

MORE THAN JUST STARS AND STRIPES

by Rabbi Yissocher Frand

This dvar Torah was adapted from the hashkafa portion of Rabbi Yissocher Frand's Commuter Chavrusah Tapes on the weekly portion: Tape # 240, An Early Start for Shavuos? Good Shabbos!

Tribal Flags: More Than Just Stars and Stripes

There is an interesting Medrash in this week's parsha on the pasuk [verse] "Each man by his flag and by his insignia" [Bamidbar 2:2]. The Medrash quotes a passage from Shir HaShirim [Song of Songs] 6:10, "Who is this that gazes down brightening like the dawn, beautiful like the moon, brilliant as the sun, awesome as the bannered hosts of kings?" As the nations of the world saw the Jews traveling through the wilderness, arranged by Tribe, they all wondered "Who are these people who travel so beautifully with their flags?" The Nations were so impressed that they said to the Jewish people, "Return, Return O Shulamite and we shall choose nobility from you." [Ibid. 7:1] You are so beautiful and amazing. Please join ranks with us. If you join ranks with us, we will make you our leaders, our governors, and our rulers. We are so impressed with you, let us merge. The Medrash then states that the Jewish people answered, "What can you offer us? Can you promise us anything better than that which G-d has already given us -- namely this beautiful concept of traveling in formation with each tribe's own flag?" They rejected the offer from the other nations.

What is the meaning of this Medrash? Why were the nations so amazed by the flags? What is so unique about a bunch of people traveling under a bunch of flags? After all, every nation has a flag. In the plaza of the United Nations, it is immediately obvious that it is no big deal to have a flag. Every little nation has a flag! What was uniquely beautiful about the travel formations that caused the nations to become jealous?

I saw the following interpretation in a volume called Yalkut Ma'amarim from Rav Siegel: Every nation can have a flag. We in the United States have the "Stars and Stripes", the British have the "Union Jack", and the French have their flag as well. The trouble is that flags come with a certain amount of Nationalism, and Nationalism comes with chauvinism. Sure, the British have a flag and the French have a flag. But since time immemorial, the British have hated the French and the French have hated

the British.

Yes, we have a United Nations with over 100 countries, where everyone has their own flag, but almost everyone hates each other as well. One of the true miracles of the entire Persian Gulf situation (1991) was that the nations of the world could agree on something. In general, we know that the UN has been a virtually impotent body for the past 50+ years because flags come with nationalities, and nationalities come with rivalries. Even after a "Soviet Union" was imposed on 15 nations, as soon as the lid is removed, the nations that have hated each other for centuries resume their rivalries.

The Nations of the world were not amazed that each of the tribes of the Jewish people had their own flags. There is nothing special about that. So what was special? Despite the fact that there were 12 flags, representing 12 unique sets of personalities and individuals, there remained a certain unity that permeated the entire encampment in the wilderness. The Nations could have duplicated the flags. They could not duplicate the peace and unity that existed amongst our nation.

What, in fact, was the secret of the Jewish people? Why, in fact, could they all dwell together in harmony? The answer is in a pasuk: "May we sing for joy at Your salvation, and raise our banner in the Name of our G-d" (u'b'Shem Elokeinu Nidgol) [Tehillim 20:6]. The Shem HaShem is the 'flag' that everyone salutes to -- the Flag of G-d. All twelve flags pale and become insignificant because there is a greater flag out there -- the Flag of the Honor of Heaven. When one has such a commonality of purpose, then one can have unity. However, when my flag must be Number One, and I can not submerge it for the welfare of a greater good, then we have a situation like the "United Nations" with all its controversy.

Rav Meir Shapiro, zt'L, once offered a beautiful insight. Those people who pray "nusuch sefarad," like Chassidim, begin their Morning Prayers with "Hodu" [Let us give thanks]. Those people who daven "nusuch ashkenaz," as Lithuanian and German Ashkenazim do, begin their Morning Prayers with "Baruch SheAmar" [Blessed be He Who spoke (and brought the world into being)]. However, everyone is the same regarding "Yehi Kavod Hashem L'Olam" [May the Glory of G-d exist forever]. People may come from Germany and Lithuania; they may come from Hungary and the Chassidic strongholds in Poland and Russia. There may be and there have been disputes and controversies. But there remains one overriding and unifying concept: May the Glory of G-d exist forever [Tehillim 104:31]. When that exists as an overriding concept, all the other differences can be set aside.

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