

The Secret of Jewish Unity

PARSHA INSIGHTS - BAMIDBAR (5758)

With Twelve Different Banner Camps, HOW COULD THERE BE ANY UNITY?

Today is *Erev Yom Tov Shavuot* [the eve of the holiday celebrating receiving the Torah], the time of the acceptance of the Torah. Our minds are flooded with thoughts of passionate love between Hashem and *Klal Yisroel* [the Jewish people], renewed enthusiasm for learning, and overwhelming appreciation for G-d's greatest gift to humankind. *ACHDUS* [unity] is fundamental for proper observance of *Shavuot*. We will first explore the relevance of *achdus* to *Parshas* [the Torah portion of] *Bamidbar*, and then its connection to *Matan Torah* [receiving the Torah].

“Every man of the *Bnai Yisroel* [Children of Israel] shall camp by his own standard (flag), with the ensigns of their father's house; far off around the *Ohel Moed* [Tent of Meeting] they shall camp” (2:2). The Jewish people were instructed to pitch their tents in a specific formation. Each *shaivet* [tribe] had a flag to represent it. *Rashi* explains that the color of each standard corresponded to that *shaivet's* precious stone that was affixed to the *choshen* [the breastplate] worn by the *Kohen Gadol* [High Priest]. It was undoubtedly a glorious sight, twelve divisions of G-d-fearing Jews, encircling the sacred *Mishkan* [Tabernacle], prepared to do Hashem's bidding at all times.

If it was the plan of Hashem that the *Bnai Yisroel* camp in such a fashion, why did it take so long for Him to give them this directive? We know that the *Sefer Bamidbar* [the Book of Numbers] begins in 2449, the second year after leaving Egypt (*Bamidbar* 1:1). How is this so? Recall that the Torah was given in *Sivan* 2448. Moshe's 120 days on Sinai ended on *Tishrai* 10, 2449, since it became 2449 on *Tishrai* 1 (*Rosh Hashana*), while he was still on the mountain. In other words, the last ten days Moshe was on *Har Sinai* [Mount Sinai] were already the “second year” after leaving Egypt. They had left in 2448, and it was 2449 as of *Tishrai* 1. Incidentally, this is often what the Torah means when it says the “second year” - anytime after *Tishrai* 1, *Rosh Hashana*, 2449.



Please review the *d'var Torah* [lesson] of *Parshas Tzav* 5758 for the sources of these dates. Copies of the essay are available by clicking the following link, or online at TorahMax.com under: “Sefer Vayikra”, “Parshas Tzav”, “[Do We Interpret the Torah Literally? \(Part 1\)](#)” - R. Moshe Heigh.

Sefer Vayikra [the Book of Leviticus], which comes after *Shmos* [Exodus] and before *Bamidbar*, takes place entirely at Sinai. Thus, our *Sefer Bamidbar* begins in Sinai as well, in *Nissan/Iyar* 2449 (*Bamidbar* 1:1 and *Rashi* 9:1) - about half way into the SECOND YEAR after leaving *Mitzraim* [Egypt].

The Jews had left Egypt more than a whole year prior to this. Why did Hashem wait so long to tell us to camp in flag formations? This is the question of Rav Yaakov Kaminetzky in his *sefer* [book] on *Chumash* [the Five Books of the Torah], *Emes L'Yaakov*. Since all of *Bnai Yisroel* had left *Mitzraim* together, why were they not commanded to create organized camps at the moment of their mass departure?

Reb Yaakov on 2:2 answers with a profound insight relating to the theme of *achdus*. Having flags is truly wonderful, but it could lead to some complications. Reb Yaakov describes the potential situation as “*pirud halevavos*” [disunity of hearts]. Each flag expressed some particular ambition, a goal unique to that specific *shaivet*. Each banner represented the special personality of that tribe, a nature unlike any other. The colors, shades, and content varied totally. The flags could actually cause *machlokes* [disagreement] among Jews. Conflict could result from these colorful banners! At the time of *yetzias Mitzraim* [the exodus from Egypt], this would, in fact, have been likely.

However, something major developed between *Nissan* 2448, when we left Egypt, and *Nissan/Iyar* 2449. Time had passed, a full year, but another change had occurred. The *Mishkan* had been constructed. This edifice, says Reb Yaakov, changed everything. At *yetzias Mitzraim*, before the *Mishkan*, there was no focal point, no center of attention for *Bnai Yisroel* to view at all times. Twelve flag camps would have spelled disaster - quarrel and conflict. But now that there was a *Mishkan* erect AS OF *NISSAN* 1, 2449 (see all dates on *Tzav d'var Torah* of 5758), the separate banner camps would not threaten unity. All the Jews resided AROUND THIS CENTRAL BUILDING, the *Mishkan*. This was a synthesis of individuality and solidarity. On one hand, each *shaivet* had a particular strength, a special function, a unique personality. This was depicted vividly and brilliantly by the twelve

flags. On the other hand, all Jews had a unifying force that would bind them. The *Mishkan* stood in the center, constantly drawing their attention, reminding them of *achdus*, the oneness of *Klal Yisroel*.

Reb Yaakov provides a valuable *mashal* [an analogy] to illustrate this point. The human body is created with numerous features and senses. Since the ears are made for hearing and the eyes for seeing, do we expect disunity to develop? Is there bickering between the eyes and the ears? Is there a fight for supremacy? Of course this is silly and illogical. They are all part of the same body! The same is true with *Bnai Yisroel*. Different *shevatim* [tribes] serve different purposes. Each *shaivet* has its strengths, tendencies, and functions in Jewish life. This does not and SHOULD NOT lead to a lack of *achdus*, because we are all centered around a common focal point. The *Mishkan*, the sacredness of Divine service, should unite us at all times, through all ordeals and experiences. Once the *Mishkan* was erected, it was safe for *Bnai Yisroel* to form flag camps and express their diversity in this atmosphere of oneness.

This is also what Moshe *Rabainu* [Moses our teacher] tried to impress upon Korach and his cohorts when they staged their tragic uprising. “As for us (the Jewish people), we have just One G-d, one holy ark, one Torah, one altar (for animal sacrifices; another **one** for incense), one high priest...” (*Rashi* on *Korach* 16:6). We must have unity of purpose! Each person is different from his neighbor, but our unique abilities are supposed to be COMBINED to achieve national success, not misused as the vehicle for strife.

The *Yom Tov* of *Shavuos* is upon us. Where do we see this idea of *achdus* associated with *Matan Torah*? There is much to be said on this; we will look at one angle only. The most famous expression of *achdus* in *Matan Torah* is in *Parshas Yisro* 19:2: “Yisroel camped there opposite the mountain (Sinai)”. The word for “camped” is “*vayichan*”, in the singular form, denoting “like one man with one heart” (*Rashi* from the *Mechilta*). Most of us are familiar with this, so I would like to bring up something new. Harav Shlomo Ganzfried, revered author of the *Kitzur Shulchan Aruch* plus more, wrote the *Apiriyon*, a magnificent commentary on *Chumash*. On this *pasuk* in *Yisro* 19:2, he states as follows. The *Midrash* wonders why the Torah was given at Sinai in particular. If the Holy One was giving the holy Torah to the holy nation, why not present it in the Holy Land of Israel? Why choose some desolate wasteland, the Sinai Peninsula? The *Midrash* he cites explains that in *Eretz Yisroel* [the Land of Israel], THERE WOULD HAVE BEEN BICKERING. Each *shaivet*, with its noblest intentions, would have insisted that the Torah be given in its portion. Thus, the reason for the *achdus* by *Matan Torah* was that it was NOT given in Israel. That clarifies the *pasuk* also. “*Vayichan SHAM* [there] *Yisroel*...” - the reason for the singular form “*vayichan*” - HE camped - is that it was *SHAM* in the desert, and not in Israel. In *Eretz Yisroel*, there would have been friction and rivalry, each *shaivet* insisting on the Torah being given in its land. This is just a small part of the *Apiriyon*'s discussion.

We see the incredible significance of *achdus*. Hashem delayed the order to create flag camps one full year to prevent fighting. Once the *Mishkan* was established, its unifying power prevented discord, which would have otherwise resulted from diverse camps and banners. In addition, the Torah was given in a “neutral zone”, the wilderness, rather than the Holy Land of Israel. All this to avoid disunity and quarrels! May we be moved by these words to achieve greater levels of *achdus* in our communities and personal lives.

By Rabbi Moshe Heigh

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