



## **BAMIDBAR**

**Nasso / 9 Sivan**

Are You Expressing Your Individuality?

June 3, 2017

## ARE YOU EXPRESSING YOUR INDIVIDUALITY?

### ABSTRACT

Individuality is a noble aspiration. Who doesn't want to be unique? But is individuality actually possible when you have been and continue to be shaped by many forces – your childhood, parents, social and peer pressures?

How can you express your individuality – or even know who you are as an individual – when you are over-stimulated by today's endless flow of information and inundated by millions of advertising messages and marketing pitches that manipulate your emotions, telling you who you are supposed to be? And how can you ever discover your true identity when all these forces conspire to influence your choices? How can you find the courage to be yourself, and not what others want, demand and expect of you?

And then, a second set of questions: Where does religion fit in? What is the role of spirituality in the search for one's self? Religion seems to demand conformity – following a certain code of behavior, being part of a community. Some religionists even see individuality as a threat, a sin. But does G-d want people to lose their identities in the name of faith?

This week's Torah reading provides a powerful response to these questions, as well as the tools to actually discover your own individuality in the age of conformity – to “make your own kind of music ... [to] sing your own special song ... even if nobody else sings along.”

A revolutionary thought from the Baal Shem Tov and several short inspiring stories about performing artists help drive the point home.

### 1. One Musician's Expression (Optional)

In 1969, Richie Havens was not exactly a nobody, but he was not famous either. He was billed as the opening act at Woodstock – which was to feature (and did) some of the most important rock and folk musicians of the day – like Janis Joplin and Jefferson Airplane. But they were all stuck in traffic (snarled by the unexpected thousands flocking to the concert), so Richie Havens was told to punt.

It was a long punt. Havens played for three hours.

Having run out of material, he started in on old spirituals, including “Sometimes I Feel Like a Motherless Child.” To draw out this simple song, he added the chant “Freedom ... freedom ... freedom.”

It became the defining song of Woodstock and launched him into stardom. It is still frequently performed today.

## 2. Unique Ability

The ability of the top world artists to make something unique out of the mundane – even out of established classics – is well known.

A friend once told me about going to an Arthur Rubenstein concert. The great pianist was well up in years then and, a few years later, he passed away. Yet on this occasion, though he was in his 90’s, he performed a particularly difficult and emotional Tchaikovsky piece. My friend, a pianist herself, knew the piece well, and she noticed that while he attacked the piano with passion, he occasionally hit the wrong notes. But it made not the least bit of difference. In his hands, the music soared to new levels. My friend sat spell bound, realizing for the first time the difference between being a pianist and being an artist.

Another friend related a similar story about the actor Kirk Douglas. On this occasion, Douglas was asked to read the T. S. Eliot poem “The Love Song of J. Alfred Prufrock.” He did not know the poem. Amused he began. And his audience who, unlike himself knew the poem well, sat spell bound at a totally fresh interpretation.

Such is the strength of a performing artist. The ability to impose a new level of creativity upon a work and make it uniquely, *individually* his or her own.

A very special talent, I know.

But I am here to tell you that we all have it.

“You gotta make your own kind of music,” sang the Mamas and the Papas (even before Woodstock) ... “Sing your own special song ... Make your own kind of music, even if nobody else sings along.”<sup>1</sup>

Oliver Wendell Holmes wrote in *The Voiceless* (1858): “Alas for those that never sing, but die with all their music in them!”

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<sup>1</sup> “Make Your Own Kind of Music” by Barry Mann and Cynthia Weil.  
Bamidbar Rabba 13:14.

### 3. A Noble Aspiration

Yes, individuality is a noble aspiration. Who doesn't want to be unique? But is individuality actually possible when you have been and continue to be shaped by many forces – your childhood, parents, social and peer pressures?

How can you express your individuality – or even know who you are as an individual – when you are over-stimulated by today's endless flow of information and inundated by millions of advertising messages that manipulate your emotions, telling you who you are supposed to be? And how can you ever discover your true identity when all these forces conspire to influence your choices? How can you find the courage to be yourself, and not what others want, demand and expect of you?

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### 4. Twelve Repetitions

In this week's Torah reading, we find an unusual repetition – twelve times in succession – of the offerings that the leaders of the twelve tribes of Israel were to bring to the Sanctuary.

As the Torah is known for its *concise* descriptions, this is a reason to sit up and take notice. After all, many fundamental ideas in the Torah are related in a just a few verses ... complex laws are derived from an extra letter or a turn of phrase ... so what is going on here?

Though each of the leaders brought the exact identical offerings, when describing them, the Torah finds it necessary to repeat separately every detail of each tribe's gift. It ends up repeating the 35-item gift list twelve times! It could have just as easily listed the offerings and stated that each of the twelve leaders brought these same gifts, thereby "saving" seventy-two "extra" verses in its account of these offerings (which make *Parshat Nasso* the longest in the Torah at 176 verses).

## 5. Individuality – the Sacred Voice

Individuality – the sacred voice and dignified exclusivity of each person – lies at the heart of this so-called repetition. Though each leader technically brought the same offerings, each one did so with his unique personality, passion and creativity – and with his special intention (as explained in the Midrash<sup>2</sup>). Think of it like twelve different master musicians playing the same sonata, yet each is doing so with his or her distinctive tone, inflections and spirit.

The Torah takes pains to emphasize the sanctity of individuality ... to show us how faith and religious observance are not about conformity, but quite the contrary – they are the tools of each soul’s unique expression. And that is why the Torah goes out of its way to separately record every detail of each offering. Though the offerings were physically the same, down to their volume and weight, each one was completely different ... each one had its own special flavor ... because the people who brought them were different.

What does this teach us about our own search for individual expression?

## 6. Our Individual Expression

First of all, the Torah communicates to us the necessity and magnitude that our individuality carries – that if we do not live up to our indispensable calling, we upset the entire balance of existence. As well, the Torah’s elaboration enlightens us as to how we discover our own individuality and repel the forces of conformity.

We do so by bringing a sacred “offering” (as did the tribal princes in this week’s Torah reading).

Our unique personality can only emerge when we become a giver, rather than a taker ... when our inimitable soul begins to express itself in its own distinct voice. As long as we remain dependent on those around us, we have no choice but to conform to those that we rely upon. (Let’s not forget that, in biology, parasites are always shaped and influenced by their hosts.) Only when we take the initiative and create something new do we flex our own muscles and express the uniqueness of our exclusive souls.

## 7. The Uniqueness of Giving

Taking does not make anyone unique. Everyone knows how to take, and we all take, more or less, in the same fashion. What makes each one of us unique is giving – what we give and how we give. Each one of us has something different to give, and we all give in our own special way.

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<sup>2</sup> Bamidbar Rabba 13:14.

Our bodies and everything material in our lives are driven by self-interest – they are always in the taking mode. Except at times when, in order to take, we also have to give a bit. And it is this corporeal part of our existence that is essentially conformist by nature. It depends upon others and, therefore, must accommodate to get what it wants.

Our souls, however, are natural givers. They are not bound by or dependent upon what others give us. Every soul, from birth, is saturated with all the skills and tools it needs to make its mark on the universe.

## 8. A Soul in Prison

The only problem is that your indispensable soul is thrust into a prison of sorts – into a material world, into a physical body, placed in the custody of subjective parents and educators, and affected by their attitudes, fears and insecurities. As such, it is vulnerable, defenseless to the forces surrounding it – all trying to take control of its development.

The Baal Shem Tov asks:

In the daily *Amidah* prayer why is the order “Our G-d and the G-d of our parents,” when chronologically G-d is first “the G-d of our parents” before He becomes “our G-d”?

And he answers:

Because once we grow into adults, after our formative years, we must ensure that G-d becomes our G-d, to develop our relationship with G-d, and not just serve Him because He is “the G-d of our parents.”

Imagine a child in its formative years. How much is foisted upon him or her by family and environment. So it is with our soul. As we develop and grown – shaped by the forces around us – our soul recedes into the background, silenced and not allowed to express itself.

Imagine the pain of a unique and original soul, a creative spirit, trapped in the stale monotony of mediocre conformity – waiting, waiting to be released from the prison of repetition, waiting to express its own individuality.

Of course, healthy nurturing parents and influences will help the child build the confidence to allow his or her soul to emerge. But even in the best scenario, the growth process is filled with minefields, as a gentle soul braves the untamed elements of an insensitive world.

## 9. The Antidote

It is possible to find the antidote to all these compromising forces only by going in the opposite direction.

As long as we follow the tides and succumb to the pressures that shape us, we will be swept away by them into the oblivion of insignificance. As long as we continue to take and depend on others for our sustenance, we remain “victims.”

But by making an “offering” and initiating a new effort – by becoming a giver, instead of a taker – our exclusive soul finds its creative expression, and our distinct voice discovers its song.

## 10. Free Spirits

How many of us are true free spirits?

People talk a big game about individuality, free expression, originality and being “yourself.” But how many of us actually have the ability and the courage to transcend the forces that have shaped us from our earliest formative years?

Most people will not acknowledge that they are conformists. I have tried the experiment many times with different audiences, asking them, “How many here, by show of hand, are conformists?” Rarely will someone raise his or her hand.

“So if no one in this group is a conformist,” I continue, “and no one in all the other groups that I have polled are conformists, where then are the conformists in this world?”

As the saying goes “You can always tell the non-conformist in a crowd, because he looks like every other non-conformist.”

Or: “I am a non-conformist, just like all my friends.”

Individuality and democracy should not be confused. Many equate the basic freedoms we enjoy today with being a free spirit. Despots of old, the argument goes, did not allow people to be free, but modern democracy has emancipated our souls. This axiom, however, is *absolutely* false. We can have all the basic freedoms – of speech, of religion, of expression – and still be psychologically enslaved. Conversely, we can be oppressed by tyrants, and our souls can be free.

Freedom, true freedom, is not “doing anything you want,” playing any games you enjoy, traveling anywhere your heart desires, purchasing anything you wish. It means something else altogether.

True freedom means that your choices are not imposed upon you from any force outside of you. It means that your behavior is driven by a *free soul within*, and not by expectations, pressures, competition, vanity, insecurities and all the other forces that compel you to behave a certain way.

## 11. Invaluable Lesson

This week's Torah reading provides us with an invaluable lesson about the dignity of individuality and the indignity of conformity, teaching us the tools how to discover and embrace our true identity, which lies hidden beneath the layers of attitudes, behaviors and habits that have been superimposed upon us.

It is telling us:

Bring an offering – commit to giving of yourself to others, take initiative, use your skills to do something fresh that will help others – and you will allow your soul to emerge.

Become a giver, instead of a taker, and you will find the courage to be yourself, to finally allow your unique voice to play its own music.

Remember: You were born an original. Don't become a copy...