

Bamidbar; Flags in the Desert

Source Sheet by Rabbi Amy Bernstein

במדבר ב':ב'

(ב) אִישׁ עַל-דָּגְלוֹ בְּאֶתֶת לְבֵית אָבֹתָם יַחֲנוּ בְּנֵי יִשְׂרָאֵל מִן־גֹּד סָבִיב
לְאֶהֱל־מוֹעֵד יַחֲנוּ:

Numbers 2:2

(2) The Israelites shall camp each man with his standard, under the banners of their ancestral house; they shall camp around the Tent of Meeting at a distance.

רש"י על במדבר ב':ב'א'

באתת. כל דגל יהיה לו אות מפה צבועה תלויה בו, צבעו של זה לא כצבעו של זה, צבע כל אחד כגון אבנו הקבועה בחשן, ומתוך כך יכיר כל אחד את דגלו; ד"א: באותות לבית אבותם, באות שמסר להם יעקב אביהם כשנשאווהו ממצרים שנאמר (בראשית נ') "ויעשו בניו לו כן כאשר צוהו, יהודה ויששכר וזבולון וישראל וכן המזרח, וראובן ושמעון וגד מן הדרום וכו'", כדאיתא בתנחומא בפירשה זו:

Rashi on Numbers 2:2:1

באתת [EVERY MAN OF THE CHILDREN OF ISRAEL SHALL ENCAMP BY HIS OWN STANDARD] WITH THE SIGNS [OF THEIR FATHERS' HOUSES] — Each banner shall have a different sign — a piece of coloured cloth hanging on it, the colour of the one not being the same as the colour of another, but the colour of each tribe shall be like that of his stone that is fixed in the breastplate (of. Exodus 28:21), and by this means everybody will be able to recognise his banner. Another explanation of באתת לבית אבותם is: by the signs (i.e., following the signs) which their father Jacob gave them severally when they carried him

out from Egypt, as it is said, (Genesis 50:12) “And his sons did unto him exactly as he had commanded them”. For he had commanded that Judah, Issachar and Zebulun should carry him, having their position at the east side of the bier, Reuben, Simeon and Gad at the south side, etc., — as it is related in Tanchuma on this section (Midrash Tanchuma, Bamidbar 12; cf. Rashi on Genesis 50:12).

"...each person under his standard with the banners of his family: Every Jew must know and think that he is unique in the world, and there was never anyone exactly like him-if there were someone like him (before), there would have been no need for you to come into the world. Every single person is someone new in the world, and it is her duty to improve all her ways, until all of Israel has attained perfection (*Beit Aharon*, quoted in Itturei Torah)."

This commentator seems to be exploring the tension between each person finding his or her own, personal "standard," or flag, and also being grouped into a larger social unit under the "banner of his family."

This is a fundamental tension in contemporary Judaism: Each of us must develop our own, personal journey of Jewish spirituality, and yet we are not alone in doing so. We are inheritors of a larger Jewish tradition, with all of its teachings and customs and different interpretations. There's no such thing as a Jew who just makes up a brand new Judaism for themselves, but rather we always exist as individuals in a creative, covenantal relationship with the larger Jewish community.

This creative dialectic between individual and community works in both ways: Not only does the individual have to find their own "flag" within the larger Jewish tradition, but we must also recognize that the Jewish community is not complete, as it were, unless people are finding their own, comfortable place within it. (From "A Map of Pluralism", **myjewishlearning.com**)

The narrative of the Israelite camp's organization describes the creation of a human community striving to embody the sacred, integrate heaven and earth, make immanent that which is the transcendent, and translate the eternal into the here and now. Bamidbar, by locating the ark and the Tabernacle at the center, illustrates the importance of orienting all aspect of any living organism towards its higher purpose in Creation.

In this series, we have learned that the Hebrew word kavod connotes "weightiness," and describes a palpable sense of the Divine Presence. The mishkan/Tabernacle signifies the middah of kavod (awareness of sacred presence and purpose), and kavod's placement in the center represents its primacy in the design. The numbering and ordering of the individuals, clans, and tribes, as well as their equidistant placement encircling the mishkan/Tabernacle, indicates an intent to infuse the entire system with kavod, or "sacred weightiness."

We can practice this in our lives by paying closer attention to the extent to which the individual elements of our lives (family, work, friendships, passions, leisure; mind, body and spirit) are aligned with each other. We can notice whether these elements are infused with kavod, attention to others and our own innate worth, and whether they are pointing towards our highest aspirations. (**Rabbi Pamela Wax** from IJS Weekly Torah Commentary)

On one level, flags celebrate a world in which each person recognizes his own tribe and affiliates himself genetically with his past. On another level, we might understand this affiliation as an inner sense of connection with the fathers, going back to Abraham. "God said to Abraham, 'So [ko] shall be your seed.... This should be read as a blessing: May your seed resemble you....' The flag, then, comes to celebrate not a simple and proper tribal grouping, but the spiritual act of identification with the father, the patriarch Abraham. To be "the seed of Abraham" is to remain connected, not to be alienated- to acknowledge one's inmost affiliation. It is a choice. closing that gap and love leaping toward its aim On one level, flags celebrate a world in which each person recognizes his own tribe and affiliates himself genetically with his past. On another level, we might understand this affiliation as an inner sense of connection with the fathers, going back to Abraham. "God said to Abraham, 'So [ko] shall be your seed.... This should be read as a blessing: May your seed resemble you....' The flag, then, comes to celebrate not a simple and proper tribal grouping, but the spiritual act of identification with the father, the patriarch Abraham. To be "the seed of Abraham" is to remain connected, not to be alienated- to acknowledge one's inmost affiliation. It is a choice. closing

that gap and love leaping toward its aim On one level, flags celebrate a world in which each person recognizes his own tribe and affiliates himself genetically with his past. On another level, we might understand this affiliation as an inner sense of connection with the fathers, going back to Abraham. "God said to Abraham, 'So [ko] shall be your seed.... This should be read as a blessing: May your seed resemble you...." The flag, then, comes to celebrate not a simple and proper tribal grouping, but the spiritual act of identification with the father, the patriarch Abraham. To be "the seed of Abraham" is to remain connected, not to be alienated- to acknowledge one's inmost affiliation. It is a choice.

Sefat Emet quotes his grandfather, quoting R. Simcha Bunim of Peshcha, who comments on the rabbinic aphorism: "One should always say, When will my deeds equal those of my fathers, Abraham, Isaac, and Jacob?" But who is so naive as to think that he can compare himself with the patriarchs? The aphorism means, however, that one should express a wish not to be alienated from the fathers, that one's life should have a *negi'a* -some *contact*-with their lives. In the same way, the signs, the insignia on the flags, express a yearning that one's life bear some intimation, some fleeting glimpse of affinity with their lives. This is the leap, the occasional (*lifamim*) flash of desire that connects one with one's roots. (**Avivah Zornberg**; Bewilderments, p.27)

The flag procession replicates the blessing of Jacob - both 'to' and 'from'- because these tribal identities descend from a family tree whose roots can be traced back to a beloved father. This is not just a matter of territory or pride; these flags also represent a profound connection to home, and tradition and even love.

(There is a) tension inherent in any form of nationalism. On the one hand, when masses of people are mobilized together through shared ethnic identity, there is always a great danger of their coming to violence. But on the other hand, through these tribe-like national affiliations we are able to experience a sense of belonging in our society, as if it were our own family. Nations can breed hatred; but they can also cultivate love. Flags can be symbols of aggression or of affection.

(Rabbi David Kasher; From ParshaNut - FLAGS OF LOVE AND WAR)

תהילים כ"ו

(ו) גִּרְנָנָה | בִּישׁוּעָתְךָ וּבְשֵׁם־אֱלֹהֵינוּ נִדְגֹל יִמְלֹא יְהוָה כָּל־מִשְׁאֲלוֹתֶיךָ:

Psalms 20:6

(6) May we shout for joy in your victory, arrayed by standards in the name of our God. May the LORD fulfill your every wish.

This is the flag waiving of victory, of the satisfaction of desires. One senses behind these words a battle recently won, the glorious triumph over an enemy. (Ibid)

שיר השירים ב'ד'

(ד) הִבִּיאֲנִי אֶל־בַּיִת הַזֶּה וְדִגְלוֹ עָלַי אֶהְבֶּה:

Song of Songs 2:4

(4) He brought me to the banquet room And his banner of love was over me.

שיר השירים ה"י

(י) דוֹדִי צֶחַ וְאָדוֹם דָּגוּל מִרְבָּבָה:

Song of Songs 5:10

(10) My beloved is clear-skinned and ruddy, Preeminent among ten thousand.

So a flag can be a marker of love, or the banner of war...They might go either way. In fact, the rest of the Book of Numbers will continue to play out this tension...Through their long desert journey, they will be learning what it means to be a nation - the good, the bad, and the sometimes very ugly. (Ibid)

Source Sheet created on Sefaria by Rabbi Amy Bernstein