

# UNITY FOR OURSELVES, OR FOR EACH OTHER?

*by Rabbi Pinchas Winston*

We have reached the end of Toras Kohanim, so-called because the book of Vayikra deals primarily with laws of the kohanim, and their service in the Mishkan/Temple. However, now more than ever it is important to recall that the Torah has called the entire Jewish nation Mamleches Kohanim—Kingdom of Kohanim (Shemos 19:6), making many of their lessons, at least in principle, are our lessons too.

Hence, it is not a coincidence that the Torah ends off the book with a discussion of values, right after discussing the blessings for Torah obedience and the curses for disobedience. For the former, Torah obedience, is really a function of one's sense of self-worth and the latter, Torah disobedience, the result of the lack of it.

The main trait of Aharon HaKohen, and the priesthood in general, was Hod. The actual word means glory, but it is a glory that shines forth as a result of operating in the role of a kohen, because of the self-nullification—hisbatlus—that is necessary for the job. You cannot be as devoted to the service of God as the kohanim were unless being so is one's personal priority as well.

Strangely enough, though we intuitively know this, for the most part, people do not live according to this idea. As my Rosh HaYeshivah, Rabbi Noach Weinberg, zt"l, used to tell us, "It is a lot easier to die for God than it is to live for Him," because it is easier to nullify oneself in a single act of greatness than it is to do so all day long, every day of the year, all the days of your life.

For example, when a person falls on a bomb to save the lives of others, he has literally nullified himself for a higher purpose. Even though he committed suicide by doing this, we don't say that he was suicidal, but rather, we call him heroic, and reward him, albeit, posthumously. As the Talmud states, there are some who acquire their portion in the World-to-Come only after an entire lifetime, and some who do it in a single moment (Avodah Zarah 10b).

The question might be, though, was this hero as generous with himself during his lifetime, on an ongoing basis? Was he as sacrificing for others when it wasn't an issue of life-or-death? Did the lives of others matter more to him than his own even when they could get by without his help?

Let's say, in this case, the lives of others did matter more to him than his own, or at least as much. If that was the case, how would he have been viewed by others? As a person with a lot of self-worth, or with little self-worth? Aren't selfless people often seen as individuals who lack self-appreciation, and are, therefore, incapable of looking out Numero Uno?

Not from a Torah perspective. Hisbatlus, as prescribed by the Torah, it is the ultimate expression of self-worth, just as selfishness is the ultimate expression of a lack of it. It is one's sense of self-contentment that allows a person to think of others before himself, and to be concerned about needs other than his own.

Any society whose members lack self-worth, which is likely to be the case if they are constantly being bombarded by advertising telling them that they need more to be complete, or even just good, will shun self-nullification, tend to be selfish, and help others only when it is to their own personal benefit. In such a society, selfless and unassuming people are prey, not praised.

Therein lies all the ills of society. People are so busy looking out for Number One that their sense of social responsibility has become greatly distorted. True, at least in many parts of the world, people cooperate with one another, as do countries. But even in those cases, it is not out of concern for the other party, but because it is mutually beneficial.

This is the difference between the level of *k'ish echad b'leiv echad*—like a single person with a single heart—that the Jewish people reached just in advance of receiving Torah, and the reverse, *b'leiv echad k'ish echad*, the level upon which the Egyptians were as they pursued the Jewish people into the sea. In the case of the former, first there was unity, and this unified their hearts, but in the case of the latter, it was their cause that united them, namely, their common hatred of the Jewish people and desire to kill them.

When it is a common cause that unifies people, then the bond will only last as long as the cause does, which may be for a while, or not long at all. However, when the unification is independent of any external cause, then the relationship becomes eternal, and can survive just about every kind of setback.

Hence, the Mishnah in Pirkei Avos warns:

Any love which is dependent on something, when the something ceases, the love ceases. Any love which is not dependent on anything will never cease. (Pirkei Avos 5:19)

The only way this can be the case is if the person doing the loving already loves himself or herself, but not selfishly, but as a function of his or her own sense of self-worth. They may not be the most popular person around, and may be unable to compete with most people around them in so many ways, but that does not matter to them. They are who they are, and personal greatness is defined as being the very best they can at just being themselves.

People with the opposite perspective feel negatively towards others. They are competitive, overly critical, and often project negative qualities onto others to make up for their own lack of self-worth. They are manipulative, distorting situations to their advantage, and often to the disadvantage of others. They even start wars, or avoid the ones they ought to fight.

As such people cause the deterioration of the society, they invite Divine judgment. As such societies promote this type of approach to life, they force God's overt involvement in the destiny of mankind, prompting Divine responses as severe as those mentioned in the curses of this week's parshah.

For, the basis of true self-worth is the following verse:

God created mankind in His image . . . (Bereishis 1:27)

We have been made in the image of God, each and every human being, regardless of personal appearance, natural skill, or financial wealth, as the following story emphasizes:

Rebi Elazar bar Rebi Shimon was once riding and feeling proud of himself for having learned much Torah. He came across an ugly person, who greeted him. Rebi Elazar responded by saying, "Good-for-nothing! Is everyone in your town as ugly as you?"

The man responded, "I do not know; why do you not ask the Craftsman Who made me?"  
Contrite, Rebi Elazar bowed and begged forgiveness . . . (Ta'anis 20a)

Therefore, if one finds himself unnecessarily competing with others, unnecessarily feeling insecure around people, and having to manipulate reality to make it work for him, then it is time for him to assess his sense of self-worth. It is not easy to do, and it takes courage to face facts about ourselves, the net result will be a higher quality of life once we increase our self-appreciation, and the prevention of the kind of societal ills that can result in negative Divine intervention.

Text

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