


CHABAD

RESEARCH UNIT

שבת..... *for Friday nights* קדש

Friday 23 May 2014 - 23 Iyyar 5774
Sedra Bemidbar

UNITY AND DIFFERENCE

UNITY AND DIFFERENCE ARE TWO CONTRASTING **OR** even conflicting themes of our time. On the one hand there is a quest for unity, linking together, forgetting our differences and being one. This applies in human relationships, in the business world, and is an idealistic element in international politics. On the other hand, there is the sense of distinctiveness, of a unique identity, of an individual pathway and destiny.

How does this work for the Jewish people? Is there room for difference, or do we all have to be the same? Of course, there are varied communities: Sefardi, which includes diverse communities such as Spanish, Iraqi, Iranian and Moroccan Jews; Ashkenazi, which likewise includes Lithuanian, German Jewish, Polish, Hungarian and Russian Jews, and so on. And yet, despite these differences, we are all one people.

There is the same dual tendency within any single community, or even within a family. Each person is an individual, with his or her unique characteristics, and at the same time, we are one together. The Sedra¹ gives us a hint about this dual feature of the Jewish people. It begins the fourth Book of the Torah, called in English the Book of Numbers. Although Jews often use the Hebrew name Bemidbar (meaning, “In the Desert”) in fact an ancient Jewish name for this book is likewise “Numbers”. The reason for this name is very simple: the Book describes how the Jewish people in the desert, led by Moses, are counted several times.

In this process of counting there is an interesting feature. G-d tells Moses to count the people as individuals and also by their families, within their Tribes. During this process, Moses and Aaron have with them twelve men, heads of each of the Tribes, who are now given the name “Communal Leaders” (1:16), that is: leaders not only of their individual Tribes, but also of the entire community.

The counting in our Sedra and subsequently differs from the previous counting of the Jewish people. In the earlier counting - carried out by Moses - each individual was counted, by giving half a shekel, and the total sum was a figure for the entire Jewish people². In our Sedra the counting is also of individuals, but now grouped by family and by Tribe. Further, several people - Moses, Aaron and the twelve heads of the Tribes - were in charge of the counting.

Commenting on this, the Lubavitcher Rebbe explains that each Tribe in fact represented a distinctive pathway in life and in service of G-d. We see this from the distinctive blessings which Moses gave each Tribe at the end of his life⁴. The counting by Tribe and by families within the Tribes expressed the significance of being different and distinctive. Yet all the different pathways join together in the single, united totality of the Jewish people.

This is why the leader of each Tribe was involved not only in the counting of his own Tribe but also that of the entire community. Indeed, as head of a Tribe he was also called Communal Leader: his responsibility extended beyond his own Tribe, to everyone in the Jewish people.

This presents a useful paradigm for us today. We are each unique, with distinctive qualities. At the same time we form the totality of the Jewish people. Further, like the heads of the Tribes, our responsibilities are dual: to our own selves and our own group, and also to the entirety of the Jewish people. This combination of individual distinctiveness and unity of the whole is the secret of our strength, of our power, and responsibility, to heal the world.

1. Numbers 1:1-4,20. 2. See Exodus 30:12 and 38:25-6. 3. See *Likkutei Sichot* vol.23 pp.3-7. 4. See Deuteronomy ch.33.

Torah teachings are holy - please treat this page with care

SPONSORED BY DR REUVEN JOEL



SEDRA BEMIDBAR

GOOD NEIGHBOURS

It was a sunny Sunday afternoon, Ben and his best friend David were playing cricket in Ben's back garden.

"WHACK..." David hit Ben's spinning bowl hard into the bush.

"Whoa..." Ben said "we've got to be careful, Mr. Lewis from next door doesn't like it when we play cricket and he always shouts, even though we put up the high net so the balls won't go over in to his garden".

The schools were having cricket championships and the first game was going to be on the following Sunday.

"I heard that they have a really good batsman" David said. "They say he could easily hit our best spin for a six".

"Yes I heard that too," said Ben, as his arm went over his head sending the ball swiftly toward the wicket. "My dad promised to teach me a new spin that may help us".

Suddenly they heard an angry shout from next door. "WHAT ARE YOU BOYS DOING?! I TOLD YOU IF I EVER CATCH YOU PLAYING CRICKET AGAIN NEAR MY GARDEN WALL..." The shouted message continued in a rather blood-curdling way, rising to a crescendo.

“Oops,” David said quietly. “I think it is time we went inside, he doesn’t sound too happy”.

“I hope I never become like that,” Ben said as they went inside, “so sad and angry. In this week’s Sedra lesson we learned about the camp of the Jewish people. Korach was a Levite, but unfortunately a wicked man, who later rebelled against Moses. Our teacher said that because the tribe of Reuben camped near him, their bad neighbour had a bad effect on them and caused some of the people from the tribe of Reuben to join him in his uprising”.

“Don’t worry” David said “We also learned that good neighbours have a good effect. The Midrash tells us that’s why all the people who camped near Moses became great Torah scholars.”

“So that will fix it,” Ben said. “If we are good neighbours then we can make him more happy. Then he will be nicer to us when we play cricket”.

“Yes“ said David, “that’s a good idea. In fact, my dad told me that Mr. Lewis used to be a very kind and gentle person. Then a few years ago he was involved in a tragic accident in Israel, after which he just became more and more lonely and sad, and always getting angry with people. Maybe there’s a way we can change him back to the way he used to be. Like, if we ask him if we can help him in some way, do shopping for him, I don’t know, something.”

“Umm....” Thinking more about it, Ben didn’t feel so sure, but he had to admit that it was a good idea. Perhaps the power of being a good neighbour would work now as well, just like in the time of Moses!

***Torah teachings are holy –
please treat this page with care***