

NOT JUST A CASE OF POLITICS MAKING STRANGE BEDFELLOWS

by Rabbi Yissocher Frand

Parshas Yisro

Not Just A Case of Politics Making Strange Bedfellows

Parshas Yisro contains the narration of the receipt of the Torah. This section is the Torah reading on the first day of Shavuot. The pasukim say, "In the third month from the Exodus of the Children of Israel from Egypt, on this day, they arrived at the Wilderness of Sinai. They journeyed from Rephidim, and arrived at the Wilderness of Sinai and encamped in the Wilderness and Israel encamped there, opposite the mountain. [Shemos 19:1-2].

Rashi comments that the verbs for they arrived (ba-u), they journeyed (va'yis-u), they arrived (va'yavo-u), and they encamped (va'yachanu) are all plural. Suddenly, when the pasuk states: "Israel encamped there" the Torah uses a singular verb (va'yichan). In a famous comment, Rashi notes that the encampment at Sinai was "like one man with one heart" (k'ish echad, b'lev echad), although until that point every encampment had been with some complaint or dispute.

The Tanna of the School of Eliyahu is even more explicit: "Great is peace and unity for in connection with all the travels we find 'They traveled', 'They camped' (plural - indicating multiplicity of opinions and strife). However when they came to Sinai, they camped in unity as it is written (singularly) 'Israel encamped opposite the mountain.' The Almighty said, 'Since they despised strife and loved peace and camped as one person, the time has come for Me to give them My Torah.'"

The Avnei Nezer points out that Rashi makes a very similar comment in last week's parsha (B'Shalach). The pasuk says, "And behold Egypt traveled after them (noseah achareihem)" [Shemos 14:10]. Again, the pasuk uses the singular form of the verb noseah. There too Rashi comments "with one heart, like one man." In other words, the Egyptians achieved this apparent level of unity in their pursuit of Israel.

However, the Avnei Nezer suggests, there is a significant change of emphasis from the Rashi in B'Shalach to the Rashi in Yisro. In B'Shalach, when speaking about the Egyptian pursuit of Israel, Rashi uses the expression "b'lev echad k'ish echad" [with one heart, like one man] and here in Yisro, when speaking about the encampment at Mt. Sinai, Rashi uses the inverse expression "k'ish echad, b'lev echad" [like one man, with one heart]. Why is Rashi not consistent in explaining the idea of

unity?

The Avnei Nezer gives a beautiful answer. The Mishneh says "Any love dependent on a tangible matter is destined to become nullified; any love independent of tangible matters is destined to last." [Avos 5:16] People can have a love based on a specific reason or agenda. One can fall in love with a person based on their money or beauty, but when the ulterior motive for establishing the relationship disappears, the love disappears. If, on the other hand, the love and unity is NOT based on any specific trait or reason but is based on the people themselves, that is love of a different magnitude.

There can be unity among people for different reasons. Sometimes there is unity among people because they have the same agenda. The thing that binds us together is common purpose. Basically, we hate each other, but if we have a common purpose, we can put aside our differences and unite to achieve a common agenda. There is an expression "politics makes strange bedfellows."

Fundamentally, these groups have totally opposite philosophies of life, but on one issue there can be unity and common purpose. For example, we have many differences with the Catholic Church, but when it comes to the question of government aid for parochial schools, we do share a common agenda. On this issue, we are on the same side and we can work together in unison.

The Egyptians formed this latter kind of coalition amongst one another. They all had one goal - to recapture the escaping Jews, their former slaves. This is articulated in the expression "b'lev echad" [with one heart]. They had a common desire which created a unity that made them be "k'ish echad" [like one man]. This is a very tenuous type of unity.

This is contrasted with Israel's encampment opposite the mountain that Rashi describes beautifully as "k'ish ecahd, b'lev echad". There, the unity was created because of commonality of the people themselves. Everyone felt they were brothers with each other. This was real unity, not merely superficial unity to achieve a common agenda. This sense of identity of "k'ish echad" of course led to an identity of purpose as well - "b'lev ecahd".

As an addendum, I would like to share the following beautiful insight that I recently heard. Consider the five consecutive paragraphs recited on Mondays and Thursdays following the Torah reading. Each of the first four paragraphs begins with the words "Yehi Ratzon m'lifnei Avinu B'Shamayim..." [May it be the will before our Father in Heaven...] We pray that it should be His Will to reestablish the Bais HaMikdash; it should be His Will to have mercy upon us; it should be His Will to sustain the scholars of Israel and their families; and it should be His Will that we hear good tidings, and so forth. Suddenly, this poetic symmetry is broken in the fifth paragraph, which does not begin with the words "Yehi Ratzon" but begins with the words "Acheinu kol Beis Yisrael" [Our brethren, the entire House of Israel]. Why the change?

Rav Chaim Sanzer teaches a fantastic lesson. In the fifth paragraph, the words "Yehi Ratzon" become superfluous. Rav Chaim Sanzer explains that if we can already speak in terms of "Our brethren, the

entire House of Israel" with a love and unity that we consider each and every Jew as our sibling, there is no greater fulfillment of "May it be the Will of our Father in Heaven" than this. The words "Yehi Ratzon" become superfluous. Great is peace when Israel encamps as one man opposite the mountain. This is the ultimate fulfillment of the Will of the Almighty.

This write-up was adapted from the hashkafa portion of Rabbi Yissocher Frand's Commuter Chavrusah Torah Tape series on the weekly Torah portion. The complete list of halachic topics covered in this series for Parshas Yisro are provided below:

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