

How Do We Create Personal Concern?

Category: Bamidbar, Bamidbar

The book of Bamidbar seems to contain complaint after complaint by the Jewish people. What was going on? Should we still be complaining today?

The Cranky People

Anyone that has visited Israel knows that all taxi drivers seem to have one thing in common. Each of them has the perfect solution to the problems Israel is facing. They each knew exactly what was being done wrong and exactly how to fix it. The beautiful thing about it was that no matter what their opinion was, they all cared about what was going on in their country.

This had me thinking; why don't we see this kind of concern expressed in the United States? Many people, even in the recent political climate, live their lives quietly and peacefully, letting the affairs of the country pass unnoticed. True, in Israel many times the political situations are matters of life or death but it's more than that. Every citizen serves in the army, each person feels a responsibility for the country's wellbeing.

Perhaps this phenomenon can help us understand something about the time the Jews were traveling in the desert after leaving Egypt. This week we begin the Book of Bamidbar. At first glance, we notice that this Book is full of complaints the Jews had against Moshe and essentially, against G-d.

Here we find them demanding meat because they are bored with the miraculous Manna they'd been eating all this time. Afterwards, we read the story of the spies which were sent as result of the Jews claiming that Moshe intended for them to be killed in the land of Canaan. Then is the story of Korach's fight against Moshe. And so it goes on, story after story!

Had we spoken about one solitary complaint, it could probably be justified. But if they complain again and again about their situation, perhaps there's something deeper that's bothering them. Since they cannot say what it really is, they come

up with different things to complain about.

Specifically, in the Parsha of Beha'aloscha, where the complaints begin, the Torah starts it off by saying "The nation was looking to complain and it was evil in G-d's ears and G-d heard and His anger burned..." The Torah doesn't even indicate a reason for the complaints here. Rashi explains, "It was evil in G-d's ears because they intended that He should hear it and be provoked by it."

Rashi is basically saying that the Jews were looking for reasons to complain. The obvious question is, what happened? What suddenly happened in the year after leaving Egypt that caused this complete change in attitude, from the joy of building the Mishkan to all the complaints?

Taking a Back Seat

The answer to this question is found in this week's Parsha. G-d says, "As for Me I have taken the Levites from among the children of Israel in place of all firstborns among the children of Israel, and the Levites shall be Mine." Rashi adds the reason for this: "For originally the service was performed by the firstborns, but when they sinned by the golden calf, they became disqualified. The Levites, who had not committed idolatry, were chosen in their stead."

Until the Mishkan was built, every firstborn served as the Kohen for his family; he would bring the offerings. If a person didn't have a firstborn son, his nephew would assume the role. As it says in Shemos, "Send the youths of Israel and they will bring sacrifices and offerings." And the youths are explained to be "the first born of Israel to whom this service was given." But then the sin of the calf occurred and from each tribe, people participated in some way, besides for the tribe of Levi. They stayed true to G-d, did not participate, and when Moshe announced, "All who are with G-d come to me," all of the tribe of Levi approached.

This is the reason the firstborns lost the merit of serving in the role of Priests and were replaced by the Levites.

What actually happened was that in one moment, all the tribes lost their connection to the service of G-d, bringing sacrifices. Until now, everyone had this one personal connection through sacrifices, and in one moment it was taken from

all of them and given to the Levites.

Another change occurred then. The Talmud states, "As long as the Mishkan was not built, Bamos were allowed and the firstborns had the service and once the Mishkan was built, the Bamos were forbidden and the service went to the Levites."

This meant that now the only place where it was possible to bring sacrifices and express closeness between G-d and a Jew was in the Mishkan- where the Levites ruled.

Inside the Mishkan there were many places that were forbidden to Jews even to enter. Therefore, most of the nation was left behind, far from G-d, and this embittered them. As long as the firstborns had the service, each and every Jew felt a connection with the service of G-d and therefore greatly rejoiced in the building of the Mishkan. But once the building was complete and people no longer had that connection, the Jews began to feel alienated and detached. The tribe of Levi ran the show and the rest of the nation looked on from outside.

The moment a person begins to feel unnecessary and that there is nothing more he can do for his surroundings, he begins to feel bitter. Suddenly everything is bad or difficult and nothing is good anymore.

This was where all the Jews' complaints stemmed from. This was the essence of Korach's complaint, that "the entire nation is holy" and should be included in the service. The same regarding Pesach Sheini, when the people complained "why should we be left out" because the Paschal sacrifice was the only one that each family still brought individually and they didn't want to miss out on this sacrifice.

This fact explains what happened in the era of the first Temple. All the Jews were on their land, they still had the two Tablets, there were prophets, etc. And even with all this, the Ten Tribes were still lost! What brought about this tragedy? The fact that through all the years of the temple, everything was dependent on the Kohanim in the Temple while most of the nation looked on from afar, not involved in the service. This led to the assimilation of the Ten Tribes, for they felt no connection to anything.

The Gain of Destruction

Then came the destruction of the Temple, and from every seemingly bad thing comes something good. As the saying goes “My transgressions are my repair.” This is when the concept of prayer taking the place of sacrifices was created. The service of G-d once again became the responsibility of each individual. No longer was it only for the Priests in Jerusalem but each and every person prayed personally to G-d. A person turns his living room into his own private synagogue and forms his own private connection to G-d.

There is no need for intermediaries. Each person controls his own service of G-d. We see that specifically in exile the spiritual situation of the Jewish nation improved drastically. Like Maimonides said, “Not only the Levites alone but every person who dedicates his soul to serve G-d is holy and G-d is his.”

What is the lesson for us? In the days of the First Temple, a person could still excuse himself by saying I’m interested and willing to serve G-d but what can I do when it’s all up to the Kohain?’ But nowadays, the door is open to everyone. Every person needs to take some responsibility for the Jewish people. No need to be a Kohain or Levi, the more you do for the Jewish people, the more you will feel a personal connection to it and to your own Judaism.