

TRAVELING IN FORMATION

by Rabbi Yissocher Frand

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Bamidbar - Traveling In Formation: A Lesson From Yaakov Avinu

In this week's parsha we learn about the order and divisions in which the Jewish people traveled and camped in the desert. Moshe was commanded to divide the encampment into four divisions, each with its respective flag. Each division of three tribes traveled and camped along one of the sides of the Mishkan, with the Mishkan in the center.

The Medrash explains that when HaShem [G-d] told Moshe that the Jews were to travel in a specific formation around the Mishkan, Moshe began to complain that if he specified such a formation, controversy would break out. "If I tell Yehudah to camp in the East, they will say they want the South, and so it will be with each and every tribe". HaShem told Moshe not to worry -- each tribe would know and accept their own place willingly because "they have travel plans predetermined from the days of the Patriarch Yaakov". The travel formation in the desert was identical to the arrangement that Yaakov Avinu [our forefather] made for his sons to use when they carried him out of Egypt to be buried in the Tomb of the Patriarchs in Chevron. The same three sons were in the front, the same three were on each side and the same three were behind.

This Medrash is very difficult to understand. What was Moshe worried about in the first place? These were people of great moral and spiritual stature. They were not petty individuals who would be jockeying for position. In addition, what is the connection between their travels in the desert and their travels when they carried Yaakov's coffin?

I found an interesting interpretation in the Ateres Mordechai. Moshe was worried about life in the wilderness. Life in the wilderness was not a natural existence. It was an existence that was tense and filled with danger. True, they had the Clouds of Glory and the Manna and the Well, but it was an unnatural existence -- they were living on a string. People living under such immense physical pressures often lose their humanity and become like animals. [There are pictures of the American

escape from Vietnam burned into our memories. When life becomes so tenuous, one's normal behavior ceases and one virtually ceases to be a human being.]

Moshe Rabbeinu was worried about maintaining a sense of order and dignity in the desert. He was worried about the specter of the nation losing that sense - their sense of humanity. Moshe feared that their existence in the wilderness would lead to confusion, turmoil, and the very antithesis of neatness and civility.

HaShem answered by telling Moshe that he need not worry about the Jewish people. They already learned this lesson of civility and dignity earlier in their history, when they suffered that great moment of trauma - the loss of Yaakov, the last of the Patriarchs. Before Yaakov's death, he instilled in his children, for all future generations, this strength of character - the ability to remain dignified and human even in times of adversity and trauma.

The great proof of this, as we all know, are the incredible stories we hear about Jews in the concentration camps. When Jews were treated worse than animals, they were often able to rise above the occasion and maintain human dignity. Recently I heard a woman on a radio show reflecting on her life in the concentration camp, where she was treated in the most inhumane fashion imaginable. She and another girl struck up a friendship. They had lost their parents and families and they had no one else in the world besides each other. One day, while working in the field, one of these girls found a raspberry. She held the raspberry in her pocket for the entire day, and guarded it so that it would not get crushed. At the end of the day, she gave the raspberry to her friend. That was the last raspberry that she saw in her life - because she died there in the camp.

The idea that a person can retain human dignity even when treated like an animal was the strength that Yaakov our Patriarch imbued in his children. Moshe feared the loss of such dignity, and HaShem's response was "They already have the travel plans from Yaakov, their father".

Traveling In Formation: As One Man With One Heart

Another approach to this Medrash is as follows. Moshe's concern was not about the physical location of the Tribes during their travels in the dessert. Moshe was worried about something else entirely. Many of the commentaries point out that the traveling locations of the Tribes around the Mishkan represented much more than the way in which they traveled. The groupings represented how they were to contribute to the nation as a whole.

In order for a nation to be successful, there must be a division of labor. Not everyone can perform the same functions. There must be 'Priests' and 'Israelites', scholars and supporters of Torah, men and women. In order to create a successful nation, everyone must work toward a common good. Each person needs to do his part for a higher purpose.

When Moshe divided the Tribes, it was not merely a geographical or chronological division, but a division of roles. Moshe told HaShem, "When I tell Yissacher that they will be the learners of Torah

and Zevulun that they will be the supporters of Torah... When I tell Asher that they will be the men of commerce and the Levites that they will be in charge of the Temple Service... there will be arguments and controversy."

Moshe envisioned that one would say, "No, I want to do the Temple Service" and another one would say, "No, I want to do the learning", etc. HaShem reassured Moshe that this would not happen. They already received their missions in life from Yaakov Avinu. Yaakov called them in before his death and told them "how to travel."

The "blessings" that Yaakov gave to his sons in Parshas Vayechi do not all appear to be "blessings". Some were actually critiques: "You are too this, and you are too that." The commentaries explain that before Yaakov's death, he gave to his children the greatest blessing that any parent can give. Yaakov told them their strengths and weaknesses. He told them, based on their natures, what their roles in life and mission among the Jewish people would be. Based on the personalities and characteristics and strengths of each son, Yaakov defined exactly what they should be and what they should do.

HaShem told Moshe not to worry about assigning roles to the Tribes. They will not resent it or rebel because their great-grandfather already assigned the roles to them. "No arguments will emerge from your re-assignment of these same roles."

This, says the Chidushei HaRi"m, is why we read Parshas Bamidbar before the Holiday of Shavuot. In order to achieve a Kabbalas HaTorah [reception of the Torah], we need "and Israel camped there (vaYichan) opposite the mountain" [Shemos 19:2]. Our Rabbis emphasize that the verb vaYichan (they camped) is in the singular to indicate that when the Jewish nation camped prior to receiving the Torah, they camped with unity "as one man, with one heart".

How is unity achieved? How are jealousy, envy, and argument removed? We read the Parsha of Bamidbar - about the encampment of every man by his appropriate tribe and by his appropriate flag. We read how everyone must understand that every person plays a vital role in Klal Yisroel - regardless of whether he is the teacher, or the doctor, or the fund-raiser, or whomever. The only way we can be a nation is by understanding and appreciating our individual roles.

Rav Yaakov Kamenetsky points out in his sefer that the whole "Order of the Flags" was not commanded until after the second year in the wilderness. What happened when they traveled during the entire first year? Rav Yaakov explains that during the first year there was no Mishkan, no Tabernacle, in the middle. Only after the Mishkan (representing the concept of HaShem's Divine Presence, and which was to be in the center of this traveling formation) was erected in the second year was there a command to move in formation.

People will object if you arbitrarily demand that they be assigned to specific roles. But if people realize that the purpose is for the sake of accomplishing a common goal; if they realize that they are bound together for one centrality, then they will joyfully contribute with individual roles, knowing

that this is the only way for a team or a nation to function. Only then can they reach the level of "one man with one heart" and merit the receiving of the Torah.

Glossary

Mishkan -- Tabernacle

Avodah -- (Divine) Service

Kabbalas HaTorah -- Receipt of the Torah

Klal Yisroel -- Nation of Israel

Personalities

Ateres Mordechai -- Rav Mordechai Rogov; Rosh Yeshiva; Skokie Yeshiva; Illinois.

Rav Yaakov Kamenetsky -- (1891-1986) Rosh Yeshiva of Mesivta Torah Vodaath, New York.

Chiddushei HaRi"m -- Rav Yitzchak Meir of Ger (1799-1866), founder of Ger Chassidism, Poland.

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