

THE UNITY SERIES PART ONE - THE VALUE OF ONE

by Rabbi Aron Tendler

The Medresh in Parshas Vayichi (49:1) relates that Yakov wanted to reveal to his sons the time of the redemption. However, as he was about to tell them, G-d's presence departed from Yakov and he was unable to relay the secret. G-d's departure at that crucial moment caused Yakov great concern. "Maybe one of my sons is unworthy of redemption. Maybe one of my sons is destined to stray from the path of his forefathers!" Rather than keep his concerns to himself, Yakov confronted his sons as they were assembled around his deathbed.

Upon hearing their father's concern all twelve sons responded, "Hear O' Israel, G-d is One." Yakov, convinced and grateful that the presence had nothing to do with the worthiness of his sons, responded, "Blessed be the honor of His kingdom."

Returning from Yakov's burial in Canaan, the brothers conspired to tell Yoseph a lie. (Bereishis 50:15) "Our father told us before he died that you should not revenge yourself against us for the evil we had done to you." Yoseph cried and reassured them that he did not harbor any thoughts of revenge against them and that he would continue to protect them and their families.

As Moshe stood at the Burning Bush he questioned G-d's reasons for redeeming the Jewish people. (Rashi 3:11) Why?

The book of Shemos is the story of Jewish nationality and purpose. Forced by circumstance and design into slavery, the family of Yakov grew into the nation of Israel. As a nation the challenges they had to confront were profoundly different than the challenges they had to contend with as a mere family. A family is a manageable number of individuals connected to each other by similar genetics, ancestry, and shared experiences. A family has a well-defined hierarchy that helps administrate the family. Grandparents and parents rule the family and older siblings support the induction of younger siblings into the established rules and traditions. Communication between family members is mostly done in person or personally, and the emotional ties within the family both bind and obligate. Loving relationships are encouraged, praised, and should be the norm.

As families grow from generation to generation, the genetics and ancestry mix with the broader population and the shared experiences become less personal. Traditions come into existence that are valued by some and not valued by others. Family communications become reserved for occasions of joy, sorrow, and family vacations with distant relatives relegated to an address book or a notation on the family tree. Emotional ties with distant relatives are more the product of curiosity or

family honor assuming that you even like the person or persons. Otherwise, that page in the phone book seems to get lost along with the invitation.

I recently heard Rabbi Block (Dean of Beis Medresh Torahs Hashem, Valley Village CA) speak at a funeral. He shared a beautiful imagery from his Father Z'L, Rabbi Morris Block. Parents are like the binding and cover of a book with the pages being the children. When the binding begins to fray and the covers fall off the pages are in danger of separating.

The truth is that as pages are added to the family book there comes a time when the covers and binding are not strong enough to hold all the pages in place. Eventually new books must be bound. If each page is a person and each book a family, then the nation is the library. Clearly, the rules for organizing a library are far more involved and complex than the organization of a page or book.

As the family of Yakov grew into the hundreds, thousands, and tens of thousands, the rules and expectations had to change. Four generations of family units had become twelve tribes with the loose assumption of being one nation. What bound them into a single entity were the difficulties of the persecution and the general traditions of being Jewish. Shared ancestry, traditional clothing, language, and names were prevalent within Goshen and were the primary elements of Jewish national identity.

On his deathbed, Yakov feared for the cohesiveness of his children. His concern was not as much for the twelve sons who were the progenitors of the nation as it was for the endless generations yet to be born. How could he aid them in maintaining familial connections during the difficult years ahead of them? How could he help them become a nation?

His first thought was to offer them a single collective goal that would bind their present and future to each other. Tell them when the redemption would take place. Tell them when Mashiach would come. Let them know that persecution and oppression are temporal realities along the way toward eternity. The countdown would be a count up. Survival would be a matter of hope rather than desperation. There would always be a light at the end of the tunnel. That alone should inspire unity, cohesiveness, and a national identity. The goal would be more than a dream. It would keep past promises alive while providing pride in the present. Names like, Avraham, Yitzchak, Yakov, Sarah, Rivkah, Rachel, and Leah, would be as alive and real to the generations as Yocheved, Miriam, Elisheva, Amram, Aharon and Moshe.

However, it was not to be. G-d stopped Yakov from revealing the future redemption. G-d did not want the hope for a better tomorrow to be the motivation of today. G-d wished his children to discover that regardless of what today seems to be, today is infinitely valuable. Not because tomorrow will be better but because today provides an opportunity to be alive and serve G-d regardless of circumstance or design.

Jewish unity must be founded on ideals and values that transcend person, time, or place. We are who we are because we serve G-d, not because of where we live or when we lived. That is not to

suggest that time and place are irrelevant. Time and place can enhance our relationship with G-d or detract from it; however, it should never be dependent on it. In the worst of times and the worst of places, Jews managed to remain Jews.

The 210 years in Mitzrayim, before receiving the Torah, were uniquely challenging to a family that had grown into a nation. They did not have the set values and ideals that could unify a nation and transcend time and place. All they had was the shared persecution and oppression and the shame of being slaves without the scheduled dream of redemption! What did G-d expect from them? What did Yakov hope for on his deathbed?

When Yakov questioned his son's deservedness to be the Chosen People, they responded with a resounding "Shema Yisroel" They did to Eretz Yisroel. They did not proclaim their hopes of being worthy to receive the Torah. They simply proclaimed their singular belief in G-d. "Father, fear not for the unity of our selves and our children. Inevitably our families will grow in size and number to the point where family rules and traditions will no longer be able to sustain us. However, we are the children of Avraham and we are all committed to the values of ethical monotheism. That will sustain us regardless of person, time and place. Shema Yisroel Hashem.

Upon hearing their proclamation, Yakov cried out, "Baruch Shem Kvode Malchuso." "The kingdom of G-d and His honor it has no bounds. Neither person, time, nor place, can limit Him. My children are bound by belief rather than circumstance past or future. They live by the edict, 'Serve G-d as servants who do not expect a reward. They live in the present and trust G-d for the rest."

The twelve sons understood Yakov's intentions and blessings. It was incumbent upon them to live each day with trust and belief in G-d and teach the same to their children. Eventually, they would be redeemed, receive a Torah, and the belief in G-d would have greater context and support. However, until that time, belief in G-d would have to sustain and unify them.

With Yakov's death, the book lost its covers and the brothers began to feel the inevitable separation. Not so with Yoseph. Yoseph, was responsible for supporting the family / nation and that responsibility connected him to them with the bond of father for his children. The brothers did not know the extent of Yoseph's commitment to them and the nation. They had grown up with the familial norms of shared experiences, joys and sorrows. They were bound to each other in a manner that transcended Yakov's presence; however, they did not know if they could trust Yoseph to be the same. They had never experienced a connection that was not founded on the presence of person, time, and place whereas Yoseph's survival for 22 years was predicated on a connection that was removed from person, time, and place. His connection was to the ideals and values of his family and not their physical presence. It was the vision of Yakov's face and not Yakov himself that kept him going. It was the face that was engraved on G-d's throne that he envisioned and not Yakov himself.

Upon being confronted with his brother's lie Yoseph understood their fears. Rather than resent their attempted manipulation Yoseph reassured them that his love for them was unconditional. It was not

founded upon the norms of the family. Instead, his love and commitment to them was founded on the ideals and values of the nation. Person, time, or place did not restrict his love; his love was the most reliable of all. However, he also realized that they needed to translate the ideal of Shema Yisroel into a national reality or else the nation would not survive.

Fundamental to belief in G-d as the sole creator is the understanding that all things are valuable because He created them. As such, every human is as valuable as the next. If G-d designated one human, family, or nation from the rest as chosen, it is incumbent upon the rest of the world to respect that divine designation and it is incumbent upon the chosen to understand that their value was divinely assigned. The others should want to protect and cherish that which G-d has chosen, and the chosen should be humbled and determined to do whatever they were chosen to do and be.

The reality of Shema Yisroel is that G-d, the one and only G-d, has designated the Jews to be chosen and that is what makes them special. More so than being the sons of the Avos and Imahos (patriarchs and matriarchs) was the fact that each of them and each of their children was and would be chosen to be a part of the chosen. The reason he had designated them was because they were the children of the Avos and Imahos to whom He had promised the Torah and the Land; but that was less important than the seeing themselves and their children as the chosen ones of G-d. As the chosen ones they were invincible. Only G-d or themselves could destroy them. (See Rashi Bereishis 50:21)

Before dying, Yoseph reassured the brothers that they would be redeemed. He reassured them that belief in G-d and only belief in G-d was their national identity. (Eventually, the preponderance of historical anomalies would become part of the Jewish mystique and for some take on an identity apart from belief in G-d.) In doing so he emphasized the critical importance of the individual and mandated them to make the value of the individual the practical reality of Shema Yisroel.

When Moshe arrived on the scene he was confronted with two tragic disappointments. First he encountered two Jews fighting with each other and they were the ones who turned him in to Pharaoh for killing the Egyptian overseer. In both instances Moshe concluded that the fundamental lesson of Jewish survival, the value of the individual, had been corrupted and the nation was unworthy of redemption. (Rashi 2:14)

G-d's response to Moshe recalibrated Moshe's entire existence. (3:12) "When you take the people out of Egypt, you will serve G-d "Moshe, you question their deservedness because you observed what appeared to be a lack of appreciation for each other. You question their deservedness because you were the victim of their animosity and hatred. You question their deservedness because if they believed in Me they must value each other as My intention and they are not doing so. Let Me assure you that regardless of your questions My intention is to bring them to the foot of this mountain where you will give them My Torah. Let Me assure you that the people you question are the ones I have chosen to be Mine. Therefore, you must cherish them with unqualified love and reserve. You

must protect them and esteem them. They are my precious possession and you are to redeem them. Your doubts and questions are irrelevant! Go to Pharaoh and tell him to let My people go!"

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