



**THE PERSON**

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**IN THE PARSHA**

# Uniformity and Uniqueness

One of the interesting paradoxes of human life is our tendency to copy one another and to try to “fit in” with friends and acquaintances, while simultaneously trying to be distinct from others, and to be our “own person.”

The pressures of conformity are very strong in all human societies. People who are different are often treated as outcasts. And each of us determines our behavior with an eye toward others’ opinions. We want to be part of the group, part of the crowd.

The pressures that human groups—large and small—exert upon each of us result not only in conformity, but in uniformity. Groups demand that all members act in accordance with their norms and its standards. Behavior which breaks the mold

of uniformity is seen as threatening, even bizarre.

And yet, we all feel the need to assert our uniqueness, our own precious individuality.

One of my personal favorite cartoons shows a crowd of penguins, looking identical, all black and white. In the center of the horde is one penguin with a barely noticeable red bow tie. The cartoon’s caption has that penguin saying, “I got to be me.”

Obviously, conformity is necessary for a society to function efficiently, and to maintain its equilibrium. Individual self-expression is also necessary, to introduce new coping methods into the social process.

There are dangers to both tendencies, that which demands uniformity, and that which allows for the individual’s urge for autonomy and self-assertion.

Countless times in history, we have witnessed terrible dangers intrinsic to crowd behavior. We have seen the negative effects of cults, which encourage blind conformity to group norms. We have seen entire nations unquestioningly following cruel calls for the genocide of targeted populations.

We have seen the urge to be different result in equally harmful and dangerous behavior. Individuals who just want to be noticed will resort to serial murders of innocents, or to venting their rage by spraying a school campus with bullets. Self-expression carried to the extreme.

Apparently, there are good sides and bad

In loving memory of  
**Clara Horowitz a”h**  
On her 22nd yahrtzeit - ח סיון  
*from Mina and Howard Millendorf  
Sharon, Shlomo, Elior, Amiad,  
and Yagel Rabinowitz*

sides to both social conformity and individualistic behavior. The secret lies in the balance between the two.

In the Torah portion, *Parshat Naso*, even the casual reader will be troubled by the repetitive description of the offerings of the twelve tribal princes. Each of them contributes an absolutely identical set of celebratory gifts to the tabernacle. The uniformity of the twelve sets of gifts is absolute. It seems as if each of the twelve princes strove to totally conform to the others, and none dared defy the standards of the rest of the group. An example of conformity, if there ever was one.

The congregants in the synagogue who hear the Torah reader repetitively chant the monotonous lists of contributions often feel bored and ask, “Why the repetition, and why the uniformity?”

Here, the rabbis of the *Midrash* help us out. They take a different, deeper, and more perceptive view. Motivated by the same discomfort as today’s *Torah* listener, they exclaim, “Their gifts are all identical, but each has his own unique intention.”

Although the gifts all shared common explicit language, the thoughts and emotions behind each gift differed from prince to prince. Each lent a different *kavanah*, a distinct unspoken meaning, to his gifts. And that meaning was based upon the unique nature of each prince and the tribe he represented. The gifts were all the same; the underlying intentions were as different as one can imagine. The lyrics were identical;

the melody, different.

The rabbis speculate at some length as to the nature of these implicit intentions. They wonder as to how the prince of the tribe of Reuben might have expressed his tribe’s uniqueness in contradistinction to the prince of the tribe of Simeon, and Levi, and Judah, and so forth.

All human societies contain the tension between the pressure to conform and the inner urge to be distinctive. Religious societies contain that tension all the more. Judaism, for example, requires conformity to an elaborate set of behavioral guidelines. The casual observer of a group of Jews at prayer, or at the Passover *Seder* table, or circling the *bimah* with their palm fronds during the holiday of Succoth, will see a group of people who seem to be obsessively imitating each other.

But the observer who is familiar with the inner lives of those who comprise that group of Jews will realize that each person’s prayer is different and reflective of his or her unique experience. Everyone around the *Seder* table is responding to different religious memories, and each of those who are circling the *bimah* is doing so with a very distinctive and unique set of religious emotions.

If there is a lesson to be gained from this perspective of our *parsha*, it is this: Religious behavior calls for a great deal of uniformity, but also insists that each individual draw from his or her own wellspring of inspiration.

We all must be the same, yet we all must be different. This paradox is true of all human societies. It is especially true of the society of Jews. ■

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