

AS YOU REST - SO SHALL YOU TRAVEL

by Rabbi Eliyahu Hoffmann

As they encamp, so shall they journey; everyone in his place according to their banners. " [2:17]

In parshas Bamidbar the Torah arranges the positioning of the Tribes during their encampment in the desert. They were to be organized into four formations of three tribes each, known as Degalim - banners, because of the distinctively colored banner each formation carried.

The Torah then explains that this formation was not only for periods of encampment - even when travelling they had to maintain their positions within the Degalim structure. "As they encamp, so shall they journey; everyone in his place according to their banners." Imagine a school-wide trip. The principal has the different classes assemble in the gymnasium, and the teachers do a head-count to make sure no one is missing. Once they begin travelling (let's suppose they're walking), classes and students begin to mix and mingle. When they arrive at their destination, they once again separate into classes, and again there is a check. Why is the Torah so insistent that even during their travels, the Degalim structure be maintained?

There are individuals, says Mikra Meforash, to whom "vacation" means not only a rest from work and a break from the pressures of day-to-day life, but also an opportunity to "take a break" from the standard of Torah-observance they practice at home, and "loosen up a bit." "After all we're on vacation, and vacations are meant to be enjoyed." Wouldn't it be a shame, after having spent all that money to travel to some exotic destination, not to "see the sights," even if it means compromising just a touch on one's usual standards? We certainly don't identify with the rationale of those who "keep kosher at home," yet eat treif when dining out. If you're kosher, you're kosher - everywhere, all the time. Yet if while "out of town" we allow ourselves the luxury of doing things and going places that we would be embarrassed to do at home, how different are we?

The Torah understands this mentality. It therefore warns: As you encamp - at home, So shall you journey - your standards should be no less while travelling than they are at home.

In a letter to a young Chassid, Rabbi Avraham Mordechai Alter of Gur (the Gerer Rebbe zt"l) writes:

"I received your letter. I once again insist that under no circumstances are you to travel (to visit me) without your wife's consent! Although you wrote that your desire to travel is in order to study Torah and 'accept' the Divine yoke' - this can be done at home as well, as it is written [Devarim/Deuteronomy 6:7] 'And' as you sit in your home.'

"It is regarding this that the Torah writes: Just as you encamp, so shall you travel - [i.e. Anything that can be accomplished through travel to a Rebbe can be accomplished at home as well]. The most basic aspect of being a chassid is to refine one's character, and to be humble even when dealing with one's own family... To accomplish this takes many years."

A final interpretation: To some, Shabbos is a day to rest up from working hard all week long and take a much-needed break from the burden of the work-week. For others, it is a day to enjoy time with the family, good meals, some singing and some shmoozing. Then there are those for whom Shabbos is a "day of the neshama (soul)." For them, physical rest and sumptuous meals are secondary: It is the spiritual aspect of Shabbos that receives their attention. They spend their Shabbos immersed in Torah study and prayer. They begin Shabbos early, and draw it out hours after everyone else has already made Havdalah - hanging on to the "light" of Shabbos for another few precious moments.

Perhaps somewhere deep down we all wish our Shabbos was a little more about the soul, and a little less about the body. Should we fake it? Should we make believe we feel elevated and uplifted on Shabbos, even if we really don't? What is it that makes Shabbos feel so different to each of us? It depends, says the Bais Avraham, on what's going on during the week. Shabbos is the center and the culmination of the Jewish week. If our weekday life is focused on money, food and possessions, then our Shabbos will focus on the delicacies and the clothing and the ornaments that bedeck our Shabbos table. If our weekday lives are centered around serving Hashem, and earning a living is merely a necessity that must be addressed, then on Shabbos we will feel a desire to elevate our avodas Hashem. Our Torah-study feels different, our prayers feel different - everything takes on a heightened awareness and sensitivity.

Chasam Sofer paraphrases the verse (Shemos/Exodus 35:3): Do not ignite a fire on the day of Shabbos - If you want your soul to be ignited with the spiritual fire of Shabbos, he says, don't bother trying to "light the flame" once Shabbos has already arrived. On Shabbos we don't light fires. The fire must have been ignited during the weekdays; then and only then can it burn throughout Shabbos with greater intensity and clarity.

As you encamp - The Hebrew word for encamp (Yachanu) is from the same root as the word to rest. The type of "rest" that Shabbos brings to a Jew, depends on: Just how you travel - during the weekdays!

Have a good Shabbos.

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