

"BANNERS IN THE DESERT"

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In our Sidra of this morning, the ~~first~~^{of} the Fourth Book of Moses, we read of the peregrinations of Israel in the desert. The people was to be divided according to its tribe and to march through the wilderness in a set pattern and order. Each tribe^s, in addition, was to have its own banner, or flag. This banner or degel was to differentiate it from all the other tribes of Israel.

What is the origin of this interesting commandment? Our sacred tradition gives us an amazing answer. That is, that G-d did not command the Israelites concerning the degalm on His own initiative. Rather, he merely acceded to the request of the Jews who insisted upon banners in the desert. Nitavu Yisrael she-yihyu lahem degalm k'malekhei ha-sharet -- the Israelites desired that they have banners just like the ministering angels.

What a remarkable statement! Are we to imagine that the Israelites conceived of the angels as tin soldiers -- and envied them? Do angels really parade as if they were in an elementary school play?

In order to understand the profound symbol of the banners in the desert and their relation to angels, we must understand that there are two words for a banner or flag in Hebrew, and each has a different connotation. Those words are degel^f and nes. Nes is an external symbol, a sign to others; it is meant for outsiders. Thus, Isaiah speaks of the Messiah's function towards the rest of the world at the end of day^s: ve'nissa nes la-goyim me'rachok -- "He shall raise a nes for the nations from the distance." The nes is meant for other nations; it is for the distant, for the outsider. Degel on the other hand is a symbol of the fulfillment of one's own purpose, his own destiny, the meaning of his own life for himself.

Nes implies a communication with others; you identify yourself thereby to others. Degel implies communion with yourself; you identify

6/22

"BANNERS IN THE DESERT"

yourself to yourself -- it is a symbol of self-identity.

Nes will cause people to rally. Degel will rally people to a cause.

Nes is appropriate to the harim -- the mountains, with which word it is often associated in the Bible. For (you are on top of the mountain when you preach down to others. The degel is generally associated with midbar, the desert. When you are in a wasteland, there you must first find yourself and discover who you are and what you stand for.

In Jewish tradition, an angel is created for one single purpose, for one solitary shelichut. The angel knows what it is he was created for, and he proceeds to do it. Therefore, the degel is indeed symbolic of the malakh. The degel symbolizes a single-minded purpose -- and an angel lives for just that. Hence, nitavu Yisrael she-yihyu lahem degalim k'malakhei ha-sharet, means that the Israelites wanted, like the angels, to know the great purpose for which each of them was brought into the world. Every Jew wanted to know what he stands for, what function he is to serve in the grand drama of creation.

Purpose does not mean only a career, a profession, a matter of occupational ambitions. One does not have a noble purpose in life by selling real estate, or securities or textiles, or diamonds. These are only the means to an end. And the end, the goal, the purpose -- that is the degel.

Like the ministering angel, each of us must consider life as a mission, a shelichut. Each of us must consider himself an ambassador of G-d who must report back to the Almighty at the end of ^{HIS} ~~our~~ earthly pilgrimage, who will then judge ~~us~~, whether or not we have carried out our task faithfully.

Of course it is difficult for everyone to know what single great purpose he is to serve in life. Some people, perhaps the greatest number, are helplessly lost, with no idea of what they are doing in the

"BANNERS IN THE DESERT"

world. They are like driftwood on the wild waves of a stormy ocean. These are people who lack identity, who seemingly have no purpose, no degel. It is about such people that the Russian theologian, Nicholas Berdyaev^X, said that they have not only lost the way, but they have also lost the address. They do not know where they are going, and in fact they do not know if one is supposed to go any place ^{AT ALL} in life. They live in a vast midbar without the benefit of degelim.

Many areas of modern life are such bannerless deserts. Television is one such notable example. It was most refreshing to hear Mr. Newton Minnow, who was recently appointed as the Chairman of the Federal Communications Commission, lecture the broadcasters about their responsibilities. It was a speech which will long be remembered by thoughtful people. He reproached them for having no purpose other than that of exploiting the airwaves for financial gain. The words he used to describe the present situation are most appropriate: "a vast wasteland." In Hebrew, that is -- midbar! What Mr. Minnow was trying to do -- vainly, I fear -- was to give them degelim, banners, a sense of purpose, ^A set ^{OF} high goals, in this wasteland. It will be a real pity if the vested interests of industry and politics manage to destroy his plan and return the control of the Tv airwaves to those who regard it as nothing more than another source of income.

Most of us, however, and most decent people, are not in that category of those who are completely lost. We know in general where we belong, what our general goals are, what camp we belong to. However, we do not know, each of us, his individual purpose in life. We know that as human beings it is our duty to reflect the Divine Image in which we were created, by being decent, compassionate, kind. We know that as Jews, more specifically, we are obligated to the prophetic challenge: atem edai, ne'um ha-Shem, "Ye are my witnesses, are the words of the Lord." Our task as Jews is to be the witness to the presence of G-d in human history.

"BANNERS IN THE DESERT"

And, as the sainted author of the Sefat Emet, put it, how are we witnesses? -- By living according to "the words of the Lord," that is, Torah. But if you ask such a person: what specifically is your task, your purpose in life, your specific function in the Divine economy of creation, he does not know.

Some individuals, a minority, are truly blessed. They have matured spiritually, and have discovered what it is exactly for which they were created; they know their purpose in life. How fortunate they are!

These last two types -- those who know the general trend of their being, and those who know the specific purpose for which they were brought into the world, are represented in our Sidra by the words ish al machnehu v'ish al diglo, "every man according to his camp, and every man according to his banner." These represent the two types we have mentioned. (See Sefat Emet.)

Ish al machnehu represents those who know the general camp with which they are identified. They have identified themselves with a group. Ish al diglo are those who know specifically their degel or purpose in life. They have identified themselves also within the group. Ish al machnehu may be in the right camp, but he tends to fritter away his energies and his resources on the wrong task, sometimes on trivialities. Such a person is in the right machaneh, the right group and the right environment, but he has never managed to find himself.

The story is told of the sainted Chafetz Chayim who, in a time of great and grave community crisis, noticed one of the wealthiest men in the town staying long after the hour of services in order to recite the Psalms. The gentle and saintly Chafetz Chayim approached him with the following rebuke. He told him that he had no right to spend his time reciting the Psalms when G-d had blessed him with the wherewithal to alleviate the grave crisis which had struck the community. "Your

"THE BANNERS IN THE DESERT"

business," he said, "is to organize campaigns for charity and disburse it yourself, not to spend all your time in reciting the Tehillim." And he told him the following parable, "in the army of Czar Nicholas there are many divisions. If a soldier who has been trained for the cavalry and is serving there at present, were one fine day to decide that he is going to join the artillery, he may be serving the same Czar and fighting for the same cause, and meaning well all along. But what probably will happen is that his superiors will court martial him and put him against the wall to face the firing squad. His purpose was determined by the Czar to be cavalry, not artillery. You cannot mix purposes by yourself." Ish al machnehu is not sufficient. We must each strive for ish al diglo.

This latter class, those who know what their place and purpose is in life, they have indeed achieved the angelic distinction of degel. In the Song of Songs we read: diglo alai ahavah, "His banner above me is love." The word ahavah, love, is numerically equal to echad -- "one" (See Sefat Emet). The only way to discover the degel of echad, the single-minded application to a great cause, your single greatest purpose in life, that for which you were created, is to experiment with every noble purpose, every sacred task, every lofty cause, until you discover that which you can do best and that with which you can fall in love. You must have a deep loyalty and a profound affection for what you recognize as your purpose in life. The banner of echad must participate in ahavah.

Is there any need to enumerate the hundreds of great purposes which beckon to each and every one of us? There is Israel, education -- both your own scholarship and assisting others, there is rescue work, there is cancer, there is heart work, there is Hebrah Kadisha, there is Shabbas, there is Free Loan Society, there is the ability to make others happy

"BANNERS IN THE DESERT"

through word or song, there is helping the retarded children ... there is indeed no lack of degalim!

About eight hundred years ago Rabbi Judah, the author of Sefer Chassidim told us that the truly pious man will never neglect any one of the 613 mitzvot. Indeed, to have a great cause never means to renege or to be negligent of any of the obligations to which all Jews are committed. However, the truly pious man will choose one of these and so to speak, "specialize" in it. He will choose one mitzvah above all others which will become his symbol, his purpose, his degel. Perhaps that is why we refer to a young man who has attained religious maturity as a bar mitzvah; by right, we should call him a bar mitzvot,^(PLURAL) since on this thirteenth birthday he becomes responsible for the observance of all the commandments. But on this day we tell him that with his assumption of responsibility for all the commandments, he is at the same time urged to find one area of virtue, or goodness, of religious creativity which will define his own purpose in creation.

It is significant that we read the portion of degalim on the Saturday before Shabuot. On Shabuot we each realize what is our machaneh, our camp. It is that of Torah. But the Sidra of degalim reminds us: that it is not enough merely to be a man of Torah. We must also each know our individual purpose, we are each challenged to find and execute his shelichut. The Sidra addresses each of us: What do you stand for? Where and what is your banner in the desert of life?

Happy is the man who can answer clearly and lucidly. Blessed is his life for his mission, his shelichut is triumphant. His existence is meaningful and worthy. In the words of King David: neran'nah bi-yeshuatekha u-ve'shem Elokenu nidgol -- "We shall sing out over Thy victory and raise our banners in the name of our G-d." Yemalei ha-Shem kol mishaletkha, "May G-d fulfill all your requests."