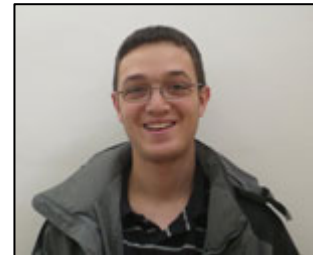




## A STUDENT'S PERSPECTIVE

by Eitan Cooper



*"The people saw that Moshe was late descending from the mountain. So the people assembled around Aharon and said to him, "Come! Make for us gods which shall go at the head of us because we don't know what became of this man, Moshe, who brought us up from the land of Egypt." (Shemot 32:1)*

In last week's parsha, *Ki Tissa*, *Bnei Yisrael* felt fearful, anxious and overwhelmed. While Hashem's numerous revealed miracles had inspired *Bnei Yisrael* to firmly proclaim "*Naaseh V'Nishmah!*" ("We will do and then listen!"), they now deeply yearned for an external vehicle through which to connect to Hashem- one which was not found as a result of Moshe's long, mysterious absence. *Bnei Yisrael* panicked, and assembled around Aharon. Many feel that the infamous sin of the golden calf was the result of *Bnei Yisrael's* mistaken attempt to connect to Hashem using their own means.

*Parshat Vayakehl* begins with a second assembly of the people: "*Moshe assembled the entire community of Israel and said to them, these are the words that the Lord commanded you to do them.*" This assembly comes right after the giving of the second *luchot* (tablets). Moshe has just spent forty days on Mt. Sinai, and he is now addressing the people for the first time since descending from the mountain.

There are some interesting parallels worth noting between these two assemblies. Both verses use a form of the Hebrew word *kahal*, or congregation. Jewish tradition teaches us that we need ten men in order to form a minyan, which makes up a *kahal*. Nine men standing in a room are just a group of people, but when we have ten or more we become a united front, with a common, higher purpose in mind. It is clear that *Bnei Yisrael's* assembly around Aharon served a higher purpose, however misguided it might have been. It is also clear that Moshe's assembly of the people was meant to serve a higher purpose. But what was it?

In order to answer this question, greater attention must be paid to the wording in the *pesukim*. When the people gathered around Aharon, the Hebrew word "*am*" (nation) is used. This word is frequently found in *Tanach*, and often refers simply to a group of people who have external concerns which are contrary to what Hashem desires. "*The nation complained (Shemot 17:3)*" or "*They are a stiff necked nation (Shemot 34:8)*" are two examples. The usage of the word in our *pasuk* implies that *Bnei Yisrael* was acting as a group of people who were not conscious of their duties to Hashem. While the higher purpose they served was to connect to Hashem, they went about it in completely the wrong way.

Moshe's second assembly of the people uses the Hebrew phrase "*Et kol adat Bnei Yisrael*" ("The entire community of Israel"). This phrase is not as frequent as the word "*am*," and is often used within the context of *Bnei Yisrael* engaging in a holy act which affirms their belief in G-d- whether this be through temple service or verbal expression. For example, "Speak to the entire assembly of the children of Israel and say to them: You shall be holy, for holy am I, Hashem your G-d" (*Vayikra 19:2*) or "From the assembly of the children of Israel he shall take two he-goats for a sin offering..." (*Vayikra 16:5*).

It emerges that the higher purpose of Moshe's assembly of the people was to unite them in the observance of Hashem's laws. And it is no accident that Moshe begins his address by describing *Shabbat*. For it was right before Moshe descended Mt. Sinai, with the first, soon to be broken tablets in his hand that Hashem told Moshe to inform the people about *Shabbat* and its significance. It was only because of the sin of the golden calf that Moshe never had a chance to relate Hashem's message. Now, after the people have been forgiven, Moshe assembles them and informs them that their higher purpose is not to serve Hashem through their own means, as they had thought. Rather it is to bring about a manifestation of Hashem in this world, in the way that G-d wants them to. *Shabbat* is the perfect example of this.

In early September, twenty of us gathered in JFK airport and boarded a plane headed for Israel. Emotions ran high; some of us felt anxious, some fearful and some ecstatic. For most of us, this was the first time we would be living independently- free from the watchful eyes of our parents. All of us had no clear idea of where we were going when we landed (both literally and spiritually). Different factors motivated every one, and it seemed that all anyone had in common was that they were a part of what was to be called "Orayta."

In the beginning of this year, we were an *am*. While we all knew that we were serving a higher purpose, we may not have gone about it in the right way. But now, six months into the year and almost at the end of a long period of learning, the Orayta students have become a strong, united, G-d conscious *edah*. This was apparent two weeks ago while davening at the Kotel. It was apparent during Purim. It is apparent every day of the week, while learning in the *beit midrash*. May we all be privileged enough to continue to enjoy the empowerment which comes from experiencing an *edah* in action.

Shabbat Shalom,

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