



*“Words from the Heart
Enter the Heart”*

BAMIDBAR > Bamidbar

By Rabbi Simon Jacobson

May 24, 2014

Bamidbar

Together as One



Meaningful Sermons *“Words from the Heart Enter the Heart”*

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ABSTRACT

Is the role of religion to stifle the singularity of one for the sake of many, for the sake of the greater community, or is religion meant to highlight one’s singular uniqueness?

Many stereotypes abound about religion being a dogmatic force that imposes mind control and is threatened by individual spirits and free inquiry. Galileo is a case in point.

And what about Judaism? Does Judaism enhance one’s individuality or does its emphasis on community effectively stamp it out?

And most of all: What does God want from us – to be like everyone else or to be unique? To be a carbon copy of our neighbors or to be like no one that has ever lived before and will ever live again? As we travel in the wildernesses of life, do we possess talents and potentials and abilities that no one else does or are we all imitations of one another?

The Israelites, as they traveled in the wilderness, were marched and camped in a strict formation. The message was clear: nation is paramount and every tribe’s place in it is clearly defined. But each tribe also raised a flag and bore a banner that exclaimed to the entire world its unique purpose and distinctive color. With the Sanctuary anchoring them in the middle, the Jews were able to be highly individualistic – and it is this individualism that blended and banded and bonded them together as one people with one purpose on one journey to one destination: the Promised Land!

Like a vineyard, formatted in rows of vines following a specific grid, whose unique and individual grapes are then blended together to form one sublimely divine vintage, the Jew too is never off the grid, but merely creating it and electrifying it with his or her individuality.

Being insecure and apologetic festers disunity and fragmentation. It is only by being outstanding and standing out that we can blend together as one!

**TOGETHER AS ONE:
DOES JUDAISM ALLOW FOR INDIVIDUALITY?**

1. Unique Laughter (Joke)

A Chassid, all bedecked in his traditional garb – long black coat, swaying *tzitzit*, dangling *peyot*, flowing beard, wide-brimmed hat – walks into a bar in El Paso, Texas, with a white parrot perched on his shoulder.

Surprised at the sight, the bartender asks: “Wow – where did you get that thing?”

To which the parrot responds: “What, this Chassid? There are thousands of them back in Brooklyn!”

2. Are All Religious Jews Alike?

I am a rabbi. It is my job to talk about religion. If I can find a unique angle through which to address this long-ago exhausted topic, then I am doing a good job. If I cannot, then I am doing a good job at putting you to sleep.

So let us take an old question and answer it with, hopefully, a very invigorating take on the human condition, religion, and Judaism. The old question is: Do all religious Jews look alike? Which, of course, is a question that could be posed about any one single group of stereotyped individuals – do all Japanese people look alike? Do all taxi drivers look alike? Do all black people look alike? Do all Scandinavians look alike? Do all Chassidim look alike? Do all lawyers look alike? And are they meant to?

To paraphrase our glib parrot, “There are millions of these *kippa*-sporting, *Torah*-toting, *mezuzah*-kissing, *tefillin*-wrapping, *challah*-cutting Jews in the world.”

But the question is: Are all religious Jews alike, are we all the same? And, are we all meant to be the same?

3. Conformity and Religion

Some would say that enforcing conformity is a key function of religion. That religion is primarily a dogmatic force that imposes mind control and is threatened by individual spirits and free inquiry. Galileo is proof that some religions have tried to do this.

But has Judaism?

If one were to believe that Judaism is an “opiate of the masses,” whose very purpose and singular goal is to iron-out the differences between people and create iron-clad uniformity across the board, then the Jewish utopian vision is indeed a world where all men, women, and children are cut of the same cloth and clothed in the same garb.

Which brings us to a key question: Is religion in general, and Judaism in particular, meant to stifle one’s individuality or highlight it? Are we meant to forgo our unique perspective on life for the greater good of the community? Indeed, do we even have a unique perspective on life, or are we created so equal that one person is like another?

Put in edible terms: Are we – as people, as Jews, as Torah adherents – meant to be of the predictable cookie-cutter variety, or are we meant to invent new recipes for new cookies?

4. Is There Individuality in Judaism?

In short: Is there individuality in Judaism? And if there is individuality, how does that jive with the expectations of the community?

Every Jew is commanded to obey 613 mitzvahs, which – at first glance – appear intended to even out the playing field and make us all alike. Anyone could reasonably ask: How can there be room for personal expression when we all have to follow the same path of the same Torah?

As Jews, one of our fundamental beliefs is in the coming of the Redemption, a perfect world where the Divine will be revealed for all and where there will be eternal and everlasting peace. What will this world look like? Will we all look the same, act the same, and think the same? If not, if there will be individual self-expression, how will we ensure that this Redemption remains unified and peaceful? After all, if I am I and you are you, and we all each have our unique (sometimes opposing) viewpoints, how can we guarantee unity and harmony?

Just some light questions for a Shabbat morning...

And now for some answers, which (not surprisingly) are found in this week's Torah reading.

5. Parshat Bamidbar

This week's Torah reading is *Parshat Bamidbar*, the first portion of the Book of Numbers, the fourth book of the Torah. After reading about the creation of the world and our ancestry (in book one, Genesis), after learning how we became the Nation of Israel (in book two, Exodus), after receiving instructions in the laws and services of interaction with the Divine (in book three, Leviticus), we now commence book four, Numbers.

Numbers, which is so named because it begins with a census of the Jewish people,¹ goes on to describe their journeys in the desert, and this is why, in Hebrew, this book is called *Bamidbar*, meaning “in the desert/wilderness.” And its first portion is also called *Bamidbar*.

Every word of this portion is pregnant with meaning and relevance. But today, we shall focus on the passage (the third *aliya*) which speaks of the arrangement of the tribal camps around the Sanctuary.

All throughout the forty years in the desert, when the Jews would travel and camp – in the literal sense and in the spiritual sense – there was a very specific formation to this journeying and encampment. This formation was divinely-designed to be like a grid, with each tribe designated a specific position within it.

Unlike today when people travel and their email auto-response annoyingly says, “I am traveling and am off the grid,” the Jews’ traveling was a grid.

It is within this grid that the beauty of the Torah’s take on individuality and the greater community is expressed:

*The Israelites shall camp with each person near the banner having his paternal family’s insignia. They shall camp at a specified distance around the Tent of Meeting.*²

Our passage begins with God commanding Moses and Aaron to tell each of the tribes that they will encamp and travel beneath the banner of their father’s house. Each and every one of the tribes was to unfurl a *degel* – a flag, a coat of arms, an emblem, a ensign, a standard under which and by which they would position themselves. And then the Torah describes just where that should be.

At the center of the divine grid that defined the Nation of Israel stood the Sanctuary (or Tent of Meeting) upon which and within which the Holy Presence of God rested. Immediately surrounding the Sanctuary

¹ In Hebrew it is called Bamidbar (“In the Desert”), while in English and Aramaic, it is called the Book of Numbers. See Talmud, Sotah 36b.

² Number 2:2.

was encamped the priestly tribe, Levi. From this literal and spiritual center, went out four spokes – one to the Sanctuary’s east, one to the west, one to the north, and one to the south.

Each of the four spokes was comprised of three camps, for a total of twelve encampments, as follows:

- To the east, stood the camps of Judah, Issachar and Zebulun.
- To the west, the tribes of Ephraim, Manasseh and Benjamin.
- To the north, the tribes of Dan, Asher and Naphtali.
- To the south, the tribes of Reuben, Simon and Gad.

Note that in describing this arrangement, the Torah is relaying two different, and seemingly conflicting, messages: 1) on one hand each of the tribes had a very specific banner and standard, unique to that tribe; but 2) on the other hand, all of the tribes were positioned in a pre-determined and specific grid.

So were the tribes meant to be individualistic or communal, independent or inter-dependent?

6. The Individuality of the Tribes

To answer this question, and to better understand the relationship between a singular unique entity and the greater whole, we need to better understand the individuality of each of the tribes.

Ever single one of the twelve tribes had a standard, a flag, an ensign, a coat of arms that displayed its unique gift to the world. The Midrash³ describes these flags in detail. It says that each of the flags had a unique color, corresponding to the precious stone imbedded into the High Priest’s breastplate, one for each tribe. Each of the tribal banners also had a unique image, corresponding to that tribe’s unique, exclusive, special, and individual personality and gifted skill. These were:

³ Bamidbar Rabbah 2:6.

- Reuben: Red flag with mandrake flowers (*dudaim*)⁴
- Simon: Green flag with the skyline of the city of Shechem
- Levi: Red, white and black flag with the High Priest's breastplate (*Urim v'Tumim*)
- Judah: Sky blue flag with a lion (for they were the royal tribe)
- Issachar: Bluish black flag with a sun and moon (for they were great scholars, experts in the cosmos)
- Zebulun: White flag with a ship (for they were businessmen, shipping tycoons)
- Dan: Blue flag with a snake
- Naphtali: Deep wine colored flag with a deer
- Gad: Black and white flag with tents
- Asher: Pearlescent colored flag with a (olive⁵) tree.
- Joseph: Pitch black flag with Egypt depicted upon it. It also had two parts for Joseph's two sons became separate tribes: Ephraim's sign was an ox, and Manasseh's a wild ox.
- Benjamin: Multicolored flag with a wolf.

We can talk for hours on the significance of each one of these flags, their symbolism and deep spiritual meaning. Don't worry, as much as I would like to elaborate on the individual insignia of the tribes, due to the unfortunate time restraints I won't.

Suffice it to say, these flags and banners depicted a heightened sense of individuality. The standards shouted: "This is who I am! This is what I stand for!"

⁴See Rabbeinu Bechai on these descriptions.

⁵Ibid.

For example, take the tribes of Issachar and Zebulun. Issachar members were scholars, represented by the insignia of sun and moon upon their banner. They were experts in the complex sciences and rhythms of the constellations. They studied the universe via its divine blueprint and knew its physics and spirits intimately. This was their individual skill and gift.

Juxtapose this with the tribe of Zebulun. Its members were businessmen, entrepreneurs, and financiers. As symbolized by the ship upon their flag, the Zebulunites were shippers and handlers. Their unique individuality and distinctive God-given gift was enterprise, making money and supporting the world.

These are two small examples of heightened individuality. But what does this individuality mean and how does it feed the greater the community?

7. The Vine Metaphor

The answer comes from another Midrash⁶ which notes that Israel is compared to a vine and asks why?⁷ Because just as the vines in a vineyard aren't planted in an unstructured hodgepodge, but rather row-by-row, so too were the Jewish people arranged in a grid format.

If you have ever driven through wine country – whether in the Golan Heights, Israel, or in Napa Valley, California, or in Bordeaux, France – you have seen a very beautiful but orderly sight. As you passed vineyard after vineyard, you did not see a random mixture of wild vines, intermingling with one another and out of control, but rather row after row of very orderly plantings.

⁶Leviticus Rabbah 36:2 based on Psalms 80:9: *You uprooted a vine from Egypt; You drove out nations and planted it.*

⁷Note that the Midrash in n. 4 quotes the following, He brought me to the wine hall, and he attracted (v' diglo) upon me love. (Song of Songs 2:4), where the word degel, 'flag' (in this case 'attraction') is referenced in the context of wine.

The Midrash says that the Jews are compared to a vine because, like a vineyard, they were structured in a symmetrical grid, legion by legion, banner by banner.

Indeed, after the crossing of the sea, the Torah relates that *Moses led Israel ... into the desert of Shur*.⁸ The Midrash⁹ inquires: “There is no known desert named *Shur* – what does *Shur* mean?” One of the explanations the Midrash gives is that *Shur* comes from the Hebrew word *shura*, meaning “row.” The desert was called the “desert of rows” because the Jews traversed it lined up in rows, in a unified formation.

8. Kabbalistic Insight

The mystical teachings of Judaism¹⁰ explain all this in a revolutionary way.

The Zohar – the key book of Kabbalah – points out that Israel is often called *Yeshurun*.¹¹ Why? Because this name is derived from *shura*, meaning “row.”¹² And one of the definitive abilities of the Jewish people has always been the power to create rows, lines and grids, out of this great universe.

How does this work?

The world in which we live is composed of many different forces, energies, and elements. There are forces that attract and those that repel; there are forces of giving and those of withholding; there is the power to smile and the ability to cry.

⁸ Exodus 15:22.

⁹ Rabbah, Beshalach end 24.

¹⁰ See Midrash *ibid*; Ohr Hatorah from the Tzemach Tzedek, Bamidbar, pp. 37-38 and sources cited there.

¹¹ See Deuteronomy 32:15 and 33:26 as examples.

¹² Vayishlach p. 177b.

As explained by the mystics¹³ the idea of a shura, of a row, is the power and ability to bridge and align different individual forces into one cohesive grid. This gives the Jews the ability to create rows, structures, and binding elements with the power to unite highly energetic individual parts and particles into one cohesive cosmic atom.

And the vineyard is the perfect analogy: Each individual vine stands alone in its designated place and has the freedom to be unique. But when it is harvested and blended with the other grapes of the vines in its row, it contributes to the unified wine of a most divine vintage.

The Jewish people, *specifically because* of their individuality, *specifically because* of their distinctive flags and personalized standards, were they able to fuse with one another, travel in formation, and provide a unified structure even to the wildest parts of the wildernesses.

This too is why each of the four spokes jutting out of the Sanctuary consisted of three tribes, one of whom acted as the leader for the other two. True individuality allows for two complete opposites (take Issachar and Zebulun) to be fused together by the third and adhesive power, which completes their *shura*, their row.

9. The Lesson

This, my fellow tribesmen and women, my fellow standard-bearers and flag-raisers, is the lesson for today and the answer to our question:

Are all Jews *meant* to look alike and act the same way? And is Judaism the ultimate cutter of uniform cookies or is it a cultivator of self-expression?

The Torah makes it clear:

The Israelites shall camp with each person near the banner having his paternal family's insignia. They shall camp at a specified distance around the Tent of Meeting.

¹³See Ohr Hatorah *ibid*.

Every single Jew is a bearer of a unique standard, a waver of a distinctively colored flag, portraying an insignia like no other. Your color is not my color; your unique gifts are different from my unique gifts; your insignia is an inimitable signature upon the world like no one before you and none after.

But, make no mistake about it, our individuality is predicated on the centerpiece of this whole trip – the Divine Sanctuary, where God dwells among us, anchoring everything and anything we do.

As we traverse the wild wilderness, the desert where nothing flourishes, we must each have a Sanctuary, a Temple, anchoring our journey and directing our path. It is what allows our individuality to burst forth in a flash of distinctive color and unprecedented brilliance.

The only way for us Jews to unite, to become one, to fuse and blend together into one camp traveling through this *midbar*, this material desert, is by raising our flags high and proud and being unapologetic individuals in keeping our Jewish standards.

The flag raising at a simple physical parade – say at a July Fourth ceremony or at the singing of the National Anthem before a sports game – inspires awe and confidence, and unifies a country, a people, and a nation. How much more so when we raise the profound spiritual flag of Judaism! The awe, confidence and unity that results is magical and sublime.

When we raise our standards, the world becomes much more than standard.

10. Conclusion: Standing Out

I once asked a friend of mine, who thought himself to be a very independent thinker with a healthy dose of individuality, how he came about this self-assured confidence?

To which he replied: “I’m not really sure. Let me ask my wife and I’ll get back to you.”

Which reminds me of the guy who was driving home from work one day when his wife called frantically: “Honey, I hope you’re not on the I95. I heard on the news that there is one *meshuganeh* driving the wrong way down the highway!”

To which the husband replied: “One? There’s thousands!”

Here is the uniqueness of us Jews: by standing out, by being a stand out, do we actually blend well together.

As with a fine wine – the finer the individual grape, the better it will mix with other like grapes. But if the grape is weak, then not only won’t it blend well, it will bring down the entire vintage.

The only way for a Jew to live is to bear a standard and wave a flag. This is why each of us was born.

We weren’t born to blend into the woodwork – we were born to work the wood itself and then rework it some more, turning the original woodwork into something so much more beautiful.

Not one of us can say, “I do not have the capacity, the ability, or the talent to do so.” This week’s Torah portion states explicitly and unequivocally that every single Jew has the ability and responsibility to raise a flag, a banner, a standard that is way beyond the standard anything.

And it is precisely through being a confident, proud, and soulful individual that the entire camp of Israel, of Yeshurun, blends and fuses together as one.

Precisely through the distinct and defined rows of the vines, does the entire vineyard blend into one divine wine of the most sublime vintage.

May the day of our tasting of this heavenly wine – both individually unique and cosmically unified – come speedily in our days, with the coming of the immediate and eternal Redemption. Amen!

Shabbat Shalom!

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