

Bamidbar 5771

Rabbi Aharon Ziegler

The parsha states: “The people of Israel did everything HaShem had commanded Moshe...This is how they camped and this is how they traveled” (2:34).

Why does the Torah make special mention of the compliance of the Jewish people with the G-d given instructions for encamping and traveling? What was so special and commendable about it?

The Midrash explains that the people were indeed to be commended for their unquestioning compliance. It was a true manifestation of *Na'aseh Ve'nishma*. To understand this Midrash we can draw from our own experiences. We know that in a Bet HaKnesset (shul or synagogue) everyone vies for those front seats closest to the Aron HaKodesh, which are usually given to the Rabbanim or shul officers. Here, the Midrash explains, the Levi'im occupied the position of honor in the center of the encampment, near the Ohel Mo'ed, while the other tribes, many of whom were superior in wisdom and knowledge to the Levi'im, occupied positions on the fringes. Nevertheless, to their everlasting credit, they did not complain or raise any objections. They submitted willingly to the divine wisdom that had assigned positions and roles to all the *shevatim*.

But, we could ask, was this really a fair system? Was it right that for all generations no member of another tribe could aspire to the priestly duties of the Levi'im? According to our contemporary minds and thinking about fairness and equality, this was perhaps, unjustified. However, there is a difference between Jewish attitude and universal secular attitude. In the secular view, the purpose of each individual's existence is solely for personal fulfillment. Therefore, if all people are inherently equal, their purposes are also equal, and no one should be allowed to take precedence over someone else.

In our Jewish view, Knesset Yisrael represents a team effort. Each ball player will do his best in the position he is assigned to for the sake of the team, just as each musician will give his best performance on the instrument he is playing to bring out the harmony of the symphony. So too all our people are united to one common purpose, the fulfillment of HaShem's plan for the world, a world of justice, peace and righteousness. Some roles are of course more prominent and prestigious than others. But in the greater picture, everyone is of equal importance, since everyone's contribution is essential towards achieving the greater common goal.

That is the concept of “*Kol Yisrael Areivin Zeh BaZeh*” (Shevuot 39a), that as a team we are responsible for one another. If one Jew has failed to perform a Mitzvah then we are all lacking in our Mitzvot. But as individuals, we have to know our role, execute it to the best of our ability and not to confuse it with the role that others have to perform.

That also explains the Gemara Shabbat (31a) about a potential “Ger.” who approached Hillel and asked to be converted on condition that he will eventually become a “Kohen Gadol”. Shamai immediately dismissed him with such a request but Hillel accepted him and instructed him to begin studying the entire Torah. When he came across the passuk in our parsha “*Ve’Hazar Ha’Kareiv Yumat*” [A non-Kohen who approaches {the Ohel Mo’ed} shall die” (1:51), he asked Hillel, “To whom does this apply?” and Hillel responded, “Even to David, king of Israel”. He may be a king but since he is not a Kohen, he is considered a “zar”, an alien or a stranger, as far as the holiness of the Mishkan is concerned. The *Ger.* realized that no matter what, he could never be a Kohen, so he accepted his role as a member of Klal Yisrael.

We each have our own unique role to accomplish something positive in this world, in our lifetime. So let’s do it, while we can.