

WHO IS MORE IMPORTANT?

by Rabbi Aron Tendler

In the second Ani Maamin, the Rambam formulated the concept of G-d's unity. G-d is one. He is not two or more than two, but One. His unity, however, is like none other in the world. He is not like a species, which still encompasses many individuals. He is not like a physical thing, which can be divided into parts and dimensions. He is one with a Unity that is absolutely unique. (Yisodei Hatorah 1:7)

In contrast with G-d, the Jewish nation is a single entity that can be subdivided into many separate parts. Every individual who comprises the single entity that is called, Am Yisroel is indispensable to the integrity of the whole nation is greater than the individual. Yet, we each accept that the integrity of the nation is greater than the individual. It is this understanding that assures that the integrity of the nation is greater than the individual. It is this understanding that assures G-d's promise that the nation is as eternal as the universe.

If these laws of nature would ever give way before Me only then shall the offspring of Israel cease to be a nation for all time. (Jer. 46:27-28) Individuals die and perish, but Am Yisroel will live forever.

When G-d promised Avraham that he would be the progenitor of a nation He used two different imageries in describing the Jewish people. "Your children will be as the stars in the heaven." "Your children will be like the dust of the earth." These two imageries encompass the importance of the nation as a whole as well as the importance of its individual components. The stars fill the night sky in a dazzling display that is magnificently awesome. There are so many stars that it is not possible for us to count them all. Yet, each star is distinct and singular. Each is a world unto itself - so too the Jewish people. Each Jew is distinct and individual. Each is a world unto himself.

The nation is also described as the dust of the earth. The earth appears to us as a single entity. It has countless contours, colors, shades, and textures, but its overall appearance is singular and unified. So too is Am Yisroel. The nation is comprised of countless complexions, guises, miens, and philosophies; yet, we are also a unified entity sharing a single national destiny.

The book of Bamidbar has so far been a book of national organization with an emphasis on counting the individual components. Whether individuals, families, or tribes, each component has been identified and organized into a cohesive whole. The culmination of that process was the Priestly Blessing in last week's Parsha. The blessing started by focusing on the individual, G-d should bless you and watch over you, and climaxed with, And G-d should establish peace for you. Peace is the

outcome of integration and unity. If each individual fulfills his potential for serving G-d and humanity G-d promises that the combined total of each individual effort will affect wholeness and peace.

Following the Priestly Blessing the Torah began to focus on leadership. Each Nassi, Prince, representing himself and his tribe, brought an offering to inaugurate the Mishkan and the Altar. The Torah's message is clear. In the organization of the Am, not only is the individual essential to the integrity of the whole, and not only is the whole greater than its individual components, but the individual and the whole is dependent upon those select few who are the leaders. The leaders were chosen for all the obvious reasons. However, the most important criteria was their total subjugation to G-d and His Mitzvos. Therefore, every Nassi was individually represented at the inauguration of the Mishkan, but each one brought the exact same offering. Ultimately, their mission was to lead their individual tribes into a singular service and devotion of G-d.

This week's Parsha continues the theme of leadership in relation to the national organization and destiny.

1. Aharon was instructed to light the Menorah.
2. The Levites were consecrated into the temple service as replacements for the first born.
3. The situation leading to the laws of Pesach Shaynie the second Pesach is detailed.
4. The functioning of the pillar of clouds and the pillar of fire is explained.
5. Moshe was commanded to fashion two silver trumpets.
6. The Bnai Yisroel began on what could have been the final leg of their journey to the Promised Land.
7. Yisro (Jethro) turned down Moshe's offer to join the Jews in their conquest of Eretz Yisroel.
8. G-d got angry because the Bnai Yisroel complained about the rigors of traveling through the desert.
9. The Jews complained about having to eat only Manna as well as the newly imposed sexual restrictions.
10. Moshe expressed his frustrations to G-d about dealing with the nation's complaints.
11. G-d instructed Moshe to assemble 70 elders as well as inform the people that they would have meat to eat.
12. The 70 elders were selected and they experienced first hand the power of G-d's presence and prophecy.
13. Eldad and Maydad prophesized the transition of leadership from Moshe to Yehoshua.
14. The quail descended upon the camp and the people were punished for their loss of faith and lack of appreciation.
15. Finally, the episode of Miriam speaking Lashon Hara (slander), Moshe's confirmation as the greatest of all prophets, and Miriam's punishment is recorded.

Starting with Aharon preparing and lighting the Menorah (#1) the issue of individual expression and position in contrast to national effort and purpose is apparent. Rashi referenced the Medresh

Tanchuma that related how Aharon was upset at not being a part of the princely offerings. He felt that both his tribe and his own position had been overlooked. G-d assured him that the daily lighting of the Menorah was a far greater sign of service on his part and on behalf of the tribe of Layvie than the offerings brought by the Princes. The Menorah represented all knowledge as subject to the Torah. Each of the individual flames (representing different aspects of knowledge see Rav Hirsch) were important, but all of them, were toward the face of the Menorah (representing the wisdom of the Torah) he kindled its lamps, as Hashem had commanded Moshe. (8:3) Aharon's and the Laviyim purposes were to model that integration of all knowledge into Torah wisdom for the rest of the nation just as the nation modeled that integration for the rest of the world.

The consecration of the Laviyim into the service of the Mishkan (#2) at this point makes sense. The Levites were to be the nation's teachers. As such, they had to be formally inducted into their leadership positions. As a tribe they were but a part of the whole, but in relation to the Am (nation), they were indispensable in helping the other tribes realize their individual and collective goals as Jews.

The final scenes in the Parsha, starting with the Jews complaining about the rigors of the travels (#9) until Miriam's punishment (#15) clearly reflect the importance of leadership in the organization of the Am. From the first moment of our nationality it was and they believed in G-d and in His servant Moshe. Our identity as the nation of G-d, demanded leaders who would teach us the word of G-d. You speak to us and we will understand. (Shemos 20:16) Moshe, Yehoshua, the 70 elders, and every one of our leaders throughout the millennium were those teachers who taught us the word of G-d, so long as they fulfilled the mandate, Remember the Torah of My servant Moshe. (Malachi 3:22) However, each generation is challenged to accept its designated leaders and subjugate themselves to his teachings. Even the great Miriam did not fully appreciate the uniqueness of her own brother Moshe. Was it only to Moshe that !

G-d spoke? Did He not speak to us as well? (12:2) The immediacy of G-d's response to Miriam and Aharon underscored the importance of Torah leadership in the organization of the Am. In my entire house he is the trusted one. Why did you not fear to speak against My servant Moshe? (12:7) As a nation we must cherish and respect the position of prophet, leader, and teacher. They are our link to hearing the word of G-d. True, every one of us is important to the entity called the Am, but Torah leadership is even more important. Without teachers who speak the word of G-d, we have no national or individual identity and purpose.

I believe that every part of Behaaloscha is related to the importance of leadership. Some of it is directed toward the nation's acceptance of its leaders, and some of it encourages the leaders to accept the price and sacrifice of their own leadership. In either case, the Am cannot exist without leaders, and the leaders only exist to serve the Am. (See Rav Dessler, second ½ of his essay on Chesed)

Copyright © 2000 by Rabbi Aron Tendler and Project Genesis, Inc.

The author is Rabbi of Shaarey Zedek Congregation, Valley Village, CA.
