

“The Bnei Yisrael shall camp, each man by his banner according to the insignias of their fathers’ household.” (2:2)

The tribes camped around the Mishkan in a manner designated by Hashem. They were organized into formations of three tribes each. Their place around the Mishkan corresponded to the places which Yaakov Avinu designated to his sons when he instructed them on how to escort his bier to its final resting place. The Moinistritcher Rebbe notes that Parashas Bamidbar, which includes the chapter detailing the order of the degalim, banners, is always read on the Shabbos immediately prior to Shavuot. He posits that this is appropriate, especially given the fact that one of the forty-eight qualities by which Torah is acquired is ha'makir es mekomo, being a person who recognizes his own place. In the order of the banners, each tribe took its designated place in accordance with Hashem's dictate. Indeed, as the Sefas Emes comments, there might have been some individuals who took offense at this pre-designation. Undoubtedly, there were some among the tribes who felt that they were superior in wisdom and in their Torah knowledge to some of the Leviim. They might have contended – and even demanded – a closer spot to the Mishkan than those Leviim who were inferior to them. The Torah however, tells us that this did not occur. They assumed the position given to them by Hashem. The only democracy in those days was determined by Hashem.

What is the meaning of knowing one's place, and why is this considered a significant quality for the student of Torah? In the Mishnah in Pirkei Avos 6:6 the Tanna lists forty-eight qualities, or steps which lead to an individual's acquisition of Torah. These are forty-eight endeavors, matters that require work, application and perseverance with one's whole being. One who masters these forty-eight steps to Torah has achieved the zenith – he has acquired Torah. It is not easy. It is a long, perhaps difficult, road that can only be mastered with determination and commitment to achieving its goal.

The commentators note a difference in syntax in the Mishnah. For the first twenty-four steps, the Tanna lists what seems to be character traits that the Torah student must acquire if he is to succeed in his quest. In the Hebrew, each quality has the letter “bais” as a prefix, meaning “by” or “with” – e.g., with reverence, by humility, by cheerfulness, etc. When the Tanna lists the remaining qualities, each one begins with the letter “hay”. Thus, ha'makir es mekomo, one who recognizes his place, implies that the following qualities are not qualities to be gained, but are traits already in one's possession. The resulting impression is that there are actually only twenty-four qualities to be gained and developed through deliberate, conscious effort. Until this point, the road to Torah mastery has been uphill. The rest of the journey will be downhill. Having acquired the previous twenty-four traits, the emerging Torah scholar, whose character has thus far been refined by the Torah, will become one who knows his place. Intuitively, he will realize his proper role in relationship with those around him, his privileges as Torah scholar and consequent responsibilities. Among those greater than he, he will keep silent. When he is the one who is the greater scholar, he will step forward and speak his mind, taking the lead.

Rabbi Shmuel m'Ozedah explains that it is a rare individual who can acquire more good traits than those heretofore mentioned. To know one's place means to know oneself. How difficult it is to look at ourselves in the mirror and see what is really there, not merely what we want to see. Few people are capable of evaluating the true significance and value of their achievements, uninfluenced by those who flatter them and unmoved by public opinion. It is a natural tendency to overestimate one's achievements. Indeed, self-criticism is one of the more difficult skills to acquire. On the other hand, one should not be overly humble, allowing anyone and everyone to step over him.

Right from the onset of our People's nationhood it was essential that everyone literally be put in his place, realizing that one's value is not determined by his place on the mizrach vont, eastern wall, which is normally reserved for nobility. One's value is determined by his ability to carry out his individual role in the scheme of life. Knowing our place in the scheme of things helps us to concentrate better on the Torah and its precepts, rather than on our foolish egos.