

Dear Chavraya,

I am not a flag waver. I am wary of how quickly flag waving becomes idolatrous, an end in itself. I worry that flags too often represent a narrow view of the world, a view that is myopic in its inability to see beyond one's own borders, beyond oneself. Throughout history, when there has been a flag in one hand, too often there has been a sword in the other.

It is ironic, then, that I am so drawn to the theme of flags in this week's Torah portion, *Parashat B'midbar*, the first portion in the fourth book of the Torah. The portion opens with a census, emphasizing that each person counts. Following the census we are told, *Every person shall camp next to their standard, each designated with the insignia of their ancestral house, so shall the children of Israel camp, surrounding at a distance the Ohel Mo'ed/Tent of Appointed Meeting.*

The banner of each of the twelve tribes conveys something of its unique identity, as expressed long ago by Jacob in his blessing for each of his sons, the progenitors of the tribes. On the flag of Judah, for instance, is the lion and scepter that represent that tribe's leadership. On the flag of Z'vulun is a ship, representing Jacob's blessing that Z'vulun will "dwell at a bay of seas and become a harbor for ships." Naftali is blessed as a gazelle-like messenger, thus its flag is adorned with a leaping gazelle.

As described in *Parashat B'midbar*, whenever Israel camped along the way of its desert journey the tribes arranged themselves in a square, three to a side, with the *Mishkan/Sanctuary* in the center. The flag of each tribe celebrates that tribe's unique identity and affirms its presence among the other tribes, each with its own unique identity. All of the tribes are gathered together around a central purpose that transcends but includes their individual identities. Within each tribe, the individual is not subsumed by the collective, but is an essential part of its purpose. Chassidic commentaries give great emphasis to the importance of each one within the whole, whether the single unit is one person or one tribe. The Slonimer Rebbe teaches that everyone has her or his own camp and banner; *that is, one's own unique task and purpose in the world.*

Strong in our own identity, we are then able to reach out to others without feeling threatened, many banners proudly flying together. I think of the flags of so many nations in front of the UN building in New York, all fluttering on the same breeze, as though encircling the tent of meeting. Rather than marking a line in the desert sands that others dare not cross, the flags of *Parashat B'midbar* celebrate individual identity as the starting point from which to reach out to embrace others in common purpose.

In "Song of Songs" the beloved sings, *v'diglo alai ahavah/And his banner of love was over me.* Understood metaphorically, God's banner is love. May that be our banner too, a flag of love extended to all in peace.

Shabbat shalom,
Rabbi Victor