

THE UNITY SERIES PART TWO – THE POWER OF ONE

by Rabbi Aron Tendler

G-d first created the single human creature called Adam and then split the single creature into separate components. The male retained the name Adam and the female was named Chava., Although two parts of a greater whole, Adam and Chava remained separate and distinct.

Adam and Chava joined to create the first human family. G-d's intention was for the family to be the basic building block of society; however, the family was not intended to replace the value of the individual. The family is the basic building block of society whereas the individual is the basic building block of humanity.

The job of family is to train individuals to strive for personal accomplishment within the context of a society. Starting with husband and wife, their job is to role model, first for themselves and then for the rest of the family, self-sacrifice, compassion, sensitivity, selflessness, respect, and devotion to G-d, self, and nation. In essence, the job of husband and wife is to role model the value of the individual within the context of the family society and religion.

The story of Kayin and Hevel reemphasized the importance of the individual as the primary value and building block of humanity. Whereas Kayin and Shes became the progenitors of humanity, Hevel's death was the death of humanity. As the Talmud states, "Whoever saves a life is as if he has saved an entire world." Likewise, whoever kills a life is as if he killed an entire world.

Unfortunately, the pre-diluvium world lost sight of the importance of the individual and devalued human life to the extent that it provided for pleasure and power. Selflessness, self-sacrifice, and respect were replaced with idol worship, human avarice, and immorality. The family, which should have been the training ground for morality and decency, became the arena for its death and destruction. Noach and his family were the only individuals and family worthy of surviving.

Instructed to build the Tayvah (ark or box) and become the world's zoo keepers, Noach and his family were re-taught the value of the individual. Forced to make sense of a world destroyed, Noach and his family had to acknowledge the importance of the individual as potential progenitor of a world, but only within the context of G-d and His intentions. At the same time, they were responsible for the continuity of every living species. Not only was every human of infinite value, every animal and insect was also of infinite value. As the sole survivors of their individual species, both male and female were irreplaceable. Noach and his family could not afford to make a mistake! Once again the undeniable potential and value of the individual!

The story of Nimrod, the Tower of Babel, and the dispersion of the nations was another lesson in the importance of the individual in contrast to society. Following the lead and vision of Nimrod, humanity gathered to join as a single people in what would one day be Babylon; however, two factors worked against them. First of all, Nimrod's personal agenda was to become king and god of humanity. To do so he had to entice the rest of humanity to the banner of his ideology. His ideology was opposition to G-d, and independence (unrestricted behavior) from heaven. The Tower of Babel became the symbol of a new world order founded on the illusion of unity at the expense of individual value.

The Medresh describes that the building of the Tower revealed the inherent failure of a society that valued the individual only as it pertained to his contribution to society. In the course of the Towers construction, if a brick fell down and killed a worker on the ground the loss of the brick caused anger and mourning whereas the death of the worker was ignored.

The destruction of the Tower and the dispersion of the nations forced humanity to acknowledge the value of the individual. No matter how important the collective whole might be, if individuals cannot communicate with each other there is no collective whole and there is no society. (Likewise, if a husband and wife cannot communicate with each other there is no couple and there is no family.)

Following the Tower of Babel, the Torah turned its attention to the emergence of the Avos (patriarchs) and the Imahos (matriarchs). More so than the other Avos and Imahos, Avraham and Sarah were the paradigm of the valued individual, couple, and family. Under the most extreme conditions they acted in complete concert with each other. Situations that would have broken any other family only proved to strengthen their belief in their own worth, the importance of their family mission, and their resolve to live for the sake of all others, Jew and non-Jew alike:

a) The initial work in Ur Kasdim and Charan teaching monotheism in opposition to Nimrod and society. b) Uprooting their entire existence to go to Canaan. c) Arriving in Canaan and being forced because of famine to seek asylum in Egypt. d) Surviving the amorality of Egypt and Pharaoh and leaving them with the contrasting model of morality, dignity, and G-dliness. e) Separating from Lot because he would no longer accept the basic tenets of their lifestyle. f) Confronting the absence of children and engaging Hagar as a partner in their lives. g) The war against the four kings that established Avraham as a political player to be feared, respected, and reckoned with. h) The second hunger and their encounter with the selective morality of Avimelech and the Plishtim. i) The promise and birth of Yitzchak and the subsequent separation from Hagar and Yishmael. j) The Akeidah. k) The death and burial of Sarah.

It is no wonder that it was to Avraham and Sarah that G-d said, "And through you will be blessed all the families of the earth." No other unit of husband and wife better displayed the value of individuality and unity; no better husband and wife better displayed the meaning of family.

Rivkah and Yitzchak are each represented independent of each other and within the context of their commitment to each other and the ideals of family and nation. Yitzchak and Rivkah struggle to raise

two very different sons who on the surface should have been more alike than different. Instead, they must ultimately choose the one who will carry on the ideals of individual and familial commitment to the ideals of G-d and nation. Eisav is also blessed but Yakov is chosen. Throughout the story the unit of Yitzchak and Rivkah remain committed to each other and to their individuality:

a) The Akeidah. b) Rivkah's decision to leave her family and marry Yitzchak. c) 20 years of not having children, Rivkah seeking prophetic insight, and the birth of Yakov and Eisav. d) Living among the Plishtim and surviving their selective morality as well as jealousy. e) Divergent approaches to raising their twin sons and contending with the disappointment of one and the nachas (pleasure) from the other. f) Rivkah's conspiracy with Yakov to gain the necessary blessing and Yitzchak's final acquiescence. g) Yakov departure in face of Eisav's murderous hatred.

Yakov's emergence as the final Av is the most defined in of all the Avos. His eventual marriage to Leah, Rachel, Bilha, and Zilpah presents the added dimension of four strong and determined Imahos willing to sacrifice everything to advance their personal destinies as mothers of a nation:

a) Buying the birth right from Eisav at the age of 15. b) Attaining the designation as the scholar par excellence during the first 63 years of his life. c) Accepting Rivkah's direction and learning that honesty is sometimes relative to the greater good and survival of the family and nation. d) Fleeing Eisav's hatred and finding safe haven in the clutches of his evil uncle Lavan. e) Knowing his heart and destiny and accepting Lavan's ignoble intentions as the will of G-d when he awoke to find Leah and not Rachel. f) Rachel and Leah going along with Lavan's insidiousness because it had to be the will of G-d. g) The devotion of Rachel and Leah to the future of their nation by marrying Yakov to Bilha and Zilpah. h) Fleeing their father's home because they knew that it was time for the family to return to Canaan. i) Rachel stealing Lavan's idols and her subsequent death. j) The confrontation with Eisav and their successful avoidance of his overtures of love and concern. k) Burying Rachel in Bait Lechem because it was right and prophetic to do so.

The story of Yakov continues, but the focus changes to the emerging individuality of the children:

l) Reuven's switching Yakov's bed. m) Dina's abduction and the brother's judicious revenge. n) The rivalry between Yoseph and his brothers and Yoseph's sale into slavery. o) Reuven's attempt at saving Yoseph and Yehudah's success at doing so. p) Yehudah's separation from the family and his emergence as progenitor of Mashiach. q) Yoseph's amazing story of his metamorphosis into unrivaled power and responsibility. r) The maturation and reuniting of Yakov's sons into the nation of Yisroel.

To be continued....

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