



June 8, 2024



Parshas Bamidbar

2nd of Sivan 5784

Stars, Flags, and a Pat of Butter

Judaism places tremendous emphasis on *achdus* – unity. We hear it preached in schools and seminaries and shuls the world over. When we stood at the foot of Har Sinai, the Torah describes us as *ish echad beleiv echad*. We were unified as a nation accepting its life's mission. Every day in davening we say *veyacheid levaveinu*, asking Hashem to unify our hearts and enable us to be aligned in our service to Him. The theme is found all throughout the Torah. Unity is so foundational that the very giving of the Torah was contingent on it.

That is why this parshah seems so bizarre. The parshah goes into tremendous detail about the differences between the twelve tribes. How they must camp in different sections. How they all have different flags with different colors and different emblems. The Torah counts each member of each shevet down to the very last person, without rounding to the nearest hundred or ten. It almost seems like the Torah is reminding us which shevet we belong to lest we mix with another one. The Torah's constant categorization and compartmentalization of the twelve tribes seems to pull us apart rather than bring us together.

Why does the Torah seem to take such a dividing stance? If unity is so fundamental, why does the Torah enforce strict rules about the twelve tribes' separate encampments, each adorned with its own leader and its own flag with its own color and logo? Does it not seem a tad divisive?

Separate from the Get-Go

Not only did we have this great divide while we were in the desert, we had this divide while we were still in Egypt. Apparently, this divide was so important to us that instead of hastily jumping into the Red Sea, scrambling to safety from our Egyptian pursuers as one would have expected us to do, we carefully and in an organized fashion walked into

the twelve separate paths Hashem had prepared for us. Doesn't that seem odd? Being together with our shevet meant so much to us that even while running for our lives we spared precious moments to orient ourselves in order to go out together with our particular shevet. Why?

Let's take a step back. Why do we even have twelve separate tribes in the first place? Why not just have Klal Yisrael be one big group? We can all just be one big, happy family, sitting around a campfire singing Carlebach, drinking arak, and eating cholent. Why the whole twelve shevatim arrangement? Doesn't it fly in the face of achdus and unity? Doesn't it divide and fragment? What is it that Hashem had in mind when arranging this?

Perhaps it is the following:

When Hashem goes out of His way to painstakingly count each and every member of each tribe and record it in the Torah, it is not meant to be mere historical facts. It is to drive home the message that **each and every member of our holy nation is important and integral**. Each and every individual plays a role. Each and every person brings something to the table that nobody else does. You are not a number; you are not a statistic. You are a soul with a divinely instituted mission, and the entire spiritual galaxy is incomplete without you.

The Strange Name

Another name for Sefer Bamidbar is Sefer Pekudim, or Numbers. The word pekudim comes from the word tafkid. Mission. Purpose. The counting and the recounting and the re-recounting of the Jews in the desert wasn't for the sake of keeping a good record of the population. It wasn't for the heavenly bookkeepers to ensure that they claim all the proper dependents on their tax return. It was to drive home the fact that yes, G-d knows your name, and He needs you for the spiritual continuity of the world. How empowering!

When we divide the Jewish people into separate tribes and separate camps with separate flags and separate colors, we are not highlighting the differences; we are emphasizing the unique skills each and every shevet possesses. What Naftali adds to the Jewish people is different than Asher's contribution. And what Dan brings to the table is different than what Binyamin does. All are critical. All are irreplaceable. We use flags and signs and logos to empower each member of Klal Yisrael, and to remind us that we all have strengths, we all have talents, and we all have something unique that the entire nation relies upon. Hashem does not want us all to be the same. He wants us to wave our flag with pride and follow our inner mission.

National Rainbows

When colors clash in an unorganized mess, it is called graffiti. But when they all see their purpose and form an organized line, it is called a rainbow. All colors are merely the refraction of the same white light. It just bends ever so slightly to form its unique appearance. We, too, all come from the same forefathers and matriarchs. Those holy patriarchs shined their light through the prism of time, and it refracted into twelve different tribes, each with its unique set of talents, each with its role to play. And we all come together to form the rainbow which is Klal Yisrael. Each color plays its part.

The Tashbetz (Shimon ben Tzemach Duran, a Spanish sage from the 1300's) points out something remarkable. The name of the Jewish people is Yisrael. He says the word Yisrael is really an acronym of the first letters of each of the avos and imahos. Y.S.R.A.L. = Yitzchok. Yaakov. Sara. Rachel. Rivka. Avraham. Leah. We are their continuity. The fire they started got divided twelve ways, and each of us is entrusted with ensuring that fire remains.

Hence, there is a custom that a shul has twelve windows. They further remind us that we don't all have to be the same. We don't all have to be identical; in fact, we can't be. We are all unique in the eyes of Hashem, and that should be celebrated, not tolerated.

The very name we give a shul is a Bais Hakenesses, which translates to mean a house of ingathering. It is a place where the lawyer sits next to the sage, who sits next to the kiruv fellow, who sits next to the musician that plays keyboard at weddings. All integral children of G-d. All doing the holy work that Hashem lovingly entrusted us to do.

The Multitudes of Stars

Hashem told Avraham one starry night to go out of his tent and look up at the stars. "See those stars?" Hashem told him. "One day your descendants will be like those stars." What did Hashem mean by that? That we will one day grow to be as astronomically incalculable as the stars? A nation so large in number that it is beyond count? Well, that hasn't really panned out. Sadly, the Jews have hovered between 13 and 19 million people for most of its history. Relative to the 1.8 billion Muslims, 2.83 billion Christians, 943 million Hindus and 488 million Buddhists, that number is pathetically small. So, what exactly did Hashem mean?

The Belzer Rebbe gives a beautiful explanation. He says that Hashem was telling Avraham that the same way a star amongst the millions of stars may seem small and insignificant, and yet in reality is massive¹ and integral to the very existence of the cosmos, so, too, each and every one of your descendants, however seemingly small, is massively important and is safeguarding the very existence of the spiritual galaxy.

The Pat of Butter

Former New Jersey Senator Bill Bradley once attended a dinner in which he was the guest speaker. The waiter set down a side dish of potatoes and placed a pat of butter upon them. The Senator asked for another portion of butter.

“I’m sorry, sir,” the server replied, “one pat per guest.”

With a combined expression of shock, scorn, and disbelief, Senator Bradley looked up at the waiter. “Excuse me,” he said. “Do you know who I am? I am New Jersey senator Bill Bradley.” The senator cleared his throat. “I am a Rhodes scholar and a former NBA star. I currently serve on the international trade and long-term growth committee, the debt and deficit reduction committee and I am in charge of taxation and IRS oversight, and I’d like another pat of butter on my potatoes.”

The waiter looked down at the senator. “And do you know who I am?” he asked. “I am the one in charge of the butter!”

Each and every member of Klal Yisrael is a soldier in Hashem’s army, tasked with a mission only he can carry out. He is a star that the entire universe relies on. Every Morah, every shatnez checker, every mikvah attendant, every eruv checker, every Succah builder, every Matzah baker, every shochet, every gabbai, every baal tokeia, every rabbi, every congregant, every badchan, every fundraiser, every beggar, every rich man; every man, woman and child. Every single one of us combines with the rest to form the rainbow that is the Jewish people. Every single one of us has a special place in the starry night Avraham saw so many years ago.

There were 600,000 Jews who left Egypt and received the Torah. There are 600,000 letters in the Torah. Coincidence? I think not.

¹ There are stars that are more than 1000 times the size of the sun. To put that into perspective, Earth is 7918 miles in circumference. The sun is 430,000 miles in circumference. There are stars that are 1000 times as large, and yet appear to the human eye as a mere flicker in the night sky.