

International Rabbinic Fellowship

Weekly Dvar Torah

Parshat Yitro

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This week's Dvar Torah is provided by Rabbi Fred Klein

Sinai: The Theological Dimension of Community

הִנֵּה מַה טוֹב וְיָמָה נִעְנִים יְשֻׁבֵת אֱהוּיִם גַּם יְחַד

How goodly and pleasant it is- brothers dwelling in unity.

(Psalm

133)

There is probably not a Jewish camp in the world that does not have a *kumsitz* (bonfire) where children do not come together and sing this song, arm in arm. However, rarely do we sit to think about this deceptively simple verse. Who are the siblings?

The Jewish tradition on this verse gives many explanations, but in context the verse seems to describe the fellowship of priests (*kohanim*) who served in the Temple. However, Rashi, the famous Franco-German commentator of the 12th century gives a fascinating insight. He states that the fellowship discussed here is the fellowship between the Divine Presence and the Jewish people when the Temple stood in Jerusalem. In other words, the verse describes a unique *sacred fellowship*. What does sacred fellowship mean, and how does this relate to our mission as Jews? To answer this question we must examine another text, the last day of the inauguration of the Tabernacle in the desert, described in the ninth chapter of Leviticus.

There we read about the complex rituals performed by Moses, Aaron and his sons when the Tabernacle was inaugurated. At the end of eight days of sacrificing and complex rituals, Aaron lifts up his hands and blesses the people. Following that action, Moses and Aaron together enter the inner sanctum of the Tabernacle, and then come out and (again) bless the people, and only then are we told that the Divine presence appears to Israel. The rabbis are

puzzled by the fact that God appears to the people only after the second blessing, and are perplexed as to why Moses and Aaron enter the Tabernacle *together*, and bless *together* the second time.

One of many explanations struck my attention. When Aaron came out of the Tabernacle and blessed the people, he was worried; God's presence had not appeared. He turned to Moses, and together they went into the Tabernacle, praying that God would shower God's glory upon the people. Only when they go together as a unit is their prayer efficacious. The midrash quotes our Psalm, "How good and pleasant it is, brothers dwelling together." The midrash teaches us something important. Despite the greatness of Aaron or Moses, neither alone could bring down the Divine presence. Only through working together could this be achieved. *God resides among the people only when one person reaches out to another.* God resides in the fellowship between people. (*Pesikta Zutarta (Lekach Tov), Vayikra Shemini 27a*)

It is interesting to note, that when God created the world, God stated at the end of every day that it was good. The first time that God states that something was not good is in the second chapter of Genesis. "It is not good for man to be alone. I will provide for him a helpmate." In other words, *fellowship is essential*. To reach out and help another in need is not only nice, it is good. In reaching out to each other we realize the interdependence of all of us, that each of us truly needs each other. When we do this, God blesses this fellowship by revealing His presence. The brotherhood of man ultimately leads to the brother of humanity and God, and this is the point that Rashi is making.

What does all of this have to do with this week's parashah?

Just like the Glory of God entered the tabernacle, Sinai was a event of Divine revelation. Most revelations are given to the select few. However, according to tradition, revelation at Sinai was unique, because God appeared before the *entire Jewish people*. It is the ultimate revelation- not one person was excluded.

It is no coincidence that the greatest revelation of God in history was experienced within the context of community. This point should not be underestimated; many other traditions tend to focus upon the need to separate from the collective in order to experience the Divine. Often the community is seen as an obstacle to spiritual enlightenment. Sinai was unique however, for it while Moses alone ascended the mountain, God symbolically descended the mountain and spoke the words 'I am the Lord your God' to the entire people. That is because the Torah was not given to Moses, it was given to the entire community- a nation.

There are some today who talk of spiritual fulfillment and self-realization in strikingly individualistic terms. This form of individualistic piety at the expense of the community is inimical to traditional Jewish norms. The Torah was given to the entire people, because Jewish self-fulfillment can only be achieved in the participation within community. In Judaism, we are not only trying to realize ourselves as individuals, but as a community. The nation accepted the Torah as a nation, and we ultimately fulfill the Torah as a nation as well.

Combating hunger, fighting poverty, helping the needy, caring for the elderly, teaching the next generation- all of these values are *mitzvot*. They are not only obligations upon us individuals, but us as a community. They are the means through which we as a community realize our collective aspirations as a people, *values which were rooted at Sinai*. Only through participation in the community can we fulfill our lofty Sinaitic mandate.

Our Jewish communities can indeed be characterized by the words 'sacred fellowship', if our lives are informed by these values. When we participate in Jewish communal life, we articulate a fundamental insight every day. We are one, because to realize our greatest aspirations as Jews, we must work together. To use theological language, *the Glory of God only resides within the community*.

How good and pleasant it is- the fellowship between humans, and the fellowship between humanity and God.

Chag Sameach

Fred

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