

Bamidbar, 5780 – Rabbi Dr. Zev Wiener

" וְחָנּוּ בְּנֵי יִשְׂרָאֵל אִישׁ עַל מַחֲנֵהוּ וְאִישׁ עַל דָּגְלוֹ לְצַבְאֹתָם " - Bamidbar 1:52

Whether in Madison Square Garden or the Sinai Desert, crowd control is never an easy thing. As any stadium usher can tell you, when people leave their assigned seats and move into other people's seats, chaos and conflict will often ensue. It is thus quite reasonable for the Torah to delineate a specific layout for the Israelite camp in the desert, with the instruction that they should reside " אִישׁ עַל מַחֲנֵהוּ וְאִישׁ עַל דָּגְלוֹ " -- "every person at his own camp and every person at his own banner." While the directive to remain in one's preassigned space makes good sense on a pragmatic level, it is also true on a spiritual level: each one of us must be careful to stay true to our own specific spiritual station, without encroaching on that of another.

Judaism teaches that as a Neshama (soul), every one of us is an individualized expression of Divine greatness, sent here to play a part in the Divine symphony in a way that no other person can do. Just as light can only be fully white if it contains all the colors of the spectrum, the Divine glory is only most completely manifest when each soul illuminates the world in its own unique way, through its specifically-endowed combination of gifts and challenges. We must remain sensitively attuned to the unique nature of our Divine soul, make choices that are consistent with its essence, and be happy with it as it is. This is the root of sacred self-love, which lies at the heart of how we experience everything in this world.

Living true to our spiritual essence is not easy, as man lives in a constant state of struggle to hide or reject who he really is. So many of us spend our lives looking at other people, and consciously or subconsciously wishing we were more like them -- both in superficial ways such as intelligence, extroversion, and physical appearance, as well as in more substantive ways, such as patience, wisdom, and thoughtfulness. While we all must spend our lives working to improve negative character traits, it is equally important to embrace our core spiritual essence as a unique gift from the Almighty, and to live our lives in consonance with it.

This perspective is particularly relevant when it comes to children. The greatest gift one can give a child is to deeply understand his or her unique Neshama, and to raise or him or her in a way that celebrates and brings out this essence. Not every child is meant to be an academic star or the captain of the soccer team. Rather than lamenting a child's inability to meet one's preconceived expectations, a child's essential nature should be carefully observed and cultivated. Forcing children to

"dwell in someone else's camp," needing to be something that is not consistent with their innate spiritual qualities, can ultimately lead to great pain and disillusionment. I have met people who struggled in school academically, and even decades after finishing school, continued to feel like failures in life because their deeper uniqueness was never developed. Similarly, people who never recognize the value of their natural qualities often maintain a poorly defined sense of self, which can promote inner tension and confusion around decisions that they make.

In light of this perspective, it is perhaps not coincidental that this aforementioned verse is cited in reference to Shabbat in the ancient Shabbat Zemer, "Kol Mekadesh Shvii." Every Friday night, we sing about staying in our own assigned camp, because Shabbat is the time when we have the greatest access to this truth. While the pursuit of a livelihood during the workweek may sometimes show favor to people with sharp minds, tenacious attitudes, and extroverted personalities, on Shabbat, none of that matters. Each of us can remove our mask, sit around the table happy with who we are, and just "be," celebrating our existence as integral parts of the Divine symphony. Shabbat is the ultimate time in which every person can live joyfully in his or her intrinsically assigned camp.

As we approach the holy festival of Shavuot which celebrates the giving of the Torah, it behooves us to bear this point in mind. Beyond our basic observance of all relevant Mitzvot, we must also find our own unique place in Torah -- "ותן חלקנו בתורה." Every person's soul is illuminated most brightly by specific aspects of Torah -- whether academic legal study, philosophy, acts of kindness, or specific Mitzvot -- and it is not only appropriate, but desirable, to focus one's energies on these specific aspects. May Hashem enable us to recognize and live our true essence in all that we do.