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What Does a Civilization Place at its Center?

In Ancient Rome, life revolved around the Coliseum. In New York City, the cultural capital of America, all roads lead to Times Square. And in London, Buckingham Palace stands as the heart of the city. These central monuments reveal the core values of each society—spectacle, commerce, and monarchy respectively.

So, what lies at the center of the Jewish Nation?

The Fulcrum of Jewish Life

In the opening of the book of Numbers, God instructs the Israelites to arrange themselves by tribe, giving each its assigned position, distinctive flag, and marching formation. But perhaps most significantly, these tribal designations all revolve around a single focal point: "The Israelites shall camp each man with his standard, under the banners of their ancestral house; they shall encamp, surrounding the Tent of Meeting."¹

Rabbi Yitzchak Arama, a 15th-century philosophical Torah commentator known as the "Akeidas Yitzchak", paints the full picture:

"When one sees the tribes in their divisions, surrounding the Mishkan, with the Levite camps between them and the Courtyard of the Mishkan, and the Courtyard surrounding the Mishkan, and the curtain within the Mishkan separating between the Outer Sanctuary and the Holy of Holies, and within the Holy of Holies, the Ark of the Covenant, and within the Ark, the Torah of God, he will understand and know that the Torah is the essence of everything; the center point around which all this majesty revolves, and he will fix in his soul that the Torah is the purpose of all actions and principles..."

To permanently embed Torah's centrality in our collective consciousness, God placed the Ark visibly, profoundly, and distinctly in the middle of the camp. Twelve tribes in four directional groups surrounded the Levites, who encircled the Tabernacle courtyard, which encompassed the

Sanctuary, which enclosed the Holy of Holies, which housed the Ark, which contained – at the very center – the Torah itself. For 40 years in the desert, our ancestors lived this visceral lesson: just as the camp organized itself around Torah, so too must every aspect of Jewish life find its meaning and purpose in relation to this sacred center.²

Separate Flags, Shared Purpose

This Torah-centered design reveals another profound dimension: the balance between unity and diversity. With Torah positioned at the center of the nation, we might expect uniformity or homogeneity to result. After all, if everyone orients themselves around a single purpose, wouldn't individual expression be quashed? Wouldn't diverse talents and inclinations be suppressed in favor of a single approved path?

The Torah's arrangement reveals precisely the opposite. God didn't demand uniformity but celebrated tribal individuality by giving each tribe its own flag, unique position, and distinctive mission corresponding to its particular strengths. Instead of diminishing individuality, the tribal formations enhanced and channeled it toward meaningful purpose.

The eastern encampment of Yehuda, Issachar, and Zebulun perfectly illustrates this balance. Zebulun's merchants excelled in commerce (their flag bore a ship), yet they channeled their prosperity to support Issachar's Torah study.³ Issachar's scholars didn't pursue knowledge in isolation; rather, their wisdom guided Yehuda's leaders who implemented Torah

principles through governance. Each tribe fulfilled its distinctive calling while simultaneously contributing to their shared Divine mission.

This ancient arrangement challenges our modern tendency to compartmentalize life. When Torah occupies our center, the artificial boundaries between "religious life" and "everyday life" dissolve. Our careers transform into vehicles for ethical conduct and supporting sacred values. Our relationships become expressions of divine principles. Our talents and interests serve as pathways to fulfill our unique purpose within Torah's encompassing framework. Nothing remains peripheral when everything connects to the center.

From Desert to Civilization

The impact of placing Torah at our center extended far beyond the desert. Throughout centuries of dispersion, exile, and persecution, our ancestors maintained their devotion to Torah as their central organizing principle. This unwavering commitment transformed not just the Jewish people but gradually revolutionized human civilization itself.

Today, we take for granted that we live in a society shaped by the Torah's values, but 3500 years ago, these values—equal justice, the sanctity of human life, ethical treatment of strangers—entered a world where human sacrifice was commonplace, justice varied based on social status,⁴ and foreigners were routinely exploited or enslaved.

This extraordinary influence has been acknowledged by some of history's most influential figures, across a remarkable spectrum of perspectives:

John Adams, America's second president, declared: "I will insist that the Hebrews have done more to civilize men than any other nation... I should believe that fate had ordained the Jews to be the most essential instrument for civilizing nations... to preserve and propagate to all mankind the doctrine of a supreme, intelligent, wise, Almighty Sovereign of the universe, which I believe to be the great essential principle of all morality, and consequently of all civilization."⁵

President Abraham Lincoln affirmed this sentiment, calling the Torah "the best gift God has given to man... but for it we could not know right from wrong."⁶

Even those who sought to destroy the Jewish people recognized our moral influence. Hitler himself chillingly admitted: "Conscience is a Jewish invention; it is a blemish like circumcision."⁷

Today, even secular Jewish communities carry Torah values in their DNA. As Albert Einstein recognized: "The pursuit of knowledge for its own sake, an almost fanatical love of justice, and the desire for personal independence—these are features of the Jewish tradition which make me thank my lucky stars that I belong to it."⁸

Getting Re-Centered

This week's Torah portion arrives just before the holiday of Shavuot, offering us a perfect time to

reflect as we prepare to celebrate receiving the Torah at Sinai. At this time, we are called to ask ourselves, "How much of my life is centered around the Torah? How might my career, relationships, and personal interests better align with its path of justice and morality?" In re-centering our lives around the Torah, we take guidance from the tribal arrangement: Zebulun's business acumen sustained Torah study, Issachar's scholarship illuminated Torah wisdom, and Yehuda's leadership implemented Torah governance. Your particular strengths—whatever they may be—similarly find their highest purpose when connected to our sacred center. As we have discovered, Torah isn't just a component of Jewish identity—it defines us and the legacy we've bestowed upon the world.

May we be successful in directing all aspects of our lives towards fulfilling the Torah in all its magnificence and glory.

Shabbat Shalom!
Avraham

1. Bamidbar 2:2
2. Rabbi Mordechai Willig of Yeshiva University offers an additional explanation: A nation with 12 tribes and 600,000 unique personalities of Jews would almost definitely be fraught with conflict, intrigue, and rebellion. Only with the centralizing values of the Torah could such a nation function and prosper in harmony and unity.
3. And these values still represented the best of society! Even the Code of Hammurabi, dated to around 1754 BCE in ancient Babylon, one of the earliest and most complete written legal codes, while advanced for its time, often prescribed severe punishments without any mandate for witnesses or monetary alternatives and included social stratification where penalties varied depending on the social status of the perpetrator and victim.
4. Letter from John Adams to François Adriaan van der Kemp, February 18, 1809
5. Remarks to the American Bible Society, 1864
6. Hermann Rauschnig, "Hitler Speaks," 1939
7. Albert Einstein, from "The World As I See It," 1934

8. Midrash (Genesis Rabbah 99:9): "Zebulun would engage in commerce, and Issachar would engage in Torah, and Zebulun would support him."



An Only Child

I once had a guest for Shabbat who had 18 brothers and sisters. Nowadays, with my wife coming from a family of 12 children, it's not as big a deal to me. But at the time, I had much to ask. One of the questions that fascinated me was how did he think his parents would feel if he disappeared for a few weeks. Would they even notice? Or perhaps he could make it back before they realized he had gone? Was he just #14, or did he feel special in any way?

I was amazed when he told me that he and every one of his siblings felt almost like an only child. Each felt that their parents loved them as though they had no other children. If he disappeared, his parents would feel no different than parents whose *only child* had disappeared.

I thought about it for a moment and realized that I feel the same myself. I have six children. Take one away, God forbid, and I wouldn't merely have five left. I would have lost an entire world. Each is special in his or her own way. One is so responsible; one is so loving; one is so smiley;

one is so full of life and one is (unfortunately for him) just like his father. They aren't five clones. They are five individuals and I love each one independently of the others.

Be it one, four or 19, each child is precious to his parents. Each is a unique world unto himself.

This idea applies with God, too. Whether 19 children, or 5 billion, there is no difference. Each and every one of us is an only child. Each one is an entire universe. Each is precious in his or her own way. God loves us, because we are each unique and special.

In this week's portion, God counts the Jewish people. He knows how many of us there are, but he wants us to know that each one matters. We are not a nation of millions. We are special individuals who together make a nation. No one is dispensable. If one of us disappears, God notices. And cares.

In the same way as 19 children of the same parents can all feel like an only child, so too 5 billion children of a single God can all feel uniquely special. And when we feel secure in the love of our parents, we have the confidence to love those around us, too.



Unified Nation

The Talmud reports that the generation of Yehuda Bar Illai represented Torah study at its best. What was so striking about that generation? The Talmud says that in that period, six people would study together under a single blanket. On one level, the Talmud means that despite having only one blanket due to harsh poverty, the people were still devoted to Torah study.

Rabbi Chaim Shmulevitz, however, offers another explanation: The only way six people could have sat together under one blanket was if everyone was looking out for each other, making sure that all are "covered." The true greatness of Yehuda Bar Ilai's generation could be found in the way they loved and respected one another.

A similar idea is expressed in the Torah itself, regarding the revelation at Mt. Sinai. The Torah describes how the Jewish People were so unified at the time of the revelation, that it was as if "one person" stood at Mt. Sinai. It was precisely because of this unity that they were worthy of receiving God's law.

Bamidbar (Numbers 1:1-4:20)

basic compendium

This theme plays a pivotal role in this week's Torah portion, Bamidbar. The parsha goes to great length to describe the Israelite encampment in the desert:

In the middle of the camp were the Levites and the sanctuary. Surrounding this center were the 12 Tribes, creating an overall shape of a square. There were three tribes in each of the four sides of the square - north, south, east and west - constituting secondary encampments.

Accompanying each tribe was a flag which had that tribe's particular insignia upon it. The colors of the flags were patterned after the colors of the stones on the High Priest's breastplate, each of which represented a different tribe.

The Midrash says that when God suggested this arrangement, Moses questioned the idea, saying, "Now there will be disputes between the tribes." Moses reasoned that once he starts specifying who travels in the East and who travels in the West, who is in front and who is in back, people are going to start arguing. Moreover, each of the different directions of the compass is associated with a different quality and blessing. The north, for instance, is associated with wealth, and the south with wisdom.

God explained to Moses that there was no need for concern. The tribes would accept the encampment arrangements for a simple reason: Years earlier, at Jacob's funeral, his 12 sons carried the coffin. The way the sons were arranged around the coffin is the same way the tribes would be arranged in the desert camp. In this way, everyone would already be clear as to his proper place. So don't worry, God tells Moses,

because when someone knows their place, there is inevitably peace and calm.

And so it was. In our parsha, after a long description of who will travel first, and who will travel last, the Torah says: "And the Jewish People did exactly as they were instructed" (Numbers 1:54).

Love and respect for each individual, and a recognition of how each contributes to the whole – is the way for our Jewish nation to achieve true greatness.

May it be so speedily in our days.



Unified Diversity

Muzafer Sherif was a Turkish born psychologist who moved to the United States for graduate school and moved back to Turkey in the 1930's to teach in Ankara University. He was imprisoned and placed in solitary confinement for criticizing the Nazi party and the Turkish government. He subsequently moved back to America, becoming a pioneering social psychologist.

He is known for one of the most famous experiments related to intergroup conflicts and resolutions. Sherif gathered 22 boys in Robbers Cave State Park in Oklahoma and divided them into two groups – the Eagles and the Rattlers. At first, the two groups did not interact with each other and naturally built their own group cohesion. In the second stage of the experiment, the two groups were placed in situations where they would have to compete for various rewards and resources. Consequently, hostility between the groups increased, engendering hatred and creating conflicts.

Finally, the groups were made to interact without competition, but this itself did not decrease the conflict. Tensions decreased and intergroup cohesion was created only after the two groups were made to work together towards a mutual goal that required them to cooperate (termed a superordinate goal).

The beginning of this week's Torah portion delineates the details of a census that God commanded Moses to take of the Jewish males over the age of twenty. The numbers presented are divided by the different tribes and the specific formation that the tribes took in the desert is described as well. The first verse communicates the exact date that God spoke to Moses, namely, the first day of the second month of the second year after they were taken out of Egypt. Rabbi Yaakov Kamenetsky asks, why is that they waited until the second year to take this census and create the tribal formations? Wouldn't it have made more sense to do this in the first year?

Rabbi Kamenetsky explains that there is a danger inherent in the tribalism that is presented in this week's Torah portion. Separating by groups and standing behind flags creates an us-versus-them mentality. When people stand in groups behind their own flags, they will favor their own group and be hostile to the other groups. One way to overcome this natural human tendency is to create a unifying, superordinate goal. In our case, that is the function of the Torah. Only with the Torah in the center can we attempt to create a healthy, cooperative group dynamic. Only with the *mishkan*, the tabernacle, in the center of the formation could the tribes march around in their own group.

This is why God waited until the second year, after the Torah was given and after the *mishkan* became the epicenter. Only then was the danger of having different tribes mitigated.

This tension between the in-group and the out-group is highlighted by Rabbi Shimshon Raphael Hirsch as well. Introducing the census (Numbers, 1:1-2), God tells Moses to count the heads of the entire congregation of Israel (*adat Bnei Yisrael*) according to their families (*lemishpechotam*) and the house of their fathers (*le-beit avotam*). Rabbi Hirsch argues that *adat Bnei Yisrael* represents the unified whole of the people in the desert. However, there is a second aspect, focusing on the families and the households. This second part represents the individual differences between families and tribes. This diversity and uniqueness is important, but can be dangerous if not expressed within the context of a unified whole.

As we prepare for Shavuot, may we merit finding our own unique voices and contributions to the Jewish people, while not allowing these differences to create divisiveness. This can be accomplished if our focal point is serving God, not ourselves or our groups, and then we can stand unified in heart and mind as we accept the Torah.

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