

THE KEY TO LIFE

by Rabbi Yisroel Ciner

This week we begin the Sefer [Book] of Bamidbar. "Hashem spoke to Moshe in the midbar [wilderness]." [1:1] Moshe was commanded to count the members of each of the twelve tribes of Bnei Yisroel [the Children of Israel]. Once that was done, Moshe was commanded to arrange the encampment of the tribes with three traveling in front of the Mishkan [Tabernacle] three on each side and three behind. These were called the 'degalmim'--literally, the different flags that each of the tribes had. The formation that Moshe set was identical to the arrangement that Yaakov Avinu set for his sons when they would carry him out of Egypt to be buried in Ma'aras Hamachpelah [the Tomb of the Patriarchs in Hebron]. The same three sons were in the front, the same on each side and the same behind.

The Kli Yakar explains the formation in the following way. The first group, traveling on the eastern side, in front of the Mishkan was comprised of Yehuda, Yissachar and Zevulun. They represented the force of Torah. The light of Torah is what leads and guides Bnei Yisroel. They led the way into our battles which were won or lost based on our dedication to Torah. They therefore traveled first.

The second group, comprised of Reuven, Shimon and Gad, were situated on the south of the Mishkan. They exemplified good midos [attributes]. On the west, the third ones to travel were Ephraim, Menashe and Binyomin. They exemplified gevurah [strength] and were on the west to illustrate the fact that their attribute is one that constantly and gradually diminishes until the time of death. The 'western sunset' of each individual. The last to travel, on the northern side were Dan, Asher and Naftali. They, the wealthiest of the tribes, stood for material wealth.

Each of these groups faced and surrounded the Mishkan.

The Medrash tells that at the time of matan Torah [the giving of the Torah], Bnei Yisroel saw the angels arranged in 'degalmim' formation. They had a tremendous desire to also be arranged in such a formation.

At first glance this seems to be a bit strange. I know that my children outgrew the Simchas Torah [last day of Sukkos holiday] flag scene at a pretty young age. What was the mesmerizing impression that the degalmim of the angels made on these towering spiritual giants as they stood at the foot of Mount Sinai and heard Hashem speak?!

The Talmud [Taanis 31A] teaches that in the time to come, Hashem will have the righteous form a circle in Gan Eden [Garden of Eden] and Hashem will be in the middle.

The Mahara"l (as explained by Rav Dessler) explains that the idea of the righteous dancing in a circle is that each member is equally close to the center--to Hashem. Additionally, when dancing in a circle, each member is constantly moving and standing in what had been the other's place.

This alludes to two aspects of the existence and the reward in the world to come. Each person who uses his abilities to serve Hashem will stand as close to Him as anyone else. One person may have been granted less abilities. His lot was to serve Hashem to the utmost of his limited intellect and limited abilities. Another, blessed with a keen mind and a piercing intellect, also served Hashem to the best of his abilities. The difference that was quite apparent between them only exists in this world. In the world to come, in the circle of the righteous, each will stand equidistant from Hashem.

But they won't stand in one place. Each will move from one place to the next, in this glorious dance of eternity. Each individual, in addition to the reward earned by their own personal service, will also have earned reward for their role in the over-all, general kiddush Hashem [sanctification of Hashem's Name]. This was only made possible by the harmony of each of the many members of Klal Yisroel fulfilling his role with the abilities given to him without looking enviously at the abilities given to others. Each will receive additional reward for their role in the symphony of these different roles which contributed to the totality of the kiddush Hashem. Each rotates to the place of the other because they, by fulfilling their role, enabled each of the others to be a part of a complete entity.

Perhaps this is what Bnei Yisroel saw when they saw the angels arranged in degalim. Each had their G-d-given position--there was no vestige of jealousy. Each angel wanting to contribute his part to the heavenly hosts surrounding and honoring Hashem.

The Bnei Yisroel desired to reach such a state in their service. They wanted to be arranged in degalim. Different tribes had different strong points. Some excelled in Torah, others in middos, others in strength and others in wealth. They wanted to know that if each used their abilities to the maximum, that they'd be as important as anyone else. They wanted to be arranged equidistantly around the Mishkan. They wanted to feel that equality of the circle of the righteous here in this world. They too wanted degalim.

Bnei Yisroel knew that this was the key to life. Not being able to control what comes our way but being able to field it properly. Understanding that everything is heaven-sent to allow us to play our role in the symphony of Klal Yisroel. Realizing that our proper perception of a situation actually creates the reality. If we know it's good then it is good...

This was shown to me very vividly and humorously a number of years ago. I was about to finish a certain mesechta [Tractate of Talmud] with my shiur and I promised them the choice of one of my wife's famous cakes. They promptly chose a certain apple cake which was a favorite of theirs. However, as the day was arriving, my wife, pregnant at the time, was not venturing anywhere even near the kitchen. Undaunted, I rolled up my sleeves and decided to take matters into my own hands.

This was a very easy cake as it consisted of a batter that was put on the bottom of the pan, apple

sauce which was spread on top and the remainder of the batter which was then spread on top of the apple sauce. When baked properly, the batter reached a crumb-like consistency and presto, we're ready to serve.

As I said, when baked properly... I messed up on the baking time in the oven and I was left with a gooey layer of unbaked batter on top of some apple sauce. It looked truly pathetic. My wife took one look and told me that I'd better not serve it to the boys. Knowing my customers quite well, I told her that I planned to serve it to them and I was sure that they'd love it. I promised her that if it went over well it would be credited to her and if it would bomb, I'd take the heat.

I served the cake as if nothing was wrong and waited for their reaction. It wasn't long in coming. One of my students, as he was enthusiastically chomping away, exclaimed, "You know Rabbi, lots of the Rebbitzins make this cake, but only your wife puts this special cream on top! This is the best that I've ever tasted!"

He knew the cake was going to be good and therefore it was good. If we know that everything that comes our way is from Hashem and good, then even what appears to be uncooked batter can be transformed into a special cream. Understanding that any role that we're dealt can lead us to stand as close to Hashem as any other role. Understanding the circle of the righteous. Understanding the degalim.

Good Shabbos,

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