

Geulas Yisrael #105

Geulah and Achdut

The Korach earthquake left our nation in complete chaos. Just a few months earlier, the entire population had gathered into marching formation, preparing to stride into Israel. The Jewish encampment in the desert was a logistical marvel, highly organized and highly coordinated. Each shevet occupied a distinct and well-defined sector with the entire convoy partitioned by flags. Transporting a population of three million strong across a sandy desert is no small logistical feat, and it requires highly synchronized teamwork. According to one opinion of the gemara they journeyed in the "camp formation" rather than in single-file, further demanding precise and detailed choreography. The scene in parshat Behaalotecha is a model of cooperation and coordination.

It is also a model of a harmonious "division of labor". During an elaborate inauguration ceremony, the Levi'im were inducted into their dual role. Tasked with guarding the Mishkan, they intermediated between the general population and the shechinah. However, they also assisted the Kohanim in their daily korbanot and in general Mishkan operations. They were content playing these subsidiary roles, without demanding the limelight. Behaalotecha presents an idyllic scene of social harmony and of national achdut- both within the Jewish encampment and within the overall population.

Korach 's rebellion shattered everything. Demanding equal political and religious rights, he incited Levi'im into a full-scale rebellion. Moshe's unrelenting rivals, Datan and Aviram, exploited this mutiny to intensify their personal vendetta against him. Two hundred and fifty dissenters, hailing from the tribe of Reuven, joined the insurrection, hoping to recover their forefather's lost glory and abdicated title. It was an all-out contest of everyone against everyone, and we quickly spiraled into anarchy. Our national harmony was ripped to shreds by the Korach mutiny.

This revolt is the final event recorded by the Torah before the forty year "break in the action". The Torah doesn't document any events which transpired during those forty dark years, primarily, because nothing significant occurred, other than the slow and tragic extinction of an

entire generation. Effectively, from a literary standpoint, the Korach uprising launched our mini-gallus of forty years in an empty desert.

Conceivably, national tefillah and teshuvah could have reversed the forty-year mini-galus which had been sentenced to us after the meraglim fiasco. After all, just a year earlier, a harsh divine punishment for the egel sin had been commuted. Korach's rebellion, however, profoundly ruptured our social fabric and eliminated any hope for national recovery. A fractured nation could not rally to tefillah or to teshuvah. Our fate was sealed.

The Sale of Yosef

Of course, this was not the first time, nor the only time in history that Jewish exile was triggered by social strife. Our first exile to Egypt was sparked by a sibling rivalry which erupted into the shameful sale of Yosef. Had the family not been fractured, history may have taken a different trajectory. Thousands of years later, on the eve of our lengthiest exile, this hideous crime would come back to haunt us.

The brutal murder of the ten martyrs, signaled the start of our dreaded and lengthy galus. During the show trial of our legendary Torah scholars, the Roman prosecutors invoked the crime of Yosef's sale as the basis for this punitive verdict. Just as we were about to depart for our long odyssey through history we were reminded, once again, that Jewish exile is always triggered by social disharmony.

Sadly, we didn't need this gruesome reminder. During the final stages of the second Beit Hamikdash, our society was wracked by strife, discord and bloody civil wars which took tens of thousands of lives. Our society was badly splintered into competing factions which sparred for political and religious control.

Eventually, facing a brutal Roman siege, we plummeted into even greater conflict. We had stored up enough grain to outlast several years of a siege, however during the siege, warring sects burned each other's granaries, introducing widespread hunger and disease. When the Romans finally breached the walls of Yerushalayim they discovered a city of corpses and skeletons. The Romans didn't conquer Yerushalayim, the city collapsed under the weight of dispute and internal conflict.

Jewish exile is always a product of societal disunity. From Yosef to Korach, to the civil wars of the second Beit Mikdash, this sad cycle repeats itself throughout Jewish history.

Every Jew Owns Israel

The land of Israel was awarded to a people and not to individuals. When our national unity frays our hold on our land erodes. The notion that Israel belongs to the larger community and not to any one individual group or faction, is illustrated by an interesting halacha. The easiest method to halachikally transfer ownership of a portable item (known as *ma'aseh kinyan*) is to package it together with a land transfer. Smaller portable items can be bundled together with land and sold as one package through a process known as *agav*. This facile method of a kinyan transaction depends upon the seller actually owning transferable land.

The great French Tosafot scholar known as Rabenu Tam, the 12th century grandson of Rashi, asserted that even Jews who do not actually own land can execute this kinyan process, since every Jew, effectively, owns a potential burial plot in Israel. This narrow halachik application, allowing the use of a hypothetical burial plot in Israel as the basis for a land-based kinyan process, reflects the broader truth that the land of Israel is a national heritage. Because it is a national commons, when our *achdut* falls into disrepair our hold on the land weakens and the dark specter of *galus* appears upon the horizon.

Intergenerational Community

Israel belongs to every Jew, even those who are no longer amongst the living. Though the original generation which left Egypt was condemned to die in the desert, they legally inherited the land of Israel. A very complex and elaborate system was installed to allocate land in Israel. A parcel of land was posthumously awarded to each original member of the generation which had departed Egypt, but had passed away in the desert. The lands then reverted to their living children who physically entered the land. Israel belongs to an intergenerational community of Jews, and not just whichever generation happens to be inhabiting it. Our deed to this land is communal and historical, and when our solidarity splinters our deed becomes voided.

Broadcasting "Oneness"

The land of God lies beyond human reach and beyond human capacity. Only those whom Hashem authorizes stand any chance to settle this small parcel of land. Throughout history, dominant empires attempted, in vain, to establish permanent holds on this land, but, inevitably, they all came up empty. Unlike other regions on this planet, settlement in the land of God must be divinely ordained.

We were specifically chosen to inhabit this land as part of our national and historical mission to represent Hashem in this world. Our deed to Israel is integrated with our mission of spreading knowledge of Hashem to all of humanity.

One of the basic tenets of monotheism is the Oneness of Hashem. Ideally, our own unity should reflect His indivisibility and Oneness. When our unity reflects His, our mission is successful, and our presence in Israel is justified. When we fall into social disunity, we no longer fully represent His oneness and our lease on His land falters.

Homogenizing Minhagim?

Part of the historical project of returning home is reinstating the unity we lost during exile. The enormous challenge of unifying religious and non-observant Jews is obvious, but even within the Orthodox community we face many interesting and unprecedented questions, as we walk through the uncharted territory of Jewish redemptive history.

Minhagim and other customs such as nusach hatefillah were crucial to maintaining Jewish identity throughout a punishing exile. Communal identity and communal traditions are major elements of religious identity and our diverse and particularized customs preserved Jewish identity and strengthened our sense of "belonging".

Now that we have all gathered "under one roof", in one country, will we begin to standardize some of these differences? Obviously, strict halachik ordinances are unchanging and cannot be ignored or homogenized. However, as history unfolds and more of the Jewish population "encamps" in Israel it is possible that we will secure greater unity by homogenizing some of the different minhagim which we brought home from our exile. These differences were crucial to our survival when we were lost in history, but may deter national solidarity in our homeland.