

IT'S NOT WHAT BUT WHY PART III

by Rabbi Aron Tendler

Our Parsha begins with an account of the famed gold Menorah. Fashioned by Betzallel from a single block of gold, masterfully hammered into seven distinct yet integrated branches, its design and construction defied human artistry and ability. Comprised of seven candles, the center flame appeared more prominent than the others because the other six candles made it so. Moreover, it figured among the few daily services performed by the Kohain Gadol (high-priest).

The first three Parshios in Bamidbar (Book of Numbers) describe what should have been the final preparations of the nation before entering Eretz Yisroel (Land of Israel). The national census, the assignment of tribal placement in the camp and for traveling, and the primacy of the Kohanim, Leviyim, and the temple service, focused the nation on being a chosen people about to inherit the Promised Land.

Over the past two weeks I have explained that this focus on national purpose involves an acceptance that service to G-d is the criterion for designating value and purpose. To the extent that any one person or group does as G-d commands is the extent to which they have equal value and purpose.

Of course, there is an intrinsic value to personhood removed from any other value and purpose. To suggest otherwise is to encourage the devaluation of human life and possession and pave the slippery slope of euthanasia and genocide. However, beyond the intrinsic value of life and the respect it deserves is the question of purpose. Why we exist individually and collectively is only answered in relation to G-d - Creator of All. Those who serve Him as He asks accomplish the essence of purpose and value. Those who do not serve Him must accept the consequences of their actions or inactions including the loss of eternity. Timelessness is G-d's realm and immortality is granted to those who have embraced G-d and define their existence by His eternity.

I termed the basic formulation of this principle of absolute subjugation to G-d's will as, "Why we do, not What we do." So long as our actions are dictated by Hashem what we do may be very different from each other; however, so long as we do what we do because Hashem commanded us to do so we are each as important and valuable as the other. It was this purpose that the nation about to inherit the Promised Land was to reflect to each other and the rest of the world in word and in deed.

As a nation among nations it was intended that we be the model of integrity and truth. Truth was the characteristic of Yakov and it is the most fundamental of G-d's expectations for us. That is why the

concluding statement on the Luchos (tablets) involves "not coveting that which is not ours." The individual who truly accepts that the world was created and is governed by G-d believes that it is G-d who gives each of us what we have because what we have is exclusive to our purposes. Therefore, we should not have any desire to possess that which is someone else's.

What we have is no more important than what we do. What we have should be recognized as that which G-d gives us just as the value of what we do is determined by what G-d commands us to do. The rich and the poor, the mighty and the weak, the leaders and the followers, the Jews and the non-Jews, men and women, old and young, are all equal so long as we acknowledge that we have what is ours because G-d gave it to us and what we do with what we have is also equally valuable so long as it is what Hashem wishes us to do.

The end of last week's Parsha made this clear when describing the 12 day inauguration of the Mizbeach (altar). Twelve tribes and twelve princes each brought the exact same gift on twelve separate days. No one tribe was more exclusive than the other, no one day was more important than another. Each prince was exclusive to his day and each represented his tribe with the exact same tribute. It was not what they brought or when they brought it. It was why they brought it.

This week's Parsha starts with the Menorah. Rashi explains that the lighting of the Menorah was given to Aharon because the tribe of Layvie was not included in the inauguration ceremony. As the head of the tribe of Layvie Aharon should have brought the same offering as the other 12 princes - he did not. In compensation G-d told him, "Do not despair your gift will be greater than theirs."

In what manner was lighting the Menorah the same and even more than the offerings of the 12 princes? Why does the assignment of the lighting to Aharon and the tribe of Layvie include a description of how the Menorah was fashioned? Why is Aharon's participation reenacted every day in the temple while the offerings of the other 12 princes were a one time deal?

From the very beginning of Sefer Bamidbar the tribe of Layvie has been presented as separate from the rest of the nation. As explained, the Leviyim represent what the nation should and could have been if only they had not sinned with the Golden Calf. Therefore, everything having to do with the tribe of Layvie and the Kohanim must be viewed from that perspective. They represent the goal toward which the rest of the nation should aspire. As such, it is understandable that the offering of Aharon the Kohain Gadol represents the highest order of service to Hashem and should occupy center stage in the Mishkan (Tabernacle).

The inaugural offerings of the princes were all identical. Similar to the half shekel collected annually from every family unit, everyone had to contribute the same coin. No one could give more or less because the communal offerings were to be purchased from those funds and no one Jew was to have a greater or lesser obligation or share than any other. So too with the inaugural offerings. Each prince representing his own tribe offered the exact same tribute proclaiming the equability of value and purpose in service to G-d. Except for Shevet Layvie.

Shevet Layvie represents the highest formulation of service and dedication - complete subjugation to the will of G-d. The physical world of possessions is rendered irrelevant in that context. The fleeting norms of physicality and physical possessions that we use to judge each other and our individual worth are meaningless within the curtained sanctity (purpose) of the Bais Hamikdash (Holy Temple).

Center stage in the Mishkan was the Menorah. In the enclosed, windowless, confines of the Tabernacle the Menorah served as the only source of light. As such, its presence permeated every corner of the tent. Fashioned from a single block of gold, hammered and not cut, formed and not welded, the seven branches stood independent from each other yet dependent on each other for stability and function.

Seven lamps representing the seven days of creation. Seven lamps representing the totality of the physical world. Seven lamps, six on one side and six on the other, all focused toward the center lamp of the Menorah. Seven lamps whose sole function was to emit light that is as ethereal an entity as might exist.

The Menorah represented a physical world in service to G-d. Light was the first thing G-d introduced into creation and has remained a type of bridge between the physical and spiritual worlds. Torah is referred to as light as is the human soul. Allegorically speaking, light is produced when something else is consumed. In other words, light is created when something else is used; or, the purpose of using other things is to produce light. Light is therefore the goal of the physical world. Service to G-d, attaining spirituality through using the materialistic world is the purpose of our existence.

G-d created a physical universe and endowed physical humans with a spark of divinity so that the human should willfully spend his physical existence in spiritual attainment. As such, asceticism is sinful for within the physical resides the means for attaining purpose and divinity. It all comes back to the fundamental understanding that value and purpose are solely defined by service to G-d. A materialistic world used to attain spirituality is the very essence of G-d's intention.

The Menorah was Shevet Layvie. More so than the Mizbeach upon which the Kohanim facilitated the nation's personal and collective relationship with G-d, the Menorah was exclusive to the mission of Layvie in representing the goal of the nation. As the verse states about Shevet Layvie, "G-d is their portion." Representing the total subjugation of the physical in service to G-d, representing the integration of diverse elements (the six branches, the six days) founded upon a single purpose (single block of gold) the Menorah was to be lit daily by the prince of the tribe who had proven their devotion above and beyond that of all others. "Whoever belongs to Hashem rally to me! And the tribe of Layvie gathered..."

G-d commanded that his offering be repeated day after day after day representing the goal of existence in revealing the light that is the purpose of creation itself. G-d told Aharon that his offering would be greater than all the other princes. So it was.

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