognize that we are essentially one nation and one people, our differences evaporate. The profound realization of our fundamental oneness with our fellow Jews will hasten the ultimate redemption.

Wishing you a wonderful Shabbos,

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