Chabad.ORG

Unity and Difference

By Tali Loewenthal

Unity and difference are two contrasting, or even conflicting, themes of our time. On the one hand there is a quest for unity, linking together, forgetting our differences and being one. This applies in human relationships, in the business world, and is an element in international politics. On the other hand there is the sense of distinctiveness, of a unique identity, of an individual pathway and destiny.

How does this work for the Jewish people? Is there room for difference, or do we all have to be the same? Of course, there are varied communities: the Sefardi communities, which include diverse groups such as Spanish, Iraqi, Iranian and Moroccan Jews, and the Ashkenazi communities, which likewise include Lithuanian, German Jewish, Polish and Russian Jews, and so on. And yet, despite these differences, we are all one people.

There is the same dual tendency within any single community, or even within a family. Each person is an individual, with his or her unique characteristics, and at the same time, we are one together.

Our *Parshah* (Numbers 1:1-4:20) gives us a hint about this dual feature of the Jewish people. The *Parshah* begins the fourth Book of the Torah, called in English the "Book of Numbers." Although Jews often use the Hebrew name *Bamidbar* (meaning, "In the Desert") in fact an ancient Jewish name for this book is likewise "Numbers" (*Sefer Hapekudim*). The reason for this name is very simple: the Book describes how the Jewish people in the desert, led by Moses, are counted several times.

In our *Parshah* G-d tells Moses to count the people as individuals and also by their families, within their tribes. During this process, Moses and Aaron have with them twelve men, heads of each of the tribes, who are now given the name "communal leaders" (Numbers 1:16), that is: leaders not only of their individual tribes, but also of the entire community.

The counting in our *Parshah* differs from the previous counting of the Jewish people. In the earlier counting - carried out by Moses - each individual was counted by giving half a *shekel* and the total sum of *shkalim* provided a count for the entire Jewish people.[1] In our *Parshah,* the counting is also of individuals but they are now grouped by family and by tribe. Furthermore, several people - Moses, Aaron and the twelve heads of the tribes - are in charge of the counting.

Commenting on this, the Lubavitcher Rebbe suggests[2] that each tribe in fact represents a distinctive pathway in life and in service of G-d. We see this from the distinctive blessings which Moses gives each tribe at the end of his life.[3] The counting by tribe and by families within the tribes expresses the significance of being different and distinctive. At the same time, all the different pathways join together in the single, united totality of the Jewish people.

This is why the leader of each tribe is involved not only in the counting of his own tribe but also that of the entire community. Indeed, as head of a tribe he is also called a "communal leader": his responsibility extends beyond

his own Tribe, to everyone in the Jewish people.

This presents a useful paradigm for each of us today. We are each unique, with distinctive qualities. At the same time we form the totality of the Jewish people. Further, like the heads of the tribes, our responsibilities are dual: to our own selves and our own group, and also to the entirety of the Jewish people. This combination of individual distinctiveness and unity is the secret of our strength.

FOOTNOTES

1. See Exodus 30:12 and 38:25-6.

2. See Likkutei Sichot vol.23 pp.3-7.

3. See Deuteronomy chapter 33.

By Tali Loewenthal

By Dr. Tali Loewenthal, Director of Chabad Research Unit, London, UK, and a frequent contributor to the Chabad.org weekly Torah reading section; based on the teachings of the Lubavitcher Rebbe.