Shepherd-Consciousness

By Fivel Yedidya Glasser, with contributions from Rabbi Chanan Morrison

Tu b'Shevat, the Jewish New Year of the Trees, is a good time to reflect on our relationship and responsibility to our own selves and to the natural world. Reflection is not always easy, especially in this fast-paced world. But we can learn something about reflection, and even about our own souls, by studying our ancestors.

Our ancestors were shepherds. The Torah tells us that our forefathers, as well as Moshe Rebbeinu, Rachel Immeinu and King David all herded goats and sheep. And in the Torah portion of Vayeishev we see that Joseph (*Yosef*) also worked as a shepherd alongside his brothers.[1] The greatest of our early Jewish leaders chose this profession, a livelihood scorned by surrounding cultures. Years after Yosef's exile to Egypt and rise to viceroy of the king of Egypt, when his brothers came to him in exile, Yosef presented them to Pharaoh, the king of Egypt. The question that most interested the king was: "What is your occupation?" "We are shepherds," they replied to Pharaoh, "like our fathers before us."[2] Shepherding was not a respected occupation in Egypt, and Pharaoh relegated Yosef's family to the far-off land of Goshen.

Why did so many of the original leaders of the Jewish people choose to become shepherds? Rabbi Abraham Isaac Kook, the first chief rabbi of pre-state Israel, explains that the advantage of shepherding may be found in the secluded lifestyle of the shepherd.[3] While engaged with flocks, ambling through the hills and valleys, the shepherd is cut off from the noisy distractions of society, thus enabling ample time for inner reflection. Additionally, the labor is not intensive. Unlike farming, shepherding does not require one to exert a great deal of energy in mundane matters. While engaged with flocks, ambling through the hills and valleys, the shepherd is cut off from the noisy distractions of society, thus enabling ample time for inner reflection. Nevertheless, the shepherd *is* concerned with the actual physical needs of the flock. A shepherd does not live in an ivory tower, immersed in artificial philosophies detached from life; rather, the shepherd is constantly engaged with the real world, seeking water, shade and good fodder for the animals. The thoughts and musings of the shepherd may be sublime and lofty, but they cannot take the shepherd away from the task at hand.

This explanation, however, requires further examination, especially for Rabbi Kook, who emphasizes the importance of the individual's connection and contribution to society throughout his writings. What is the value of seclusion and solitude? Is the desire for solitude a positive trait? How do we balance reclusive behavior with the greater ideals of refining humanity and elevating the universe? In other words: *Is the ideal to connect to the world, or to disconnect?*

Let us first examine through the teachings of Rabbi Kook what occurs when one engages in the inner-reflection that exemplifies "shepherd consciousness":

“The greater the soul, the more it must struggle in order to find itself; the more the depths of the human soul are hidden from the conscious mind. One must have extended solitude and *hitbodedut* (self-reflective prayer), examining ideas, deepening thoughts, and expanding the mind, until finally the soul will truly reveal itself, unveiling some of the splendor of its brilliant inner light.”[4]

In order to cultivate one's own greatness, it is necessary to develop a deep soul-awareness. This is best accomplished through silence and isolation. When one truly engages in such a practice, it will inevitably have a positive influence both in one's own life and also on one's surroundings. The intent of this withdrawal is ultimately to have a positive impact on the larger world, and not for mere personal spiritual fulfillment.

The goal is not to engage in a personal spiritual path that is disassociated from the rest of the world. Rather, the aspiration is the opposite – the solitude of the shepherd ultimately enables him to reconnect and even provide for the larger world on a spiritual level.

The silence of the shepherd is not just the absence of speech. It is a sublime language of silence, flowing from an outpouring of the soul, a vehicle of *ruach hakodesh* (Divine inspiration). The depths of the soul demand silence. Silence is full of life, revealing treasures from the beauty of wisdom.

Yet today's hi-tech, DSL-connected world does not leave enough space for an individual to hear silence. Even with wireless access, are we able to access the inner recesses of our own being?

Rebbe Nachman of Breslov teaches that a Jew should spend one hour a day in *hitbodedut*.[5] This means that every Jewish person should set aside a significant period of time to simply be with G-d. Not to pray formally, study or engage in *mitzvoth*. Rather, to simply be. It can include mundane conversation with G-d, or soul-wrenching self-analysis. In this sacred time we can come to taste the Divine encounter that our forefathers taught us through their example as shepherds. This one hour of being with G-d “of simply being” will come to inform how we are and what we do in the world.

When we are too caught up in experiencing the world without “shepherd consciousness” we tend to make decisions from our own narrow, "get-ahead" reality. When we focus too much on "doing," without making time for "being," that is to say, communing with the Divine, we automatically make decisions that transform the earth in negative ways. This is the source of many of the environmental problems we face today. A society that is driven by consumption and industrial development can overlook deforesting the rainforests or irrevocably and negatively impacting the climate. It is precisely the accessing of our inner selves that enables us to encounter the larger picture of our own reality.

Much of today’s environmental crisis stems from laziness, detachment and simply cutting corners, not malicious destruction. If everyone, from the average consumer to the corporate CEO, dedicated time each day to rekindle their own inner-potential as vehicles

for G-d in the world, their use of the natural world would be informed by their relationship with the Creator of the natural world. It does not really matter if one is controlling a multi-national corporation or running a household, the reality is that mindfulness of the bigger picture is an essential tool for any individual who cares about the world in which we live.

We do not each need to become shepherds to learn the lesson of "shepherd consciousness." A simple commitment to withdraw from the world for a brief period and engage the more spiritual realms will provide us with a broader perspective on our own lives and the decisions we make. To put it in other words, we need to focus on being human beings, not human doings. If we are to stand a chance of returning to ecological balance, we need to regain the inner spiritual balance and clarity of vision of our ancestors.

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[1] Gen. 37:2
[2] Gen. 47:3
[3] The following ideas are based on and adapted from Rabbi Kook's Ein Eyah, vol. 4, pp. 144-145 and Orot HaKodesh vol. 3, pp. 267,269-274 ; vol. 2, pp. 439-41 (Mosad HaRav Kook Publishers, Jerusalem).
[4] *Orot HaKodesh, vol. 3, pp. 270*
[5] Likutei Moharan, second half, Torah 25

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