

THE TWELVE STONES BECOME ONE: INVERTED SYMBOLISM?

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Parshas Vayeitzei

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These divrei Torah were adapted from the hashkafa portion of Rabbi Yissocher Frand's Commuter Chavrusah Tapes on the weekly portion: Tape # 746, The Amazing Power of Saying Tehillim. Good Shabbos!

In Parshas Vayeitzei, Yaakov took "from the rocks of the place". Rav Yehuda teaches in the Medrash that Yaakov took 12 stones, symbolic of the Almighty's decree that the Jewish people would be founded based on a family consisting of 12 Tribes. Yaakov said to himself, "My grandfather Avraham was not able to fulfill this decree; my father Yitzchak was not able to fulfill this decree. If these 12 stones that I am placing under my head will merge into a single stone, I will take it as a Divine Sign that I will be able to fulfill this decree." In the morning, when Yaakov saw that the 12 stones had indeed merged into one, he knew that he would be the progenitor of a single nation emerging from a family of 12 sons.

Rav Simcha Schepps, z"l, asks a question on this incident. It would have been more logical to request a symbolic sign that he would be the father of a 12 tribe nation by taking a single stone and having it turn into 12 stones by the next morning. Yaakov's symbolism seems counter-intuitive. Twelve stones joining to form one stone appears to symbolize just the reverse of the sign he was looking for.

Rav Simcha Schepps answers his question by citing a second Medrash. When G-d told Avraham "I will make you into a great nation" [Bereishis 12:2] Avraham asked Him (according to the Medrash) "but you already have 70 nations who are descended from Noach, what will be so special about another nation?" The Almighty answered Avraham -- "The nation that will descend from you is the nation about whom it will be said "For which is such a great nation?" (ki mi goy gadol) [Devorim 4:7] - that is the nation that will emerge from you."

What is the meaning of "goy gadol" (literally, big nation)? The biggest "goy gadol" in the world today is the Chinese. There are more Chinese in the world than any other people. The second largest nationality is the Indians. There are approximately 12 million Jews in the world. Never have we ever been the "goy gadol". So what is the interpretation of the aforementioned Medrash? What is the

nature of this peculiar dialog between Avraham and the Almighty?

The answer is that there is a special connotation to the word "gadol". "Gadol" does not mean 'big' as in numerically large. Rav Dessler points out that the interpretation of "gadol" is revealed to us by its first appearance in the Torah [Bereishis 1:16] "es haMaor haGadol" (the great light, referring to the sun). "Gadol" means the ability to give to others. The sun is not called "gadol" because it is so big. The sun is called "gadol" because it provides light and heat for the entire universe.

Likewise, when Moshe Rabbeinu tells G-d "You have begun to show "Gadlecha" to your servant" [Devorim 3:24] what does "Gadlecha" mean? Rashi explains in Parshas V'Etchanan "this refers to the Attribute of your Goodness" (zu midas Tuvecha). The Almighty is the ultimate Giver.

Similarly, when we praise G-d in Shmoneh Esrei in the expression "haKel haGadol" the word Gadol does not mean "big", it means He is the Master of Kindness and Goodness. Another similarity is the meaning of "and Moshe became a Gadol and went out to see his brethren's suffering" [Shemos 2:11]. Since Moshe was a "gadol" he wanted to become aware first hand of how his brethren were suffering and see how he might be able to help them.

The technical definition of "gadol" is the capacity to do for others, to help others, to be concerned about others. When we talk about an "Adam Gadol" (a person who is a gadol), we are not speaking merely about erudition. It is not merely defining someone who knows the entire Torah. Every Gadol who we can think of was a person that was always concerned about the community. That is the definition of a Gadol.

Now we understand the dialog between Avraham and G-d. There are plenty of nations in the world. There are 2 billion Chinese and a billion Indians. However, G-d promised Avraham that he would make him into a nation that is "gadol", meaning a nation of people that care about others and have the capacity to give.

So too Yaakov Avinu says, "If I take 12 stones and they become one, this symbolizes a nation that has unity amongst themselves." If there is unity between people (achdus), the members of this nation are not just concerned about themselves but they are concerned about others as well. When people are only into themselves, there is disunity. There is no achdus.

Yaakov knew that the appropriate sign that he would be the progenitor of the "Goy Gadol" promised to Avraham is for him to take 12 stones that would turn into one, demonstrating this property of unity and the capacity for caring for one another.

An Unprecedented Thank-You

When Leah gave birth to and named her fourth son, the pasuk says: "And she became pregnant once more and she gave birth to a son and she said 'This time I will thank Hashem' therefore she called his name Yehudah..." [Bereishis 29:35]. The Gemara teaches [Kiddushin 7b] that Leah was the

first person in the history of the world to thank the Almighty.

This is a very perplexing Gemara. How can this be? Noach emerged from the Teyva and offered sacrifices. Were they not offerings of thanksgiving? When Avraham Avinu "lifted up his hands to Kel Elyon" following his victory in the war between the 4 Kings and the 5 Kings, was that not thanks? What does the Gemara in Kidushin mean by saying that from the day G-d created His world there was no person who expressed thanksgiving to the Almighty until Leah did it upon the birth of her fourth son?

It is inconceivable that none of the patriarchs said "Hoda-ah" (thanksgiving to the Almighty)!

The Mir Mashgiach, Rav Yeruchem Levovitz, points out a very interesting insight into human behavior. If Reuven does Shimon a big favor and then Shimon says to Reuven, "I can't thank you enough" and is very effusive with his thanks, Reuven may respond, "Think nothing of it."

We look at this conversation and we think superficially "Reuven is a good guy and so is Shimon." Shimon thanked Reuven profusely and Reuven said, "Think nothing of it!"

Rav Yeruchem teaches that both Reuven and Shimon have a hidden agenda here. Shimon does not want to be beholden to Reuven. Therefore, he thanks him profusely. He buys him Shabbos flowers. He sends him a candy basket. Why? Shimon wants to relieve himself of the duty to be beholden to Reuven for the favor he received from him. On the other hand, Reuven's attitude is "This guy owes me big time." So he tells Shimon, "Think nothing of it. Do not say another word!" Why? Reuven does not want Shimon to pay off his obligation to acknowledge the favor. Reuven wants Shimon to remember it every time he sees him. The hidden dynamics are that people who are indebted do not want to feel indebted and those who have done favors want to have those favors remembered forever. They want to remain in control of the person they helped. This is what often goes on in human relationships.

Certainly, Noach expressed thanksgiving and so did Avraham and the other Patriarchs. They each gave thanks. However, when Leah came and said, "This time I will thank Hashem..." and therefore something unprecedented occurred when Leah called her son Yehudah. By giving the boy a name that perpetuates the phenomenon of her need to Thank Hashem for him, she indicated that she never wanted to lose that sense of expressing gratitude to the Almighty. Every time she would address her son, she would bring to mind the great debt she owed to the Creator of the World for granting her this additional child.

Leah's thank-you was not a onetime expression of thanks. It was the first ongoing constant expression of "thank-you" to G-d in the history of humankind.

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

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