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ESSAY

achdus & redemption

ACHDUS IS HEBREW for “unity.” When people talk about the unity of the Jewish people, they use the word “achdus.” Every nation comes into existence because of achdus. Every nation only remains in existence because of achdus. America is not called “The UNITED States of America” for no reason. You know, “United we stand, divided we fall,” etc.

That is why even though the official beginning of Jewish nationhood is said to have occurred while in Egypt, it really occurred at Mt. Sinai. As Rashi comments:

They traveled from Refidim and came to the Sinai Desert, and they camped in the desert. They (writ-

ten: he) camped opposite the mountain. (Shemos 19:2)

HE camped opposite the mountain: “k’ish echad, b’leiv echad”—like a single person with a single heart. (Rashi)

THAT was achdus. THAT was national unity. And, THAT was the first and last time we ever achieved such a level of it. After that, as Rashi continues, the Jewish people quarreled all the time, and have constantly fractured throughout history. Probably no nation in the history of mankind has subdivided into as many groups and as many times as the Jewish people have.

The Torah shares in the blame. It demands personal spiritual excellence, which can easily lead to the criticism and even rejection of others. After all, God Himself has showed us His wrath for not following Torah. How are we supposed to like those at whom He shows HIS anger?

It also fosters insecurity. How is a person who thinks they are doing enough to serve God supposed to feel when they stand next to someone who seems to be doing twice as much? Sometimes the result is inspiration to try harder, often it is resentment of the other person, which turns into anger and eventually, hatred.

From the other side as well. Seeing others take Torah less seriously than they “should,” Torah Protectors become defensive—on behalf of God, on behalf of Torah, and on behalf of themselves. They eventually perceive

disregarders of Torah as an “enemy,” and consider themselves at war with them. No chance of achdus THERE.

History is also to blame. Prophecy ended 2,330 years ago. We haven’t heard from God DIRECTLY for over two millennia now. Making matters a LOT worse, the Jewish people have been persecuted countless times and exiled countless times to different places in the world. For a nation that depends upon an UNBROKEN chain of transmission to maintain the authenticity of Torah, this is bound to result in a lot of confusion.

And has. Today, about three-quarters of the world Jewish population is not religious. The remaining one-quarter splinters into many different approaches to Torah life and the service of God, some of which ignore some parts of Torah while observing others. Even within “mainstream” Judaism there is dissension, not with respect to the mitzvos but with respect to how best to observe them. Some places can’t achieve achdus in their own Bais Midrash!

It’s hard to know what God thinks about all of this. We know that He LOVES achdus, but we also know that He HATES falsehood. He REALLY hates falsehood. After all, His “seal” is “Truth.”¹ But so was Ya’akov Avinu’s, and he deceived his father and “stole” the blessings, and God had no problem with THAT.

To say that history has been anomalous is an understatement, especially JEWISH history. As a matter of fact, really weird things have been recorded in history. Shaul HaMelech tried constantly to execute the young

¹Yoma 69b.

Dovid, an ancestor of Moshiach. Yet when Dovid HaMelech celebrated his nemesis's demise, God told him:

“Had you been Shaul and he were Dovid, I would have destroyed many Dovid before him. Although I decreed that Shaul's kingdom would not continue, as an individual he was far greater and more important than you!” (Moed Katan 16b)

The Talmud tells us that God wanted to make Chizkiah HaMelech the Moshiach.² But, it also tells us that God wanted to kill Chizkiah 15 years earlier because he wouldn't have children knowing that one of them was going to steer the country to idol worship.³ So Chizkiah married the righteous daughter of the prophet Yeshayahu and STILL had Menashe who fulfilled the prophecy Chizkiah had feared.

Whose army was more righteous, that of Dovid HaMelech or that of Achav? Obviously the soldiers of Dovid HaMelech were far more righteous than those of Achav, who rebelled against God. Yet, the Talmud says, Achav's army, unlike Dovid HaMelech's, did not suffer casualties in war. Why? Because, the Talmud says, Achav's soldiers did not speak loshon hara about one another!⁴

It's not easy. There is so much to make one Jew different from another. Finding something derogatory to

² Sanhedrin 94b.

³ Brochos 10a.

⁴ Pe'ah 4b.

say about a fellow Jew is easy. Not saying it is the really difficult part. The person who passes such a test is very praiseworthy.

Furthermore, we are told by the Talmud, that we have an obligation to judge others to the side of merit.⁵ Before you assume someone has done the “wrong” thing, assume they have done the right thing, until you find out otherwise. To what extent? To a great extent, the Talmud says.

This is not talking only about people who usually do the right thing. It is also talking about people who are known to do the wrong thing. There are definitely evil people in the world who, in spite of the “good” reason for the way they have turned out, must be treated as evil people. But, there is a big difference between people who mean well but do “bad,” and people who mean to do bad. Even though a person may not realize that they are doing the wrong thing, God does.

Many profound lessons emerged out of the Holocaust, but one of the most profound was how ALL Jews, regardless of religious affiliation, were reduced to mere numbers tattooed on their arms. The Nazis did not distinguish one Jew from another because of their religious belief or garb. They treated each Jew in the same subhuman manner, even removing anything that might make one Jew appear different from another. It was an incredible level of achdus, imposed from the “outside.”

It's the way God looks at the Jewish nation, in terms of numbers. When it comes to an individual, God pays

⁵ Shabbos 97a; 127b.

attention to the person only, and deals with them as the unique person they are. But when it comes to the collective whole, we are but numbers:

God spoke to Moshe in the Sinai Desert, in the Tent of Meeting on the first day of the second month, in the second year after the exodus from the land of Egypt, saying . . . (Bamidbar 1:1)

Because they were dear to Him, He counted them often. When they left Egypt, He counted them; when [many] fell because [of the sin] of the golden calf, He counted them to know the number of the survivors; when He came to cause His Divine Presence to rest among them, He counted them. On the first of Nisan, the Mishkan was erected, and on the first of Iyar, He counted them. (Rashi)

We are “numbers,” but not in a degrading way. People who love money count each dollar. Shepherds count each sheep. We count each day from Pesach to Shavuot. Yet when it comes to taking care of a collective body, we overlook individual differences and focus instead on the group as a whole, and that is made up of single units.

It is the only way to reach the level of “k’ish echad b’leiv echad.” Everyone has to feel equal, even if they are not. Equality does not mean making people believe that there is no difference between them and others. It means having people accept that even though there ARE

differences, we are all on the same team trying to accomplish the same goal.

Humility is the key. A person can be super-gifted, super-talented, and accomplish remarkable things that others only DREAM of accomplishing. But, it is humility that allows them to do all that, and not let success buoy them higher than others less gifted. Humility makes them responsible, appreciative, caring, giving, and not selfish and conceited.

About that. Not all selfishness or conceit is obnoxiously obvious. There are some forms of selfishness and conceit that can be obnoxious and yet camouflaged. Some self-centered people do not know or care how they look in front of others, and act that way with no shame. Others do, and act that way by cloaking their lack of respect for others in “noble” causes.

The causes MAY be noble, but the way they are used as a shield to hide less-than-noble behavior is NOT. It is one thing to be “holier-than-thou,” but it is another thing to use it as an excuse to act in a less-than-holy manner. Sometimes it is so well covered up that even the “zealot” does not realize how they are behaving, or how it appears to others. They might even be more misguided than mistaken.

For others it is a case of emotions. They feel bad inside and blame others for it. They feel threatened so they lash out at their perceived threat. They may just have a difficult time living up to certain moral standards and “hate” those who remind them of it. The problem is their own, but they project it outwards and onto others.

It's a mess. The Jewish people are a mess. There are pockets, even entire communities where some are able to peacefully coexist and cooperate, but there are usually "cracks" somewhere. Overall, we are FAR from being the united nation we once were, need to be, and dream of becoming.

In short, we need a MAJOR miracle.

In short, we NEED Moshiach.

The truth is, and it is a PAINFUL truth, true and lasting achdus, the level of "k'ish echad b'leiv echad" will be more the result of Moshiach, and not the cause of it. The only reason why we were able to achieve it at the giving of Torah was because, for a brief moment, we were completely free of the yetzer hara.

The unimaginable revelation of God at Mt. Sinai removed the yetzer hara from every Jew to the point that they could ONLY be interested in truth. This was evident by the way we answered, "We will do and we will understand" to the offer of Torah, what God called the "language of the angels."⁶

Our yetzer haras aren't going ANYWHERE until Moshiach comes, until the following verse can be fulfilled:

God will be King over the entire land. On that day, God will be One and His Name will be One. (Zechariah 14:9)

⁶ Shabbos 88a.

The only way God will ever be King over the ENTIRE land is if man is free of his yetzer hara. Even people who already accept God as King still do things that are considered “rebellious.” We still need a Yom Kippur to atone for such acts of rebelliousness.

For others, their yetzer hara makes them too lazy to search for the truth, or to even want to go looking for it in the first place. They know what is at stake if God really exists, and if Torah is really from Him. Their yetzer hara, in the meantime, chooses to ignore the future consequence of ignoring the truth for the present pleasure of living a falsehood.

A day is coming though, we have been told by our prophets, when the truth will be so loud and so obvious that NO ONE will be able to deny it. THE truth will become so blatant that all intellectual confusion will vanish into thin air, and the yetzer hara will not even have a single avenue of rationalization to coax a person to sin. Evil will FINALLY become extinct.

That’s when we’ll wake up and realize that believing in God was the most logical thing to have done. That’s when we’ll understand, intellectually AND emotionally, that Torah was ALWAYS in our best interest. That is when we will know in our heart of hearts that just about everyone is essentially good, acting the opposite only when their yetzer hara got a hold of them.

Until then, a person will have to try and judge others to the side of merit as often as possible, to the best of their ability. They will have to try and stop themselves from jumping to conclusions and executing judgment

on others, at least long enough to consider what might really be behind the actions of others, and what might be at stake by taking the WRONG course of action against it.

We may not have Moshiach yet to set us straight. But, we do have God Himself. As the Talmud says, “If a person comes to purify himself, Heaven helps him. If he sanctifies himself a little, they sanctify him a lot.”⁷ If we, in our quiet and safe moments consider acting this way towards others, loving our neighbors as we ought to love ourselves, then God will help us succeed to do the same thing in the difficult moments.

We may not be able to create perfect achdus BEFORE Moshiach comes. But that will never be an excuse for not trying to until he does.

⁷Yoma 38b.