Becoming a Religious Specialist:Thoughts for Matot-Masei

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By
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Rabbinic literature includes the names and teachings of many great and well-known sages. Yet, the rabbi who is mentioned most often in our liturgy is Rabbi Hananya ben Akashya—an obscure figure about whom we know almost nothing. We quote him at the end of our Musaf service, before the kaddish; and after every public Torah study session, to introduce the recitation of kaddish.

“Rabbi Hananya ben Akashya says: The Holy One blessed be He wanted to increase the merit of Israel; therefore He increased the Torah and mitzvoth for them”. This one statement is Rabbi Hananya’s claim to immortality; this is what he has left to posterity. Without this statement, he would be totally forgotten. Why has this statement proven so meaningful to the Jewish people?

Rabbi Hananya offered a positive perspective on Judaism. While some might complain that having so many commandments is a burden, Rabbi Hananya taught that these commandments are actually blessings for us. The more Torah and mitzvoth that we have, the more opportunities we have to perform good and productive deeds. Rabbi Hananya’s words reflect enthusiasm about embracing Torah and mitzvoth as a great privilege and honor, not as a heavy responsibility.

Rabbi Eliezer Azikri, of 16th century Safed, echoed Rabbi Hananya’s teaching. We received many mitzvoth and are supposed to observe all of them. The wide variety of mitzvoth, though, provides each individual with the opportunity of becoming a “specialist” in at least one mitzvah. There are so many mitzvoth from which to choose-- certainly we can each find one area of mitzvoth that is particularly suited to our personalities and spiritual needs. We can each excel in at least one mitzvah e.g. hospitality, charity, visiting the sick, prayer, Torah study, business ethics, Shabbat observance etc.

Rabbi Hananya was not only giving us a positive attitude toward Torah and mitzvoth, but was teaching us that we each have a role to play in the fulfillment of the commandments and ideals of the Torah. We can each find something in Torah that speaks directly to us and brings out the very best in us. Rabbi

Hananya’s singular specialty was his understanding of the power of Torah and its appeal to the unique character of each person. There is room for every individual to make a singular contribution and to provide an inspiring example to others.

This week’s Torah reading, concluding the book of Bemidbar, closes with a reminder: “These are the commandments and the ordinances which the Lord commanded by the hand of Moses…”
Keeping Rabbi Hananya’s words in mind, these words are uplifting, happy and challenging.

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