

Human Dignity, not Bureaucratic Indignity: Thoughts on Parashat Bemidbar

In his essay "The Community" (Tradition, 17:2), Rabbi Joseph B. Soloveitchik underscored the dignity of each individual: "To recognize a person is not just to identify him physically. It is more than that: it is an act of identifying him existentially, as a person who has a job to do, that only he can do properly. To recognize a person means to affirm that he is irreplaceable. To hurt a person means to tell him that he is expendable, that there is no need for him. The halakha equated the act of publicly embarrassing a person with murder."

In our technological and bureaucratic world, it is easy to lose sight of the dignity of the individual. We are often reduced to i.d. numbers, or to long lists of clients/patients/customers where our particular personalities are of little account. We are shuffled through the system along with thousands of other faceless people.

Rabbi Soloveitchik pointed out that we need to be careful to stay alert to the humanity of those with whom we deal. This is true not only in general interpersonal relationships, but also in matters of halakha.

Historically, when people had halakhic questions or issues, they brought them to their local synagogue rabbi. The rabbi knew them, knew their families, knew the context of their lives. Since there was a personal bond between the individual and the rabbi, there was also honest communication.

In recent years, the halakhic world has undergone increasing bureaucratization. An Israeli rabbi recently lectured a group of American rabbis, telling us that Jews in Israel often lack a strong personal tie to their rabbi. The rabbi is appointed by the Rabbanut, and the rabbi frequently doesn't even live in the community he is supposed to serve. He is a religious functionary paid by the government. He gets paid whether or not he develops close relationships with members of the community.

When the rabbinate becomes a bureaucratic system, it invariably becomes like other bureaucracies. It becomes more distant from the public; it sees people as case numbers; it needs to "process" cases, rather than spend the time and effort to really understand the people who come before them.

The centralization of the rabbinate--whether in Israel or the diaspora--ultimately depersonalizes the halakhic system. We have dayyanim passing judgment in cases of conversion, Jewish status, agunah etc., who have no personal connection with the people whose lives are radically affected by their decisions. We have posekim who argue the fine points of halakha based on their halakhic tomes--but who don't look into the eyes and don't hear the voices of the very people they are supposed to serve. Rabbis issue rulings on conversions--even if they have seldom or never actually worked with a convert, or experienced the spiritual or personal struggles of the convert. Rabbinic courts "process cases" of marriage and divorce, without knowing much about the inner lives of those whose lives are being powerfully transformed.

Halakha works best when it is most human and humane. It is most meaningful when the rabbis and the laymen know each other and understand each other. When local rabbis feel unable to solve the issues that are brought to them, they can turn to other rabbis for guidance. When technical matters such as gittin are required, the local rabbi should be there to help his congregants through the process.

In an increasingly depersonalized world, the religious community needs to keep focused on the dignity of the individual.

This week's Torah portion describes a census that took place among the Israelites in the wilderness. A census can be the ultimate depersonalization process: it is interested in a head count, not on the nature of the people whose heads are being counted. Yet, the Torah goes out of its way to insist that those being counted should not be treated as numbers. They were to be counted "by their families, by their fathers' houses, according to the number of names." Even in this bureaucratic procedure, each individual was to be seen as part of a family and was to be counted by name. Each was a real human being, and the Torah did not want the census takers to forget this essential fact.

Religious life demands keen sensitivity to the uniqueness of each person. Halakha functions best when our full humanity is recognized and respected. The halakhic system must foster human dignity, not bureaucratic indignity.

*** THOUGHTS ON JERUSALEM AS CAPITAL OF ISRAEL: <https://www.jewishideas.org/blog/jerusalem-capital-israel-american-president-has-finally-acknowledged-obvious>

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