

Parshat Chayei Sara

Achdut of the Tribes

Michael Stein

Johannesburg, South Africa



At the end of this week's Parsha, the Torah lists the descendants of Yishmael and concludes: "These are the descendants of Yishmael, and these are their names ... twelve princes for [each] nation" (Bereishit 25:16).

Contrary to the children of Yishmael, each of which formed a "nation," we have the twelve *shevatim* (tribes) which descended from Yaakov that always remained together. The Maharal in *Gevurot Hashem* (Perek 13) compares Yaakov Avinu and his family to a tree: Yaakov, of course, being the *shoresh* (root), while his sons are similar to the branches of the tree. A branch is not a separate entity of the tree but merely an offshoot, which loses its source of nourishment when cut from the tree. This is also the meaning of the word "*shevet*" which means "offshoot." As much as the tribes may be distinct from each other in many respects, they nevertheless can never split away and form their own nation since the common denominator between them remains.

The Maharal further writes that Bnei Yisrael were created for the glory of Hashem in this world and he indicates the pasuk, "*Am zu tehilati yesapeiru* – This nation I have created, My praise it will tell." (Yeshaya 43:21) Since the main glory of Hashem in this world is that He is one and there is none other, therefore if we wish to give Him glory – then it makes sense that the best that we can do is to proclaim His Oneness. The Gematria of the word "zu" is 13, which is the number used to describe Hashem's unity. There were actually thirteen tribes (if one counts Ephraim and Menashe as two separate tribes) and in the word "*echad*", the *alef* corresponds to Levi (singled out from the rest of Bnei Yisrael for Avodah in the Mishkan/Beis Hamikdash); the *chet* corresponds to the eight remaining tribes born from Rachel and Leah; and the *dalet*, to the sons of the two maidservants. The purpose, therefore, of the thirteen tribes in this world is to stand as testimony of Hashem's unity.

The obvious question now is, why? Why do we say that the thirteen tribes serve as testimony to Hashem's unity? The Maharal brings the Gemara in Pesachim (56a), which relates the episode when Yaakov Avinu was lying on his deathbed. He was on the verge of revealing to his sons the time that Mashiach is supposed to arrive, when his Ruach Hakodesh was taken from him. At this Yaakov Avinu trembled, muttering his concerns that perhaps, like his forefathers before him, he too had produced an evil son not worthy of hearing the prophecy. Upon hearing this, his sons immediately proclaimed, "*Shema Yisrael Hashem Elokeinu Hashem echad*," with which Yaakov Avinu was comforted. From this we see that clearly it was the brothers who were the first to accept the yoke of heaven in this world. It would seem that the brothers were the first able to proclaim Hakadosh Baruch Hu's unity because of their *achdut*.

The point is, that it was solely through the brothers' *achdut* that they were able to proclaim "Shema Yisrael" as one person with one heart!