

AN IMITATION NATION

by Rabbi Berel Wein

The almost endless repetition of the gifts of the elders of the tribes of Israel, at the time of the dedication of the Tabernacle in the desert, has presented a problem to all the commentators to the Torah over the ages. Why does the Torah, that is often so sparing with words even when discussing important and eternal commandments and issues, allow itself to be so expansive and repetitive in this matter?

As can be imagined, there are numerous discussions of this matter by the scholars of Israel over the centuries, though it is difficult to find an answer that proves to be both emotionally and intellectually satisfying. Even I am loath to tread in areas where even the great angels of Israel have found difficulty, nevertheless there is an observation that I feel can and should be made that does have relevance and importance to us.

Nothing in the Torah should be treated cavalierly. There is a message to all that is written within its holy words and it is incumbent upon us to find and absorb that message in our own lifestyle and society. Often-times in life people are deterred from taking certain actions or developing certain ideas or programs simply because someone has already advanced that idea.

People feel that if they are not the first to propose an idea, if someone, so to speak, has beaten them to the punch, then they withdraw completely from the arena and have nothing to say or contribute to the matter. The repetition of the same identical gifts that each of the 12 elders of the tribes of Israel donated to the Tabernacle teaches us that just because someone else has originally done a great thing, one should not be deterred from repeating that exact same deed.

Often in life, it is the repetition of an act or declaration that solidifies the original pioneering act or statement. It is the fact that others have chosen to imitate and repeat the same act that gives the original act its validity and value. Had there been only one gift of one of the elders of Israel to the Tabernacle, cynics would say that this was merely a formal gesture of public display but did not really reflect the true intent, emotions and relationship of the tribes of Israel towards this holy structure.

It is only when this act is repeated over and over and each of the elders of the tribe of Israel demands its own right and turn to express its appreciation for the godly gift of the Tabernacle to the Jewish people that the true attitude and emotion of the people is honestly and openly reflected.

Throughout the Torah we are aware that there is an underlying idea that people do not want to be

excluded from participation in a godly commandment and holy mission. This is abundantly evident in the case of the gifts of the elders of the tribes of Israel as outlined in this week's Torah reading.

Shabbat shalom
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