

UNITY, HUMILITY AND THE WHOLE

by Rabbi Aron Tendler

The end of Sefer Vayikra (Leviticus) stands in stark contrast to the beginning of Sefer Bamidbar (Numbers). The end of Vayikra is all about the symbolic worth of the individual. The beginning of Bamidbar is all about the value of the community and the integration of the individual into the greater whole of the nation. At the end of Vayikra the individual is highlighted and paramount; at the beginning of Bamidbar the individual's importance is relative to his place within the community.

The closing topic of last week's Parsha was the ordained monetary values for the dedication to the Mishkan (Tabernacle) of person or personal property. (Vayikra 27:1-7) "...The values for males... ages 20 years to 60 = 50 Shekalim; ...females = 30 Shekel; males ages 5 years to 20 = 20 Shekalim; ...females = 10 Shekel; ... males ages one month to 5 years = 5 shekel and females = 3 shekel; males 60 years and up = 15 shekel and females 10 shekel..."

Why would someone want to dedicate his own value or someone else's value to the Mishkan? Rav Hirsch explained that the desire to do so is natural and expected; however, its expression demands a set protocol. The final chapter in Vayikra established this protocol by, "...Setting legal specifications to guide one who might feel the need to express his personal relationship to the sanctuary by a symbolic consecration of his own person or personal property." (Rav Hirsch 1:1)

The beginning of Bamidbar begins with a national census and addresses the unity and community of the nation. The individual's worth is recognized but subsumed within the whole of the nation.

"It opens with the command to take a census of the nation... a congregation or community united by and for its collective vocation. The nation is to be counted in terms of its individual components. A census of this nature makes it clear... that the community cannot exist as an abstract idea but can have true being only in terms of the totality of its components. At the same time each member of community is made aware that he personally counts as an important constituent of this totality, and that the task performed by the nation as a whole requires every one of its members to remain true to his duty and purposefully devoted to the vocation he shares with the others." (Rav Hirsch 1:1)

The purpose of life is to emulate G-d Who is the quintessential paradigm of absolute Chesed (kindness). That means that our primary mission as individual creations is to immerse ourselves in Chesed. Chesed cannot be done alone or apart from family and society. Chesed requires that we be engaged in the ongoing dynamics of family, the vicissitudes of life, the multifaceted politics of community, and be directed by the most altruistic motives for effecting good for others and

betterment for all. In many regards, Chesed was intended to be the most significant value and focus of our existence.

The Parsha begins by placing the Bnai Yisroel (Jews - Sons of Israel) in the desert of Sinai. Why is it important for us to know that they were still in the Sinai desert?

The fact that they were in the Sinai desert is important for a number of reasons. As I explained a few weeks ago, the Bnai Yisroel had to experience complete dependency on G-d even though they were fabulously wealthy. They needed to learn that money and wealth are gifts of G-d intended as the means for serving Him and the rest of humanity. As such, G-d wanted that His chosen people be independent of any other entity but Himself; therefore, He gave them extreme wealth with no means of spending any of it. Everyone ate Manna, everyone drank water, and everyone was equally dependent on G-d. The normal trappings of imposed social significance were completely absent. In their stead were the levels of individual devotion to G-d and His Torah. That became the measure of a person's true honor. All other things were as Shlomo Hamelech said, "Havel Havalim, - nothing and more nothing."

Secondly, G-d placed them in the desert to avoid the inevitable assumption that the Torah was a by-product of environment and population. For the most part, societies evolve due to geographical restrictions and circumstances. They develop codes of morality and laws that reflect the circumstantial nature of their evolution. For example: A person who steals a glass of water in the middle of the Nile delta may be forced to pay back the water as well as a fine; however, the same person doing the same thing in the middle of the Sinai Desert may find himself swinging from the nearest Burning Bush. In the 1800's, a man who stole a horse in Philadelphia was a horse thief and was thrown in jail. A man who stole a horse in the wild, wild, West was subject to immediate lynching. Morality and justice are often the dictates of time and circumstance. Not so the Torah. G-d gave the Torah in the desert so that no one could accuse the Torah of being the product of circumstance. It was Divine, timeless, and eternally truthful.

Thirdly, Rav Hirsch explains that, "The choice of the wilderness as the place for this census is proof positive that the purpose of this census could have been neither economic nor political - because economics and politics have no relevance to life in the wilderness... This census was to be made in the service of the Law that had been given at Har Sinai... First the Children of Israel had received the Law at Mt. Sinai... Now, on the first day of the month of Iyar, (a year later) all the tribes, the families and the male members of the nation, were to be numbered and to rally around the Law as its guardians and keepers." (Rav Hirsch 1:1)

I would like to suggest another benefit to being in the desert and receiving the Torah. The unity that the Bnai Yisroel experienced prior to Matan Torah (Revelation - the Giving of the Torah) - "As one person with one heart," was experienced in the desert. It was intended to teach us that unity is a value that should be removed from all other considerations - political, financial, or otherwise. It

should be a value that is agreed upon by all regardless of individual or communal differences. It is a value that is inherently good because it is built on inherent humility. It forces each individual to acknowledge that being a part of the greater whole is essential for his own benefit. The whole is greater than the sum of its parts and each part is more because of it.

So often we desire unity for a reason. Of course there are obvious benefits to unity; however, unity has far greater benefit for the whole and the part than is immediately assumed because unity is inherently good. Of course, let's keep in mind that G-d is the ultimate in Achdus - unity. In fact, G-d's Achdus transcends whatever notion we have of unity or unification. It also teaches us that Chesed is a value removed from personal need or gain. Obviously, the recipient of the Chesed is receiving benefit; however, the provider of the Chesed does not have to be a recipient of benefit - and in most cases must absorb a sacrifice and a cost. Nevertheless, Chesed is an inherent good that transcends time, place, or circumstance. The whole works to protect and heal the part because the well being of the whole should be the goal of each individual part. In doing Chesed (i.e. Tzedaka - charity) I benefit the whole. I am part of that whole and regardless of whether or not I perceive the benefits to myself in doing the Chesed I too need the healing and the help.

The desert of Sinai was the setting that made it clear to all that they were a whole. The desert was the setting that taught the individual to be humbled by being but a part of the whole. The desert was the setting that forced each individual, each family, and each tribe to embrace the value of unity, regardless of individual reservation or difference. The desert was the setting that taught us how to be a nation.

A year after leaving Egypt, receiving the Torah, sinning with the Golden Calf, building the Mishkan and learning Sefer Vayikra, the people had become a nation, a nation united in their acceptance of Torah and their obligation to do Chesed. They were a nation on the threshold of Redemption.

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