

DIGNITY AND DIFFERENCES

by Rabbi Aron Tendler

Following Kriyas Yam Suf - the Parting of the Sea, the Torah stated, "And they believed in G-d and His servant Moshe." What exactly did they believe in? It can not mean that they believed in the existence of G-d and Moshe. Belief is required when there is no empirical evidence to support the facts. However, at the time of Kriyas Yam Suf the Jews had sufficient proof of G-d's existence to declare, "This is my G-d and I will glorify Him"! To the degree that a human is able to "see" G-d, the Jews "saw" G-d. The Medresh says, "A maid servant at the splitting of the sea realized more of G-d's actuality than the greatest of prophets." Regardless of what biblical critics have explained, Kriyas Yam Suf was at the time clear evidence of G-d's reality and His special love for the Jews. Therefore, it doesn't make any more sense to say that they "believed" in G-d's existence than it does to say that they "believed" in Moshe's existence.

To understand what it was that the Jews believed in following Kriyas Yam Suf requires a study of the Shira - song that followed. The word "Uz - Then" that introduces the Shira connects the Torah's statement of their belief to their spontaneous outpouring of song and praise. The main body of the Shira describes G-d's power and majesty as He meted out justice to the Egyptians, the glory of the miracle itself, and the world's reaction to the miracle. However, the focus of the Shira - song is best identified at the end of the song.

The final verses (15:17-19) juxtapose the destruction of the Egyptian cavalry with serving G-d in the Bais Hamikdash. In essence, the Shira proclaims splitting the sea and destroying the Egyptian forces was to enable the Jews to serve G-d in the Bais Hamikdash - Temple. As the Chosen People in the Promised Land, the Jews would assume their rightful role and serve both G-d and humanity as the "Kingdom of Priests and a Holy Nation."

Following Kriyas Yam Suf, the Jews understood far more than the obvious reality of G-d's power and majesty. They understood that they had been selected from within the melting pot of Egyptian society for the purpose of being G-d's chosen. They understood that being chosen meant that they had a mission to accomplish as His Kingdom of Priests. Therefore, their stated belief was not for that which they had already experienced or witnessed with their own eyes. ; Their "belief in G-d and His servant Moshe" had to do with accepting their station and future responsibilities as the world's designated teachers. This they believed was for their own benefit as well as the benefit of all the nations.

The Jews's acceptance of their designation as the Chosen People was the single most important aspect of the Exodus. It was their first willful step toward accepting the Torah. Most slaves aspire to be free, like their masters. Few slaves, if any, aspire to be free for the specific purpose of becoming responsible for their former masters. As the Chosen People, the Jews would have to accept the Torah along with the mandate for teaching all the other nations, including the Egyptians, about G-d and their obligation for serving Him.

From the very beginning of Bereishis, the Torah emphasized speciation and separation. Just as day and night, heaven and earth, land and water, fruit and vegetable, fish and bird, animal and man, male and female, weekday and Shabbos, are separate and distinct from each other, so too the Jew is separate and distinct from the non-Jew. At first, the distinction between Jew and non-Jew was less obvious because the Jews were only a family. However, in Egypt they became a distinct and identifiable nation.

Knowledge and comprehension begins with being able to discern the natural differences that exist in our world and our society. To the extent that we recognize the natural lines of demarcation that G-d has established will be the extent to which we have clarity of purpose. Three times a day we ask Hashem to grant us "wisdom, insight, and discernment." Discernment is the ability to see differences and understand G-d's purpose in creating them different. If G-d wanted the components of nature and society to be separate and distinct, he wanted them that way for a reason. It is then our responsibility to ascertain what G-d's reasons are so that we can best serve His purposes. (It is this ability to observe and explain differences that distinguishes the innovative and creative scientist from all others.) Separation and speciation enable us to comprehend G-d's intentions. G-d had a reason why He separated the different elements of creation, and He had a reason why He separated the Jew from the non-Jew.

Starting with the beginning of Sefer Shemos and Pharaoh's anti-Semitic statement, "Let us be wise and find a solution to our Jewish problem," (1:9) the Jew was forced to be and feel separate. This, in and of itself, wasn't a bad thing. Pharaoh's evil was in how he made us feel different. He could have imposed on us the uniqueness of being the honored teachers (as Avimelech did with Avraham. Bereishis 20:15) and demanded that we live up to the standards of Avraham, Yitzchak, Yakov, and Yoseph. Instead, he enslaved us, oppressed us, and forced us to be separate and different for personal motive and gain.

It is personal motive and gain that blinds us to the purposes of separation and speciation. The judge who takes a bribe is no longer able to objectively distinguish between right and wrong, guilty and innocent. So too, Pharaoh's personal agenda blinded him from seeing the differences between himself and G-d. He was no longer able to distinguish between his own agenda and the national destiny of the Jews.

In general, all racism and persecution involves the devaluing of those who are different. To the

extent that we can devalue others will be the extent to which we can justify abusing them for our own personal gain. On the other hand, human dignity is in direct proportion to the degree of distinction that we attribute to others. By recognizing all people as unique and separate from each other and ourselves we are able to attribute divine purpose and intent to every human being.

The entire story of the Exodus and the climactic miracle of Kriyas Yam Suf is a story of separation and designation. Every plague separated the Jew from the Egyptian. Every confrontation between Moshe and Pharaoh challenged Pharaoh to subordinate his personal agenda to G-d's intentions. Moshe's stated goal, "And we will go a distance of three days and serve our G-d," was not merely a smoke screen. G-d certainly didn't have to lie to Pharaoh about His intentions for freeing the Jews. Moshe was requesting that Pharaoh acknowledge the difference between the Jew and the non-Jew. The Jew had been separated from the rest of the nations to be G-d's kingdom of priests and His holy nation. As such, they had to prepare for that task apart from the Egyptian, no differently than Aharon and his sons would one day separate themselves from the rest of the Jews for seven days at the time of their inauguration into the priesthood.

At the time of the actual splitting of the sea, the concept of separation was even more obvious. First, Pharaoh again hardened his heart and because of personal gain lost his perspective regarding the Jews and G-d. "What have we done by sending away the Jews? They were our slaves!" (14:5). In the Shira, Pharaoh's intentions are even more clearly stated, "I will chase them, catch them, and divide the spoil!" (15:9). When the Jews heard the thundering sound of Pharaoh's army, they were understandably frightened and questioned their short lived designation as being the teachers of the world, rather than the slaves of Mitzrayim. "It is better that we serve Egypt than die in the desert!" (14:12). Moshe responded to their fear by assuring them that they truly were the beloved chosen of G-d. "Fear not! G-d will protect you while you silently stand by." (14:14).

G-d then mixed fire and darkness and created a barrier between the Jew and the Egyptian (15:20). The mixture of light and darkness represented to the Jews what nature would otherwise be like if they do not embrace the reality of their separation from the other nations. The absence of separation is the reversal of creation itself!

G-d then split the waters of the sea and the Jews walked to safety. The theme of separation was again emphasized. G-d could have chosen any number of ways to save the Jews. He chose the splitting of the sea because water is compared to Torah, and it is Torah that ultimately separates the Jew from the non-Jew and teaches the Jew the uniqueness of each and every human being.

As the Jews witnessed the destruction of the Egyptian, and saw the dead washed onto the shore, they were able to believe that they had been chosen for a purpose that would yet be revealed. At that moment they knew that G-d existed and that Moshe, His servant, only spoke His words. However, they also realized that forever after they would be separate from all the other nations. Their destiny awaited them in Eretz Yisroel. They fully believed that the purpose of their designation

was to become the Kingdom of Priests who would serve both G-d and humanity in the Bais Hamikdash. As priests all their actions would have to reflect the dignity of the human being created in the image of G-d.

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