

FRAMED SYMBOLS PART II

by Rabbi Aron Tendler

Last year, for Parshas Ki Savo, I wrote an essay entitled Framed Symbols Part I. The following is a continuation of that discussion. Please note that the first three paragraphs were copied from Framed Symbols Part I.

"Absolutes must find expression beyond the workings of our minds, hearts, and souls. It is not enough to think, feel, believe, or even act in goodness and decency. Absolutes must be evident in the structure and symbolism of society. Edifices must be built, documents printed, and institutions developed that symbolize goodness and decency. Some should be functional as well as symbolic while others should be purely symbolic. Some must be imposing and public while others individualized and private. Regardless, the absolutes that frame life's pragmatism must be represented in practice and symbol in every sector of individual, family, and social living as a constant statement of who we are and what we aspire to be."

"Symbols provide us with the ability to communicate absolute values in a manner that goes beyond words. As a final example, consider what 9-11 (the Yur Tzeit - Ellul 23 - was this past Tuesday) would have been like without the American flag. How would each of us have expressed the sorrow of the tragedy, the desire to embrace each other and give strength, the fear for our nation and the extraordinary solidarity of a people standing proudly and fiercely behind their President, if we did not have the American flag? What would we have done in its stead? How much poorer we otherwise would have been? Think symbolism and think our nation's flag. How important is symbolism? How important is the flag?"

"The last Parshios of the Torah can be viewed through the framed lens of symbolized absolutes. Bikurim, tithed proclamations, ceremonies of blessings and curses, admonitions, periodic national gatherings, and the writing of a personal Sefer Torah are all Mitzvos that go beyond the absolute. They frame life in symbolic as well as pragmatic value so that we can live in goodness and decency without fear of evil's harm."

In truth, everything has symbolic as well as pragmatic value. For example, Rav Hirsch Zt'l (Introduction to the Study of Symbolism) contrasted the symbolic meaning conveyed by words of farewell with the added meaning of a farewell accompanied by a warm handshake. Both the words and the handshake symbolize sorrow at parting and the longing to stay; however, words alone cannot convey the profundity extended through the tactile warmth of human contact and touch.

Rav Dessler Zt'l explains that natural law is not reality. Instead, nature is a symbol of G-d's absolute control and unlimited power. He gives the following illustration. Most everyone knows that a pen cannot write by itself. Instead, a person, the writer, must put pen to paper in order for writing to happen; however, Rav Dessler says differently. Neither the pen, the paper, nor the person exists. The pen, paper, and the writer represent (symbolize) G-d's presence decreeing and directing all that is. Rav Dessler was not playing with semantics. Rav Dessler judged attributing reality to nature as a lower level of comprehension and Emunah. He said that doing so was akin to the sin of the Golden Calf! Believing in the reality of nature denies G-d as the only reality!

This week's and next week's Parshios stretch between Moshe imposing G-d's covenant on the Jews and Moshe himself, beginning the last day of his mortal existence on this earth. What is a covenant - Bris -, if not a symbolic representation of our relationship with G-d? Chazal told us that it is forbidden for a husband and wife to live together if they do not have a Ketubah (marriage contract). Everything else about the marriage might be in perfect order from the Kosher witnesses under the Chupah (canopy) to building a home and even loving each other. Yet, if the symbol of financial responsibility toward the marriage, the Ketubah, is lost, the husband may not sleep in the same house as his wife of 20+ years!

Contracts like covenants are mere symbols of something far more important and profound; yet, without the symbol the profundity is not secure. Without the symbol that secures the relationship the husband must move out of the home. Doing so is its own symbolic proclamation of the importance of fiscal responsibility and support in a marriage and family.

The Torah said it as clearly as could be. (29:12) "The purpose of the Bris is to establish you as His nation and He as your G-d..." Because it is a symbol of the relationship that began with the forefathers and extends for all eternity, the Bris must also be with all future generations. How can one generation oblige a subsequent generation to assume the responsibilities of a covenant? Each generation should have the chance to reconsider, and if need be, renegotiate the terms of a contract that obliges and restricts them! However, once we recognize that like all of reality, the covenant, the deal, the Bris, the contract, and the Ketubah, are symbolic of our relationship with Hashem rather than the relationship itself, the Bris can be imposed on all subsequent generations just as the laws of nature are imposed without review or reconsideration!

Leadership is also symbolic. No matter how great or insignificant an individual leader might prove to be they each occupy the same symbolic value. Who could ever replace Moshe? No one could replace the man Moshe; however, throughout the centuries, starting with Yehoshua, there have been countless replacements. Some have been like the great prophet Shmuel and others have been like the outcast Yiphtach. Some were as great as King David and Chizkiyahu and others as destructive as Achav and Menashe. Regardless of the successes or failures of their pragmatism, they each occupied the same symbolic place in the functioning of the nation. Each had to carry a Sefer Torah strapped to his forearm at all times!

Therefore, as Moshe prepared the song that would symbolize his final parting he summoned all of the nation, men, women, and children to stand before him. As they assembled he cried out to the heavens and the earth to give testimony that all of nature, all of our perceived reality is no more than the symbolic manifestation of the G-d's awesome and limitless power. Whether the reality of the nation itself gathered as one on the plains of Moav, or the passage of time which witnesses the transition of symbols from generation to generation, or the fear of future failure and the certainty of consequence, the only reality, the truth of G-d's Torah / Song remain unchanged and uncompromised.

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The author is the Rabbi of Shaarey Zedek Congregation, Valley Village, CA, and Assistant Principal of YULA.