



Were Jews Patriotic?

What can flags teach us about our relationship with others and with G-d?

Flags

Where did the concept of a flag come from? Every country has a flag: the Israeli flag, the British flag, the American flag. Every state has a flag, every city, every shlepper...! Where did the idea come from? After all, it's really nothing more than a piece of colored fabric flapping in the wind.

In this week's Torah portion of Bamidbar, we read about flags in the Torah for the first time.

It was the first of the month of Iyar, the month after the Jews had left Egypt. The Jews had already prepared sufficiently for receiving the Torah and building the Mishkan. Now, G-d decided to establish order in the desert.

Until then, all the Tribes had lived mixed with one another—it was one giant party. But now, G-d commanded Moshe: "Each man by his flag... shall the Sons of Israel encamp; around the Communion Tent [meaning: the Mishkan] shall they encamp."

The Mishkan was the center of the Jewish camp. All the Jews camped around it, with three Tribes on each side forming one camp. On the eastern side was the Camp of Yehudah, which was comprised of the Tribes of Yehudah, Yissachar and Zevulun. On the south side was the

Camp of Reuven, consisting of Reuven, Shimon and Gad. The west side camp consisted of Efrayim together with Menasheh and Binyomin, and on the north side we find the Camp of Dan, joined by Asher and Naftali.

Now, each of these four Camps also had its own flag—everyone who saw his Camp's flag knew where he belonged and immediately moved his tent to the Camp where he'd find his Tribe.

New Neighbors

The Midrash tells us that when Moshe heard this commandment from G-d, "He immediately was pained. He said, 'Now fighting will break out among the Tribes: If I tell the Tribe of Yehudah to camp to the east, they will say, "I can only camp to the south!"'" (Bamidbar Rabbah 2).

Picture for yourselves Moshe issuing orders to the Tribe of Yehudah to camp to the east. Now Yehudah has new neighbors: Yissachar and Zevulun. The squabbles start immediately: "We want a different side! The other side has more sunlight in the winter! And besides, we don't like our neighbors—we want to live together with a different Tribe."

It's almost like making seating arrangements at a Bar Mitzvah or wedding. Everyone knows that that's one of the hardest things to do in life—and that no matter what, there will be those who will be unhappy regardless of who you seat them with: "You seated me next to that pest?! I haven't talked to him for half a year!"

It's the same thing when it comes to selling seats at a synagogue. That's why most Chabad centers do not sell seats—because in many synagogues there is a perpetual war over who sits next to me, and more importantly, who doesn't sit next to me. You think this behavior started in 20th-Century America? Oh, no—it was always like that. That's why Moshe felt faint when he heard that he would have to start assigning places.

The Midrash continues and says, “G-d told Moshe: What difference does it make to you? They don’t need you. They know their places on their own.”

Now, how did the Tribes know their places?

Before our patriarch Yaakov passed away, he assembled his 12 sons, the Tribes of Israel, and blessed them. Then he charged them on how to serve him after his passing. As Rashi comments in the Torah portion of Vayechi on the verse “And his sons carried him”: “His sons, and not his grandsons, for thus he had charged them: ‘Let not an Egyptian carry my casket, nor any one of your sons... rather, only you.’ He then established their places: Three to the east, and so on for the four directions—and their order for the traveling camps of the flags was established here.”

Our patriarch Yaakov charged them that only his sons were to carry his casket and no one else. He even instructed them precisely who would march at the head, and so on. That’s why when Moshe told them which three Tribes are to the east, they didn’t complain—they already knew for years that those three tribes are connected to the east.

Why Flags?

But why did they need a flag? Moshe could have simply told each Tribe, “You’re to the east, you’re to the west...” Why did they need flags?

Flags are needed primarily so that others know your affiliation. True, a person doesn’t need a flag for himself. He knows he’s a patriot. But others don’t. The flag is waved up high so that everyone can see from afar that you are proud of your country. The entire concept of a flag is national pride.

But we can ask: If everyone has a flag, certainly G-d has a flag? If one

sees the Israeli flag on American soil, one knows that he's looking at the Israeli consulate or someone who has some connection to Israel. Likewise, if someone flies the American flag, it's a sign that he's an American.

Now, what is G-d's flag, by which we can know that there dwells not the Israeli embassy or the American consulate but the Shechina, the Divine Presence?

G-d's Flag

In Shir Hashirim, it says (2:4) "His banner over me is love." The flag of G-d is love. In a home where there is love, the Shechina is present. In a community where there is love the Shechina is present.

But just like a flag, love also needs to be seen by all. Lots of people claim that they love everyone. But how can you know if that is true? Look around and see how much others love them. That will be your answer.

In Ethics of the Fathers, Rabbi Chanina Ben-Dosa takes this one step further: "Anyone who is loved by people, is loved by G-d—and anyone who is not loved by people, is not loved by G-d."

Rabbi Chanina teaches us a very important rule here. It's not enough that you "love everyone." Others must love you too. If you want to know whether G-d loves you, if the Divine Presence is with you, check whether people love you too—and the more you are beloved by others below, the more you are beloved to G-d Above.

My friends: Let us not just "love everyone"—let us be loved by everyone. And then, we can be sure that G-d will show His love to us, and to the entire world around us as well.