

A GALLERY OF HEROES

by Rabbi Aron Tendler

Building The Force - A Gallery of Heroes

The story of Yoseph, Yehudah, and the brothers details the challenges of Yakov's sons as they struggled with their new identity as the sons of Israel. Theirs' was a stage in the development of the future nation that had not been realized by the Forefathers who preceded them.

Avraham had failed to influence his brothers and therefore had to do it on his own. (Which is why the Rabbis make such a big deal abt. Amer, Eshkol and Mamrei).

Yitzchak was protected by his parents from being involved with Yishmael and therefore grew up relatively alone. Under the direction of Avraham and Sara he was able to focus inwardly on his own spiritual development.

Yakov was also raised apart from Eisav. At first it was because of the natural differences existing between the twin brothers. Yakov was the scholar and Eisav was the hunter. Yakov was content to sit and study. Eisav on the other hand had little interest in joining Yakov in the study tent. However, as they matured, Yakov deliberately avoided associating with Eisav. He was unwilling to chance Eisav's influence corrupting his mission as the Chosen One.

For almost 240 years the Jewish nation had not grown beyond the critical founding number of three. Avraham, Sarah and Yitchak; Yitzchak, Rivkah, and Yakov. However, with the birth of Yakov's twelve sons the numbers dramatically changed. It was the first time there was a family with active and involved siblings. It was the first time that the promise of nationhood seemed real. It was the first time that all the children retained their connection to the teachings of Avraham. It was the first time that the entire family would remain intact. It was as Yakov had requested from G-d, "And I will return whole to my father's home."

With the birth of the twelve sons, an entirely new manner of national and international relationships would emerge. Internationally, the family of Yakov would emerge as a force to be concerned about and possibly reckoned with. On a national level, the internal dynamics between the twelve sons would become much more complex. When there was only one person, the Av - Father, he represented the only opinion and the only need. With 12 sons sitting around the dinner table there would now be 12 opinions and a myriad of stated and unstated needs.

The twelve sons of Yakov were destined to share the same future and the same mission. This was the factor that unified them and encompassed their individuality. However, it still required internal structure and clarity for the family to survive each other and grow to become a nation.

Their mission and destiny was simple and clear. They were to be the representatives of G-d upon earth. They were to become the "Kingdom of priests and a holy nation." As a family they would be the source of blessing for the entire world. As a family and eventually as a nation they would model for the rest of the world how G-d intended His human creature and society to live.

Role models who are above and beyond the rest of society may be admirable and honored; however, they are not effective teachers. The student must believe that the teacher represents an attainable goal. The teacher must signify for the student the potential each one of them has and the successes that comes with hard work and discipline.

The first lesson that the sons of Yakov were supposed to teach the rest of the world was the lesson of family. Nations are made up of families, not individuals. A nation is a collection of family units nurturing the individual citizens and providing them with the training ground for kindness and selflessness.

Each of us is born alone. Even a twin is born alone. Even conjoined babies are born alone. It is the inner person who struggles for individual expression and identity. Therefore, the first job of every person is to channel his basic need for personal expression and recognition into a force for goodness and selflessness. The family is the safe harbor that G-d provided for the work of self-expression and identity. Within the family there is often a safety net of unconditional love and acceptance that allows for mistakes and failure. It should establish norms and regulations that each child must live by to be an active part of the familial society. When one child demands too much attention or refuses to play by the rules there are safe consequences that train rather than punish. The individual must learn to share, to give of self, and when necessary to accept the denial of self as proper rather than hurtful.

Relations with the other members of the family, especially siblings, is the most important and far-reaching training that any person can receive. The goal is quite simple yet amazing. If a child can learn to share life's most fundamental emotional and physical needs than a child can learn to share just about anything. If a child can learn to give of himself within the safe setting of the family he will also be ready to give of himself to society and nation.

During the first 240 years of Jewish emergence into the consciousness of humanity, the Avos (Fathers) and Imahos (Mothers) represented the individual characteristics of Chesed - kindness, Gevurah - strength, and Emes - truth. As individuals they were paradigms of their personal traits and impacted all of history with their devotion to G-d. However, they were not the ones destined to be the world's role models. G-d said to Avraham, "And the families of the world will be blessed through you and your children." Avraham would do what he could do, but the real teaching and societal

changes would be done through his children.

Therefore, starting with Parshas Vayishlach, the emphasis of the Torah was on the family of Yakov, the Bnai (sons of) Yisroel. Once Yakov bested the angle of Eisav and earned the national designation of Yisroel the story was about the children: Dina, Shimon, Levi, Reuven, Yoseph, Yehudah, and Binyamin. To understand the Torah's focus it is helpful to look at the end of the story.

In next week's Parsha, the dying Yakov blesses his sons. It is the final chapter in the story of the family who at the beginning of Shemos will be presented to us as an ever-increasing multitude of people. We can surmise that the focus of the entire story since Yakov's designation as Yisroel was for Yakov to bless his twelve sons.

Yakov's blessings at the end of Bereishis mirror the final blessings given by Moshe to the Bnai Yisroel at the end of Divarim (Deuteronomy). In both instances the blessings must be viewed as essential for understanding the purpose of the nation that began as a family.

As the world's role models, the Sons of Yisroel, as a family and as a true nation of multitudes, had to represent inner conflict and identity resolution. Starting with Dina and the incident at Shechem we are exposed to the individual struggles of Yakov's children. They wanted to do the right thing but had to contend with their own immaturity and limitations. The same was true for Reuven, less so but similar for Yehudah, and even for Yoseph who seemed mature beyond his 17 years.

How did the brothers deal with each other? How did they manage the inner family dynamics of jealousies and position? When did they bring their father into the less than picture perfect familial harmony?

The Torah recorded the family's struggles, trials, and tribulations as well as the final unified resolution and blessings to provide the rest of the world with a working model of how to create a unity of similarities while honoring and protecting individuality.

There could only be one king at a time. Even in this week's Parsha where Yehudah, the acknowledged leader and king of the Bnai Yisroel confronted Yoseph, the working king of the world, the real king at the time was Yoseph, not Yehudah.

Yoseph embraced his designation as king and leader early on. While still a teenager Yoseph knew that he was unique. Yoseph knew that only he had imbibed all of Yakov's prodigious scholarship and discipline. In 17 short years Yoseph was ready to do what Yakov had not done until the age of 77 - go out alone and confront the world.

Yoseph was not simply a dreamer. As the verse stated, "And Yakov paid attention to the dreams." Yoseph accepted that his dreams were prophetic and had to be shared. If he was to be king his brothers needed to know it and deal with it!

Yakov also accepted that the dreams had relevance and accepted that the brothers would have to

struggle with their younger brother's assumption of royalty and their own places within the family and nation.

The rest of the analysis involving Yoseph and his brothers will have to wait for next week and the final blessings of Yakov.

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