

THE UNITY SERIES PART THREE – THE POWER OF ONE

by Rabbi Aron Tendler

In last week's Rabbi's Notebook we analyzed the etiology of the Jews from Adam and Chava until Yoseph's revelation to his brothers. The focus of our analysis was the importance of the individual as the basic building block of humanity. The premise of our analysis was that family and nation must be founded on the value of the individual if it is to survive. True, no one individual can accomplish redemption for the world; however, a world that does not value the individual does not deserve redemption.

So long as the Jews were limited to the Avos and Imahos (Patriarchs and Matriarchs), the value of one was undeniably paramount. No one could argue that one person or couple was dispensable; however, with the birth of Yakov's twelve sons, the individual became seemingly less important.

At first the brothers were willing to compromise the "twelve" by removing Yoseph; however, G-d intervened and the seemingly dispensable became the most indispensable. Yoseph then tested his brothers to ascertain whether or not they had learned the lesson of "no one is dispensable." Their defense of Binyamin and their willingness to sacrifice themselves for his sake proved to Yoseph that they had learned the value of one. They were ready to be in exile. They were prepared to survive Mitzrayim.

(Note: See the difference 22 years can make. When the brothers sold Yoseph into slavery he was 17 years old, unmarried, and one of Rachel's only two children. The brothers deemed him sufficiently dangerous that they were prepared to kill him. Instead, with the interventions of Reuven and Yehudah, he was sold into slavery and consigned into G-d's care. At that stage in the life of Am (nation) Yisroel, Yoseph was truly indispensable. If Yoseph would have died or never returned to the embrace of his family that would have been the end of Yakov's dream, "...And you will return me whole to My father's home." There was no one to replace Yoseph. It would have been an unmitigated national disaster. G-d would have had to engage some other process to fulfill His promises to the Avos and Imahos.

Twenty-two years later the brother's were willing to fight for Binyamin's safety even though by that time he was far more dispensable than Yoseph had been twenty-two years earlier. At the time of Yoseph's final accusation against his brothers Binyamin had already sired more children than any of his brothers. Binyamin had ten sons! As tragic as his absence would have been to Yakov and the family, there was at least a minyan (quorum) of children left to carry on Binyamin's lineage. The death of Binyamin would not have spelled national disaster the way it would have been if they had

killed Yoseph. Yet, the brothers were willing to sacrifice all for the sake of the one even though he was arguably dispensable. In Yoseph's eyes the brothers had learned the value of one.)

Yakov's death and the transition of the generations away from the original twelve sons put the value of one to the test. In the last seventeen years of Yakov's life Yakov saw the negative effect Mitzrayim was having on his family. Hoping to stay the spiritual erosion, Yakov demanded that he be buried in Canaan and not in Mitzrayim. By being buried in Canaan it would make a statement to his children and grandchildren that Egypt was not their home. Furthermore, Yakov blessed each of his twelve sons and connected the essence of their being and the individual contribution of their tribe to the land of Israel. Israel was their home, not Mitzrayim.

He had also wanted to reveal to them the exact date of their redemption, but G-d did not allow him to do so. As we explained a few weeks ago, knowing the date of redemption would have been a powerful tool to soften the years of slavery and persecution and give the nation hope. However, the Bnai Yisroel would never have learned that their relationship to G-d must be founded on the relationship and not the trappings. With Eretz Yisroel (Land of Israel) or without it, with the Bais Hamikdash (Temple) or without it, Am Yisroel must be able to survive. That is why when G-d revealed Himself to Moshe at the Burning Bush He did not say that the Promised Land would be the ultimate proof that Moshe's mission was divinely commanded. Instead, G-d said that the proof would be when the Jews "served Him upon this mountain" - when they received the Torah on Har (Mt.) Sinai. History has proven time and again that Jewish survival is because of Torah and not because of any other reason.

Torah is all about the individual and the family. Torah exists because individuals assume upon themselves the responsibility to study and to teach. That is why we say in the morning davening, "Please instill in our hearts the understanding and wisdom, to understand, learn and teach Your Torah." Whether rabbi, teacher, or other, whatever Torah we know we must also teach. There are no shortcuts to the learning of Torah and there is no replacement for the teaching of Torah. The transmission of Torah is an individualized process regardless the size of the classroom.

In past edition I shared with you the Rav's explanation for requiring a Mechitzah during davening. The Mechitzah is not intended to remove distractions. The Mechitzah is not intended to separate us because the Rabbi's did not trust us to be dignified and holy. The Mechitzah was intended to say to each of us, "When you enter G-d's home you do so as an individual. You enter alone and single. You enter as a single creation that is obligated to recognize and come to terms with the purpose of his or her existence. Titles such as spouse, parent, or child do not determine our value as G-d's servants. Our value is the extent of the effort we each put into having a personal relationship with G-d. We were born alone, we will die alone, and in the interim we will struggle alone to be close to G- d. Part of the time and space of that struggle will be shared with family, community, and nation. Part of our obligation as G-d's servants will be defined and determined by our place in family and society; however, in the end it is the "I" who will stand alone before G-d to account for his or her individual

lifetime. Therefore, it is the single and alone "I" who must have a relationship with G-d.

The story of Mitzrayim is the story of individuals rising to the challenges of being G-d's servants. Yakov, Yoseph, each of the brothers, Menashe, Ephraim, Pharaoh, Yocheved, Amram, Miriam, Aharon, the elders, and even Dasan and Aviram, are the heroes. Some succeeded as no others and some failed as no others. In the end, their reward and punishment reflected the challenges of a nation to be as one man with one heart as they each lived their own lives to serve G-d the best they could.

In the next two issues of the Rabbi's Notebook we will continue the discussion of the value of one and show how the experience in Mitzrayim and the wonder of the exodus underscore the value of one, the value of family, and the eternity of our nation.

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