

JEWISH STUDY NETWORK

Bamidbar

In this week's Parsha, the Torah describes the order in which G-d commanded the Jews to camp during their forty years in the desert. The Tabernacle was in the center of the camp, surrounded by four groups of Levites. The rest of the nation camped around them, with three tribes on each side of the camp. Each tribe had a flag that represented their tribe.

What is the significance of these laws? Why was it important for the Jewish people to camp in such a specific way? What is the significance of the flags that the Tribes had?

In taking a closer look at the structure of the encampment, one can find the a shape similar to that of a wheel. The wheel has one center point with many spokes extending from the center, each in a different direction. All the parts come together to complete the wheel. If any of the spokes are missing, the wheel will not be as strong. Furthermore, if any of the spokes are not connected to the center of the wheel, they would be completely useless. So, too, the Jewish encampment. By setting up the camps in this way, the Torah teaches that the makeup of the Jewish people and their individual roles can be viewed in a similar light. At the center of the camp was the Tabernacle which was the focal point of G-d's presence. This teaches us that the center of the life of every Jew must be G-d. If one disconnects from G-d, he/she has disconnected from his/her purpose in life. Furthermore, just as the spokes of the wheel spread out in all directions, the role that every person has, can lead him/her in different directions. Each person has different talents and strengths and therefore can accomplish different things with their lives.

While there are certain basic laws that every Jew must follow, like Shabbat, kosher, and praying, there is also much room for personal goals and aspirations in service of G-d as well. A person can serve G-d by studying Torah all day, or by working all day, so he can have extra money to give to charity. A person can devote his/her life



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to caring for others, or to developing “apps” that remind people to count the Omer or to pray daily. Each G-d-given talent and skill can be used in a productive way to serve G-d, and no two paths are the same.

The Talmud states that there are six hundred thousand letters in the Torah. This is the same number as the count of Jews that were present at the revelation at Mount Sinai. Each Jew had one letter in the Torah because each Jew has his/her portion of the Torah that is special to him/her.

Perhaps this is also the reason why each tribe had a flag. A flag demonstrates the pride of an individual person or group. Each tribe celebrated its individuality, but at the same time stayed focused on the center of the wheel. They never lost focus on the fact that although each tribe was different, and had different goals and aspirations based on their different strengths, they all stemmed from the same roots. They had different paths to reach the same ultimate goal: to be true servants of G-d.

This approach to life is required today, as well. Each person must find his/her own way to serve G-d with his/her G-d given talents, tailor made for that individual. When one lives his/her life following the lead of others, he/she is missing out on his/her individual mission that only he/she can do. Additionally, if exclusively focusing inwards, one misses out on the collective, group focus of the entire Jewish nation. Only through this two-tiered approach, can one live life to its fullest, completing the wheel, and sanctifying G-d's holy name.

Shabbat Shalom!

