

In This Issue

- **Appel's Parsha Page** by *Yehuda Appel*
- **The New Old Path** by *Rabbi Dr. Benji Levy*
- **Straight Talk** by *Rabbi Shaul Rosenblatt*



Unified Nation

The Talmud reports that the generation of Yehuda Bar Illai represented Torah study at its best. What was so striking about that generation? The Talmud says that in that period, six people would study together under a single blanket. On one level, the Talmud means that despite having only one blanket due to harsh poverty, the people were still devoted to Torah study.

Rabbi Chaim Shmulevitz, however, offers another explanation: The only way six people could have sat together under one blanket was if everyone was looking out for each other, making sure that all are "covered." The true greatness of Yehuda Bar Ilai's generation could be found in the way they loved and respected one another.

A similar idea is expressed in the Torah itself, regarding the revelation at Mt. Sinai. The Torah describes how the Jewish People were so unified at the time of the revelation, that it was as if "one person" stood at Mt. Sinai. It was precisely because of this unity that they were worthy of receiving God's law.

This theme plays a pivotal role in this week's Torah portion, Bamidbar. The parsha goes to great length to describe the Israelite encampment in the desert:

In the middle of the camp were the Levites and the sanctuary. Surrounding this center were the 12 Tribes, creating an overall shape of a square. There were three tribes in each of the four sides of the square - north, south, east and west - constituting secondary encampments.

Accompanying each tribe was a flag which had that tribe's particular insignia upon it. The colors of the flags were patterned after the colors of the stones on the High Priest's breastplate, each of which represented a different tribe.

The Midrash says that when God suggested this arrangement, Moses questioned the idea, saying, "Now there will be disputes between the tribes." Moses reasoned that once he starts specifying who travels in the East and who travels in the West, who is in front and who is in back, people are going to start arguing. Moreover, each of the different directions of the compass is associated with a different quality and blessing. The north, for instance, is associated with wealth, and the south with wisdom.

God explained to Moses that there was no need for concern. The tribes would accept the encampment arrangements for a simple reason: Years earlier, at Jacob's funeral, his 12 sons

carried the coffin. The way the sons were arranged around the coffin is the same way the tribes would be arranged in the desert camp. In this way, everyone would already be clear as to his proper place. So don't worry, God tells Moses, because when someone knows their place, there is inevitably peace and calm.

And so it was. In our parsha, after a long description of who will travel first, and who will travel last, the Torah says: "And the Jewish People did exactly as they were instructed" (Numbers 1:54).

Love and respect for each individual, and a recognition of how each contributes to the whole – is the way for our Jewish nation to achieve true greatness.

May it be so speedily in our days.



Finding Comfort Beyond Our Comfort Zone

Just like football teams and countries, each of the tribes of Israel has its own flag and symbols (*Num.* 1:52; 2:2). The Midrash explains that the when the Jewish people receive the Torah at Mount Sinai, they see hundreds of thousands of angels encamped according to flags, and simply put, they want to be like the angels and do the

same (*Num. Rabba* 2:3). Surely one would assume that these flags, which were designed as a way of emulating angels during the historic moment of Revelation, would be waved and celebrated every time these tribes are re-counted throughout the Bible. Yet, strangely, beyond this *parasha*, the Torah never mentions these flags again. Why?

Life is a constant journey towards achieving our ultimate purpose, and 'Every person has his own personal approach, because no two people think exactly the same...and no two people have the same nature' (Vilna Gaon on *Prov.* 16:1). The challenge for us all is to identify our own unique purpose in this world. But this point is always moving and always changing, because as we grow and evolve, so does our context and frame of reference. Our purpose today will not be the same as our purpose tomorrow, for tomorrow we will each be different from who we are today. Over the years and decades, our skills develop, our environments morph, and our priorities mature. These ever-changing elements create a myriad of coordinates across the map of our lives, each of which presents our unique calling for that moment in time. On the basis of this dynamic personal landscape, identifying our individual purpose at any given moment is one of the more exciting challenges of life, one that is intriguingly unique to humankind.

Similar to humans, angels also each have a unique task. By definition, however, an angel is confined to that task alone, as 'One angel cannot perform two missions and two angels cannot perform one mission' (*Gen. Rabba* 50:2). Therefore, while emulating angels in the sense of striving for perfection in one trait or another, is indeed a positive endeavour, it is important to recognise that for us as humans, achieving

perfection in one distinct mission is but a single milestone on the path to achieving our ultimate life purpose.

A further distinction between angels and humans is that angels are consistent in their trajectory of growth. They are constantly in an upward drive, always moving forwards to perfection. Human beings, in contrast, are dynamic and complex. Our journey is not one-directional. Along our path towards fulfilling our purpose we can grow, fall or fly at any one moment. 'The Torah was not given to the angels' (Tractate *Berachot* 25b) - it was given to flesh and blood. It was given to us, human beings, complete with our foibles and faults on the one hand and our strengths and successes on the other. Therefore, intrinsic within each of us is the potential for soaring to great heights, and the possibility to fly even higher than the angels.

If one excels in a certain area, one should indeed wave that flag high above one's head in pride. But to confine ourselves to that flag alone would be to sell ourselves short in regard to our unique, multi-layered human purpose on earth. To carry that banner alone does not do justice to the many other moments of fulfilment and purpose lying just around the corner. Upon fulfilment of any particular task, mission or purpose, we should immediately begin to seek out the next area of life that requires our unique contribution, and work towards attaining and subsequently waving that flag.

So once the tribes have established their respective strengths and waved their flags at that moment in the desert, it is time for them to move on to the next mission required of them. Their flags are significant in that particular moment and in that particular place, but as the

tribes move on, the flags lose their relevance, and the Torah does not mention them again.

Imagine someone who masters the skill of hitting a backhand in tennis. No matter where on the court the ball lands, if it requires a backhand, the player will hit it perfectly. But what about the skill required for serving? What about a forehand, or a volley in the middle of the court? The backhand skill will only help to win the game if the other tennis skills are similarly improved. So too, in life it is not enough to home in on one skill alone and sit back in satisfaction as soon as that particular skill has been mastered.

As we journey along our complex human path, collecting skills and experience, succeeding and failing along the way, it is essential for the ultimate fulfilment of our mission, that we constantly work on our weaknesses, acquire new skills, and push ourselves even to find comfort outside of our comfort zone. This means that not only are the goalposts of life eternally moving, but ideally, we should be active in moving them, taking the reins of our lives as we continually pursue improvement, growth and fulfilment. Such an approach equips us to face each new challenge with the appropriate skills and attitude, leading us to higher and greater successes.



An Only Child

I once had a guest for Shabbat who had 18 brothers and sisters. Nowadays, with my wife coming from a family of 12 children, it's not as big a deal to me. But at the time, I had much to ask. One of the questions that fascinated me was how did he think his parents would feel if he disappeared for a few weeks. Would they even notice? Or perhaps he could make it back before they realized he had gone? Was he just #14, or did he feel special in any way?

I was amazed when he told me that he and every one of his siblings felt almost like an only child. Each felt that their parents loved them as though they had no other children. If he disappeared, his parents would feel no different than parents whose *only child* had disappeared.

I thought about it for a moment and realized that I feel the same myself. I have six children. Take one away, God forbid, and I wouldn't merely have five left. I would have lost an entire world. Each is special in his or her own way. One is so responsible; one is so loving; one is so smiley; one is so full of life and one is (unfortunately for him) just like his father. They aren't five clones. They are five individuals and I love each one independently of the others.

Be it one, four or 19, each child is precious to his parents. Each is a unique world unto himself.

This idea applies with God, too. Whether 19 children, or 5 billion, there is no difference. Each and every one of us is an only child. Each one is an entire universe. Each is precious in his or her own way. God loves us, because we are each unique and special.

In this week's portion, God counts the Jewish people. He knows how many of us there are, but he wants us to know that each one matters. We are not a nation of millions. We are special individuals who together make a nation. No one is dispensable. If one of us disappears, God notices. And cares.

In the same way as 19 children of the same parents can all feel like an only child, so too 5 billion children of a single God can all feel uniquely special. And when we feel secure in the love of our parents, we have the confidence to love those around us, too.

See more great
parsha essays at:
www.aish.com/tp/