

A Teaching from Rabbi Weintraub:

Being Identical Is Special

Shabbat Naso | 14 Sivan; June 5-6, 2009

As the Tabernacle is dedicated, in Numbers 7, the prince of each of the twelve tribes is moved to bring his own, voluntary gift. Curiously, each of the twelve offers a precisely identical contribution: one silver bowl, one silver basin, both filled with fine flour and oil, one gold ladle filled with incense, one young bull, six rams, six sheep, six one he-goats, two cattle, and five rams. Moreover, the Torah devotes 72 verses to describing, in minute detail, each offering. What was the point of this repetition in a text wherein, the Rabbis believed, not even a single letter was superfluous?

Rabbi Yisrael Meir Ha-Kohen, the Chafetz Chayim, the early 20th Century Polish scholar and ethicist, concluded that in this voluntary campaign no one prince felt the urge to outshine the others. Like many political leaders, they had plenty of ego and ambition. However, at the moment of the Tabernacle's dedication, the individual's need for recognition was subsumed.

Jewish observance and Jewish life are all part of a pattern of Avodah, of service. It is natural and even praiseworthy to want recognition. We need to know that we are behaving properly and that our efforts are positively integrated into the community. However, the highest ideal is disinterested service. If we can contribute without the need for approval, we will be less damaged by the judgments of others, and we will rejoice more intrinsically in our giving.

Paradoxically, it is sometimes through devotion to a community that the most bitter disputes surface. All of us want the welfare of our community, but we often hold, passionately, different ideas about how to secure it. When we're getting a little too excited, convinced about the rightness of our contribution or slighted by a lack of kavod, honor, it helps to step back for a minute. Is the argument getting anywhere, or are we just jockeying for position and fanning disputes that we know will not be settled? The prophet Isaiah, in describing the ideal religious person, wrote "he shall not cry, not lift up, nor cause his voice to be heard in the street. A bruised reed shall he not break... and the dimly burning wick shall he not quench; (yet) He shall make the right to go forth..." (Isaiah 42:2-4) In the calculus of the spiritual world, quiet and unobtrusiveness can be the accoutrements of the powerful. If you are really trying to influence people, it sometimes help to honor, even mimic, the contribution of others, to turn your own mike down, and to lead by example, not by preachment.