

THE WHOLE AND THE PART - PART I

by Rabbi Aron Tendler

After Yakov's encounter with Eisav, he crossed over the border and returned to the land of Canaan. The Torah recorded in last week's Parsha that the first place he chose to settle was the area of Shechem. (33:18- 19) "And Yakov came 'whole' to the city of Shechem... and he camped outside of the city. He then purchased the field where he had pitched his tent from the family of Chamor the father of Shechem..."

The Shem Meshmuel makes the following observation. Avraham, upon entering Canaan for the first time, went to Shechem (12:6). Yakov, upon returning to Canaan, first went to Shechem. Yehoshua, upon crossing the Yarden for the first time, led the Bnai Yisroel (Sons of Israel) directly to Shechem (the ceremony at the twin mountains Ayval and Grizim). Additionally, Shechem proved to be a place of great significance in other ways. Dina was violated in Shechem. The brothers sold Yoseph into slavery in Shechem; and the split between the kingdoms of Yehudah and Yisroel, (North and the South) took place in Shechem.

The Shem Meshmuel explains that the word Shechem means, "portion - part of the whole." Shechem was a place that could inspire tremendous unity or disunity. The reason that Avraham, Yakov, and Yehoshua "first planted the flag" in the area of Shechem was to establish from the outset that their purpose in living in the Promised Land was to reinforce the whole by embracing their responsibilities for creating the whole.

The part in relation to the whole can be viewed in two opposing ways. On the one hand, the part is primary and the whole functions as the means or support for the part. On the other hand, the part is important only in its capacity to complement and complete the whole. It is the whole that is primary and the part that supports the whole. Shechem was a location that presented either choice. It could inspire the part to see itself as primary and the whole as secondary and it could inspire the part to see the whole as primary and itself as secondary.

Eretz Yisroel (Land of Israel) is not like any other land. It is a land that responds to its inhabitants by either aiding or hindering their exclusive mission. It can aid its inhabitants by giving its natural resources to strengthen the nation's economy and well-being. It can hinder its inhabitants by denying them its natural resources making the natural environment inhospitable and challenging. When Avraham, Yakov, and Yehoshua entered Eretz Yisroel they recognized the importance of the moment. They understood that their being in the land could mean success or failure and they had to be clear as to their intentions. If their intentions were to serve Hashem (G-d) and aid in the creation of

the whole, they would be successful; if not, the land would deny their attempts at settling and cultivating. The Land would chase them away.

This basic concept of the symbiotic relationship between the nation and land is not new. From the very beginning of time the relationship between human behavior and the availability of natural resources was made clear. Adam and Chava had a perfect world that took care of them. Gan Eden (Garden of Eden) left them free to focus solely on understanding G-d and His intentions for humanity. Once they sinned Adam and Chava were chased out of Gan Eden and humanities struggle with nature began. To the extent that they listened to G-d was the extent to which nature gave over its largess and bounty.

The Mabul made the symbiotic relationship between human and nature even more direct. To the extent that the human is responsible for creating and maintaining the whole of nature (the experience in the Tayvah (ark) by caring for all the animals) is the extent to which the whole of nature will support humanity in its endeavor to rise above animal and embrace its own divine image.

The destruction of society with the Tower of Bavel further underscored the symbiotic relationship between human, nature, and devotion to Hashem. If humanity devotes itself to Hashem, nature will support its social constructions. However, if humanity unites in opposition to G-d nature will respond by destroying the foundation of that society and dispersing its members to the four corners of the earth.

The destruction of Sodom and Gomorrah soon after the fall of the Tower of Bavel (52 years) left an indelible scar on the perfection of the Land. That utterly lifeless destruction proclaimed loud and clear that the Land will respond to its inhabitants in the most extreme way possible. It can be as the Garden of G-d or a pillar of salt. The choice is ours. If we serve Hashem and humanity the land will be as Gan Eden. If we choose to not serve Hashem and humanity it will become the scorched, infertile, and wasted landscape we recognize today. The Avos (patriarchs) knew this fundamental symbiotic relationship and embraced their responsibilities for maintaining the whole.

On a smaller but consistent scale were the Avos themselves. Each of them proved to be financially successful despite grave difficulties and challenges. Avraham, Yitzchak, and Yakov each did far more than survive. They rose to dominate their societies financially and spiritually. Clearly, they were living examples of the human / nature relationship. The Avos represented the importance of the part in relation to what it contributes to the whole.

For whatever reason the area of Shechem was the key to unlocking or locking Eretz Yisroel's potential to aid or hinder their destiny. It was the key to the land being a blessing or a curse. Rashi records that when Avraham went to Shechem and built his first Mizbeach (alter) "G-d showed him the mountains of Grizim and Ayval where his children would receive the oaths." Avraham knew that it was up to him and it would be up to them (his future descendants) to commit to success. Yakov as progenitor of the family returned to the land and immediately settled outside the city of Shechem.

He too understood that the success of their tenure in Eretz Yisroel was dependent on the commitment they would make in Shechem. When Yehoshua led the Bnai Yisroel across the Yarden (Jordan river) he was commanded to shepherd the nation to the foot of Har Grizim and Ayval. There, the nation would hear the blessings and the curses that was theirs for the choosing. They would have to proclaim loud and clear why they wanted to inherit the land. Being the children of Avraham, Yitzchak, and Yakov was not enough. The right of inheritance was to those who would honor the conditions of the relationship. They would have to decide if they were to be the part, the portion, the Shechem that supported the whole; or, the part, portion, Shechem that considered the whole important only to the extent that it supported the part.

What is the part and what is the whole? To be more exact, what is the whole? We know what the part is. We are each a part. The nation is a part. But what are we a part of? To which whole are we responsible?

This week's Parsha, begins to define the whole and the part. The root meaning of the name Yoseph is to gather, to unify. Yoseph's strength according to the Shem Meshmuel was to unify his brothers into a cohesive whole. Each of the brothers presented unique characteristics essential for the whole of the Jewish nation. Yoseph was the one who was intended to rally them all in the cohesive whole of a family soon to be nation that could survive all that destiny would reveal.

Yoseph's mission is revealed on two accounts. First the manner in which the brothers related to him. Yoseph's job was to unify and the barriers he had to overcome were the brothers themselves. Secondly, the outcome of his personal destiny transcended the unification of a nation and embraced the unity of a world. He and he alone became the Mashbir, the provider of food for the starving masses.

Next week we will continue the discussion of the Whole and The Part by further exploring the uniqueness of Shechem as a place of Whole or Part.

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