

JEWISH STUDY NETWORK

Bamidbar

The book of Bamidbar marks the transition from the rules of the game to the playing field of real life. After the spiritual high of Vayikra, Bamidbar provides a reality check, reminding us of our moral frailty. G-d gave the Torah to us humans and not to the angels, and failures are therefore inevitable. But it is precisely the Torah's call for spiritual muscle that elevates our lives and makes our victories so exhilarating.

We return now to the Jewish people, making their way through the Sinai Desert to the Promised Land. It will be a difficult journey, replete with setbacks, tragedy and death. More than anything else, there is one thing that holds the Jews together and carries them across the perilous desert to the banks of the Jordan. It is their shared identity as Jews and their unity as one nation under G-d. This is their bedrock and the source of their strength. Come what may, it is never questioned.

It is therefore surprising that Bamidbar opens with what appears to be a dangerous breakdown of unity, the division of the Jews into *shevatim* (tribes). We would expect that now that the nation has been united, the antiquated concept of tribal identity would be repressed. Instead we find that it is dusted off and given real prominence. Each Jew is instructed to march through the desert together with his shevet and when the census is taken, he is counted as a member of his shevet. But it goes even further than that. Each shevet is granted a distinctive flag. Is there a more effective way to unite a people than under a flag? But yet, the Jews have no national flag! Isn't this counter-productive? Don't we want to strengthen the unity of the nation? Why is there no fear of dual loyalties and conflicting allegiances? Is it not possible that a shevet might consider seceding from the union when the going gets tough? Stranger still is the timing. If G-d wants to divide up the Jews in this way, so be it. But why wait till now? Why wasn't this done as soon as they left Egypt?

Rabbi Yaakov Kamenetzky answers all of our questions by pointing out the obvious. The division into tribes was a potentially dangerous endeavor. That's why it had to be delayed until after the giving of the Torah.

The Jews have no need for a flag. They are united by the Torah, the Divine constitution. The Torah creates a common language, culture, ethic and lifestyle for the Jewish people. That is why the tribes march through the desert in formation, with the Holy Ark containing the Tablets always at center. The Torah is the heart of the Jewish nation.

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Once united within the framework of Torah, the Jews were encouraged to identify themselves as members of their particular shevet. For this they needed the assistance of externals: formation, census and flags.

The Midrash reports that Moshe was concerned about this dividing up of the shevatim. He wasn't worried about loyalty to the national mission; all Jews were united under the banner of Torah. He was afraid, however, of infighting over the various tasks assigned to the different tribes. "Moshe began to worry, 'Now there will be arguments amongst the tribes. If I tell the tribe of Yehuda to encamp in the east, they'll say they want to take the south, and the same will happen with Reuven, Ephraim and all the rest of them. What can I do?' G-d replied, 'Moshe, what are you worried about? They don't need you; they already know their place... They learned it from Yaakov their father...'" (Midrash Rabba 2:8).

When Yaakov was on his deathbed, he gathered his sons around him and poetically articulated the unique talents, weaknesses and personalities of each of his children (Breishit 49:1-28). There is nothing more precious than self-knowledge. To the extent that we attain an awareness of our individuality we are enabled to pursue our mission in life and develop a personal relationship with G-d. This was Yaakov's last gift to his children. Now, centuries later, G-d was telling Moshe that Yaakov's descendants had not forgotten their grandfather's final message. The Jews know good and well that they have different roles to play and they have no argument with that. They accept the fact that they are separate but equal. (Even though some tribes are admittedly more equal than others.)

As a nation we are indeed united by Torah, but at the same time each individual Jew is called upon to forge a relationship with G-d by utilizing talents and qualities that are more personal than national. This is the message of the division into shevatim. Although most of us have no record of membership with a particular shevet, however, we still need to recognize the fact that the Torah leaves room for several valid approaches. Today we have Ashkenazim and Sefardim, Chassidim and Litvaks. Each of these broad groupings is blessed with many subcategories, each with its own style. Every shevet has developed its own path, focusing on and broadening specific elements in Judaism. People are drawn to the approach that best speaks to them and affords them the opportunity to most naturally express their personal strengths and talents. But it is the Torah at center, around which we march in formation, that unites all of our different shevatim into one people. Directed by the Torah, our unique personal expressions rise up and blend together into a harmonious symphony for the ears of G-d.

Shabbat Shalom!

