

ONE OF THESE ASSOCIATE TRIBES IS NOT LIKE THE OTHER

by Rabbi Yissocher Frand

Parshas Bamidbar

One Of These Associate Tribes Is Not Like The Other

These divrei Torah were adapted from the hashkafa portion of Rabbi Yissocher Frand's Commuter Chavrusah Tapes on the weekly portion: Tape # 418, -Shavuos Issues -- Late Ma'ariv / Learning All Night.
Good Shabbos!

This week's parsha explains the configuration by which the Children of Israel traveled in the wilderness: "The Children of Israel shall encamp, each man by his banner according to the insignias of their fathers' household, at a distance surrounding the Tent of Meeting shall they encamp" [Bamidbar 2:2]. The Torah enumerates a leading Tribe in each direction (Yehudah on the East; Reuven on the South; Ephraim on the West; and Dan on the North) and two associate tribes that traveled and camped alongside the main tribe in each direction.

The Baal HaTurim points out an interesting phenomenon. In each case, when the Torah lists an "associate tribe," they are introduced by the conjunctive "vov" (meaning 'and'), with one exception. The exception is the Tribe of Zevulun. Zevulun traveled as an associate tribe under the Banner of the Tribe of Yehudah, as did Yissocher. However, unlike all the other associate tribes, the Torah does not introduce the Tribe of Zevulun with the word 'And'.

The Baal HaTurim explains the reasoning as follows: The Tribes of Yissocher and Zevulun were really like one tribe. Since it was Zevulun who supported Yissocher, allowing that Tribe to devote themselves to the study of Torah, the two tribes are like inseparable twins. [There is a well-known Medrash that the tribe of Zevulun engaged in business, but used their profits to support the tribe of

Yissocher so that they could study.] No distinction could be made between them in the encampments, and no distinction will be made between them in terms of spiritual reward in the World to Come.

Why Was Zevulun Sent to the Merchant Marines?

Each Tribe had its own banner ('degel'). We typically think of flags as a secular phenomenon. Flags began with the Tribes in the Wilderness. Each flag had the symbol of the Tribe (usually based on Yaakov's Brachos to his children). The symbol of the Tribe of Yehudah featured a lion. The lion is king of the beasts. Yehudah was the tribe of monarchy. Therefore his flag featured a symbol of a lion.

The flag of the Tribe of Yissocher featured the sun, the moon, and the stars. The reason for this was because the Tribe of Yissocher possessed "men of understanding of the times" [Divrei Hayamim I 12:33]. They mastered the astronomical sciences and served as consultants to the Sanhedrin for questions dealing with the calculation of the appearance of the new moon.

The symbol of the Tribe of Zevulun was a ship. They were the merchant marine. They made their living by the sea. Consequently, their symbol was a ship.

The question can be asked; if the Tribe of Zevulun supported the Tribe of Yissocher, and G-d wanted to see to it that they earned a good livelihood, why didn't G-d make life easy for Zevulun? Why couldn't Zevulun have a nice clean job, where they sit behind desks, make some phone calls, and generate profits? Instead, they were sailors, traveling the distant seas in unsafe vessels. Those who "descend to the sea" (yordei haYam) are one of the categories of people that need to thank G-d for saving them (by 'bentching Gomer') each time they return from a trip. The Tribe of Zevulun probably had the most dangerous profession of any of the tribes. Why wasn't Zevulun given a break? He is a nice guy who is supporting his brother. Shouldn't he be given the choicest of jobs? Why did Providence decree that his lot should be that of a sailor?

The Kol Dodi cites a Gemara [Kiddushin 82a] to the effect that the majority of sailors are pious (rubam Chasidim). The reasoning is that "there are no atheists in a foxhole." Surviving the ordeal of a journey at sea brings one closer to his Maker. Every time a sailor leaves dry land, he puts his life into G-d's Hand. Sailors see and feel Divine Providence throughout their journeys. That is why G-d steered Zevulun into the merchant marine. He wanted Zevulun to support Yissocher. He wanted Zevulun to be generous (Baalei Tzedakah). The people who are most likely to be Baalei Tzedakah are the people who see the Hand of G-d in their livelihood.

I see this in my experience as well. Business people who have no idea how much they are going to

earn in a certain year or how many clients or customers will come their way, always talk about the "Hashgocha" [Divine Providence] of their success. People who are salaried and receive the same paycheck every single week and know from the beginning of the year exactly how much they will be earning, are typically less sensitive to the Hand of G-d in their financial success. They are more likely to think, "I earn the living" (as opposed to "I earn the living by the Mercy of G-d"). They are more likely to think, "My strength and the might of my hand made me this great wealth" [Devorim 8:17].

People who are constantly reminded that they are dependent upon G-d are generally more generous. So, precisely because G-d wanted Zevulun to support Yissocher, He put him in a type of work where he would sense G-d's involvement in his life on a daily basis. As such, he will be more generous in his giving of charity.

Naomi Taught Rus the Fundamental of Judaism: Get Serious

Many of the laws relating to the process of conversion are learned from the book of Rus. Rus told Naomi "Do not pressure me to leave you, to turn back and not follow you. For wherever you go, I will go; where you lodge, I will lodge; your people are my people and your G-d is my G-d; where you die, I will die, and there I will be buried." [Rus 1:16].

Rashi quotes the teaching of the Sages that at this point, Naomi saw that Rus was totally sincere, and she started teaching her the laws of Judaism. Our Sages teach that each phrase in the quoted pasuk is an allusion to a certain set of halachic principles. "I will go where you will go" alludes to the law of Techum Shabbos [the maximum distance once is allowed to travel beyond the city limits on Shabbos]. "I will lodge where you will lodge" alludes to the prohibition of Yichud [impermissibility of sharing private quarters with a forbidden member of the opposite sex]. "Where you die, I will die" alludes to the forms of execution meted out by a Jewish Court.

However, the Medrash interprets something different in this dialogue. The Medrash agrees that we learn from this pasuk [verse] that Naomi was teaching Rus the unique laws of Judaism. However, according to the Medrash, Naomi was teaching her daughter-in-law that "Jewish women do not go to non-Jewish theaters and circuses." Rus responded, "I will go where you will go."

This Medrash is puzzling. One would hardly expect that the first thing that Naomi would tell a potential convert to Judaism is that Jews do not go to the theater and circuses. Even given that the theaters spoken about in the Medrash are not totally equivalent to our theaters and the circuses are not exactly referring to the Ringling Brothers Barnum & Bailey, nevertheless this is a strange curriculum for Judaism 101.

Why is abstaining from going to the theaters and circuses so fundamental an idea, that the Medrash uses this example to illustrate Naomi's introductory lesson to her daughter-in-law regarding the basics of her new religion?

The Nachalas Yosef, a wonderful work on Megillas Rus, suggests an answer based on a Gemara in tractate Avodah Zarah [18b]. The Talmud refers to theaters and circuses as 'moshav leitzim' [places where scoffers hang out]. The question then becomes, does scoffing and mocking, in fact, represent the antithesis of Judaism? The answer is most emphatically yes.

The opening verse of the book of Tehillim says: "Praiseworthy is the man who walked not in the counsel of the wicked and stood not in the path of the sinful, and sat not in the session of scorners". The next pasuk continues: "But his desire is in the Torah of Hashem, and in His Torah he meditates day and night." Thus we see that the polar opposite of desiring the Torah of Hashem is sitting in a moshav leitzim [session of scorners].

A Moshav Leitzim is not a comedy house. It is not a theater where people make jokes. A Moshav Leitzim reflects a lack of seriousness about life. It is a way of life that says that the primary purpose of life is to 'have a good time'. This is what theaters and circuses represent and this is what Naomi cautioned Rus against.

"Rus, if you want to become a Jewess, the first thing that you must know about Judaism is that life is serious. There is a goal and purpose and mission in life. Life is not a joke. Life is not having a good time. It is serious business."

Everything flows from this idea. It is a stark distinction: The 'session of scoffers' versus 'the Torah of Hashem is his desire'. It is an 'either-or'. You cannot have both. That is Judaism 101.

"Before we can talk about anything else -- Shabbos, Yichud, Sanhedrin -- you have to accept one thing: Life is meaningful. You are here for a purpose. If you are willing to accept that, Rus, then we can talk about Judaism."

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