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PEOPLEHOOD



CHAPTER 1

THERE IS MORE THAN ONE TRUTH

Before he dies, Yaakov summons his twelve sons for one final conference. You would expect him to invite each to a personal audience, to spend some quality private time before their revered father passes. A private setting would also be more sensitive, given that Yaakov also plans to rebuke some of his children for past misdeeds. Yet, he collects all of them for one collective conversation.

This collective gathering signals that the “selection process” that characterized the book of *Bereishis* has concluded. Throughout this painstaking process, a son was chosen for Jewish destiny, while a different son was discarded. Now, at this stage, the founders of history have all been chosen, and all twelve sons will form one clan and, ultimately, one nation. They must learn to accept each other despite their differences. By delineating their diverse traits in the mutual presence of all twelve children, Yaakov attempts to build *achdus*, unity. The children are different, with distinctive characteristics, possessing strengths and personal flaws. To craft a nation, they must aim for solidarity.

Our modern Jewish community is badly divided. The seismic events that have rocked our people over the past two centuries have elicited vastly different responses across the Jewish world, leaving us badly splintered. The past two tumultuous centuries have driven great wedges between different sections of Judaism. Sometimes it feels as if what divides us is greater than what unites us. We search for ever-elusive *achdus*.

What is this goal we term *achdus*, and how is it achieved? We toss the word around so frequently that it becomes clichéd. How can this goal be precisely defined so that it can be more successfully attained?

TOLERANCE

The first level of *achdus* mandates that we tolerate and bear those who are different from us, yet belong to us and belong with us. Disagreements can range from the ideological to the personal, but we must tolerate other Jews because we are one family.

This mode of *achdus*, tolerance, is especially important in Israel, for two reasons. First, the sheer diversity of Jews in Israel makes tolerance more challenging but more historically vital. It will take several generations to fully integrate such a vast array of Jews who have convened in our homeland from so many different regions of the globe. Intolerance to differences of other Jews is historically myopic to the great national undertaking we have begun.

Second, in Israel, we are forced to share limited but common resources. Outside the land of Israel, it is easier for different sects of Jews to create separate communities, separate synagogues, and separate services. But in Israel, there is only one City of Gold and only one Kotel upon its horizon. We must find ways for every Jew, and every **type** of Jew, to share in our common national heritage. There is only one sandbox called Israel, and we all must learn to play nicely together within it.

CROSS-POLLINATION

Beyond merely tolerating others, *achdus* demands an appreciation that the individual religious experience is enhanced by diversity and difference. No one person, nor one community, is fully capable of encompassing the entire sweep of religious activities and objectives. Religious life on a national scale demands specialization and division of labor. We lean on people and communities different from us to supplement our own religious experience with their own successes and achievements.

Take, for example, the study of Torah. As a teacher in a *hesder* yeshiva, I view the combination of Torah study along with army service as the ideal formula for religious young men. However, the allocation of significant resources for army service—which I view as a supreme mitzvah—often diminishes Torah achievements. Chareidi boys focus solely upon Torah study and naturally, that formula produces a prodigious amount of Torah.

That community's commitment and production in the field of Torah directly benefits **me**. *Achdus* must supersede tolerance. It must teach us religious symbiosis.

An orchestra would not be assembled solely with wind or percussion instruments. Music is enhanced by diversity and variety. Religious life and *avodas Hashem* are no different. The more varied the approaches, the richer the experience. Not every instrument can create every sound, and not every person or community can encompass all the many values and agendas of religion.

Fundamentally, the same is true (although on a different scale) regarding non-Orthodox Jews. Many non-Orthodox Jews base their Jewish identity upon social activism. Fighting injustice and creating a better world for humanity is part of Avraham's tradition and an integral part of Jewish identity. For several reasons, this aspect of Judaism has been deemphasized over the past two thousand years of exile. By refocusing our national attention upon justice, morality, and social consciousness, these communities are reinvigorating an often neglected element of our tradition.

THE THEORY OF PARTIAL TRUTHS

An even higher level of *achdus* is based on an important theological truth: Hashem is too infinite to be fully understood or encompassed by one approach or one *hashkafah*. Individual attempts to understand Hashem are partial and incomplete. By acknowledging other legitimate approaches, we concede our own inability to fully grasp Him.

The concluding Gemara of *Maseches Taanis* describes the alignment of righteous people in the World to Come as a circle.¹ *Tzaddikim* are positioned along the circumference of the circle, while Hashem occupies the center. Each *tzaddik* points to Hashem in the middle of the circle. Of all geometric shapes, the final configuration of righteous people is portrayed as a circle; what message is this meant to convey?

1 *Taanis* 31a.

A circle has infinite and equidistant radii. Each radius stretching from the center outward to the circumference is equivalent in length. Two radii may be 180 degrees apart, but they are equidistant. The message is obvious: two very different Jews may occupy different points of the circumference. They may see Hashem very differently—even 180 degrees differently. However, they are each seeing equal “parts” of Hashem. The human imagination can only distill a partial image of Hashem, and each of these views represents a segment of a total sweep. Inability to appreciate any “Torah truth” other than your own denies the unknowability of Hashem. Acknowledging the validity of other approaches admits the inadequacy of the human imagination to fully grasp its Creator. *Achdus* is a theological imperative. Arguing that a particular Torah *hashkafah* represents the “only truth” shrinks Hashem to human size. Hashem lies beyond the human mind and beyond human capacity. By accepting Torah views different from our own, we affirm the infinite sweep of Hashem.

This, of course, is the highest form of *achdus*, beyond just tolerating others or appreciating them as complements to our own religious experience. When humans attempt to define and articulate Hashem who is infinite and incomprehensible, there isn’t one *emes*. Acknowledging our inability to identify one single “true” *hashkafah* is the highest plane of *achdus*.

CHAPTER 2

JUDAISM IS LIKE AN ONION... LAYERS AND LAYERS

The Midrash records a conversation between Moshe and Hashem regarding His unending love for, and persistent interest in, B'nei Yisrael.¹ Constantly receiving commandments directed solely for the Jewish People, Moshe wonders what could possibly warrant this “pre-occupation” with our nation.

Hashem’s response to Moshe is intriguing. You may have expected Hashem to cite our heroic faith in blindly following Him into a barren desert. After all, Yirmiyahu highlights this courage and dedication in his famous verse, “זכרתי לך חסד נעורייך... לכתך אחרי במדבר— I remember the kindness of your youth... your following Me in the desert.”² Similarly, our historic pledge of “נעשה ונשמע,”³ taken at the foot of Har Sinai, might also justify Hashem’s unremitting affection.

Yet, surprisingly, in this Midrash, Hashem mentions a very simple and common declaration of “ה' ימלוך לעולם ועד”—God will reign forever,⁴ proclaimed by the Jewish People at the conclusion of *Shiras Hayam*. Somehow, this succinct and unadorned announcement warrants our special Divine affection.

For the first two and a half millennia of history, humanity was adrift in moral disorder and theological chaos. Though isolated individuals

1 *Pesikta D'Rav Kahana, Ki Sisa, piska 2.*

2 *Yirmiyahu 2:2.*

3 *Shemos 24:7.*

4 *Ibid.*, 15:18.

had discovered one God who possessed moral spirit, most of humanity was still trapped in a lawless world of violence and voodoo. Finally, one nation identified Hashem, declared His sovereignty, and brought His Presence down into this world. Having been liberated from Egypt and witnessing colossal miracles at the sea, we saluted, “ה' ימלוך לעולם ועד.” That momentous declaration would never be “forgotten” by Hashem.

It would also never be forgotten by us. This declaration is a major milestone on the road to Jewish identity. Jewish identity is never “all-or-nothing” but contains layers. These “layers” of Jewish identity were carefully compiled during the fateful seven weeks between the initial Exodus and the events of Sinai.

Imagine a timeline of Jewish identity that begins on the fifteenth of Nissan, stretches through the twenty-first of Nissan—the day of the ocean crossing of the Sea of Reeds—and culminates on the sixth of Sivan when the Torah was delivered. On each day, an important element of Jewish identity was distilled.

- On the day we left Egypt, we coalesced into a nation. The night before, we experienced our first national ceremony of Jewish identity. Gathering in our shuttered homes, in a faraway land, we celebrated the first Pesach Seder and then were quickly hustled out of bondage. That seminal experience, forever etched in Jewish consciousness, has been annually reenacted for millennia. On the fifteenth of Nissan, Jewish national identity was founded upon an enduring sense of shared heritage and historical mission.
- Seven days later, a frightened nation was cornered between the rampaging Egyptian chariots and a roaring sea. After successfully crossing through a dry seabed and watching our former abusers drown, we gleefully embraced Divine authority. Having already become a nation of history and heritage, we now transitioned into the nation of Hashem, announcing His Presence to an unruly world.
- Six weeks later, we arrived at the mountain and embraced religious practice and the study of Torah. Judaism isn't built solely upon national identity and religious belief. It demands applying Divine

will to our daily routine and to our general behavior. Furthermore, the study of Torah is not just relegated to the “clergy,” but is available to, and incumbent upon, all.

Full Jewish identity is a composite of these three components—launched on these three days of glory. A full Jew proudly senses a national and historical belonging, accepts Divine authority, and translates that acceptance into Torah commitment.

Sadly, the ravages of history and the weakness of the human spirit have caused many Jews to abandon classic halachic behavior. Yet, among those who have retreated from Sinai, there are millions who still stand at the banks of the sea exclaiming, “ה' ימלוך לעולם ועד”—affirming Hashem’s presence and authority in our world. Judaism isn’t an all-or-nothing proposition.

Though this type of Jew exists world-wide, it is especially common in Israel. Often called “*Mesorati*,” they deeply believe in Hashem and accept His authority. Unfortunately—in part because of the seismic geographic and cultural shifts of the past two centuries—their halachic observance isn’t total or complete. For example, it is not uncommon for many Jews in Israel to attend shul on Shabbos, pray fervently, conduct a Shabbos meal, and subsequently drive to a sporting event or an outing.

We all yearn for an era in which every Jew will merge all three aspects of Jewish identity. Before that day arrives, we deeply appreciate and ratify whatever layers of Jewish identity exist. Ratification of a single layer of Jewish identity doesn’t condone the lifestyle. It merely acknowledges that Jewish identity has layers.

Appreciating this layering also helps us grasp the enormous changes in Israeli society. The State of Israel was founded, and initially shaped by, an aggressive and overtly anti-religious culture. This dismayed many religious Jews who had hoped for a more religiously-toned state. This was also partially responsible for the rejection of the State of Israel within many Orthodox circles, who could not fathom a redemptive process directed by such explicitly anti-religious founders.

Since then, however, Israel’s “ideological demographics” have dramatically shifted. Though most Jewish Israelis are still not classically religious,

the overwhelming majority of them believe in Hashem and acknowledge a form of Divine authority. This is a very different landscape from 1948. Millions of Jews still stand at the sea proclaiming, “ה' ימלוך לעולם ועד.” Hopefully, they will advance along the timeline and recover the life of Torah commandments instituted at Sinai. Until that time, the echo of that proclamation still rings through our land and resonates in heaven.

CHAPTER 3

CHILDREN OF HASHEM

Every human is Hashem’s creation, possessing *tzelem Elokim*, or Divine-like qualities. The Torah describes an additional status for Jews: we aren’t just Hashem’s creatures, but also His children—a status already alluded to during the early stages of the Exodus from Egypt. Hashem initially demanded that Pharaoh release His imprisoned child—the Jewish People—and cautioned that if he didn’t accede, his own firstborn would be taken.¹ In *Parashas Re’eh*, that implicit message is articulated explicitly: we are Hashem’s children.

Every human is gifted with Divine traits: intelligence, emotion, consciousness, creativity, free will, hope, and personality. Crafted in the image of Hashem, every human must be respected and protected. More so, we believe that humans are created righteous and upright. Humanism—the belief in human virtue and human potential—is a cornerstone of Jewish faith. However, in addition to bearing the Divine image, Jews are chosen for a historical mission, to call humanity to a higher ground. We alone accepted the Divine invitation and His mission, and because of our acquiescence, we are uniquely cherished by Him. To demonstrate His love, Hashem adopted us as His children.

Balancing our respect for all humanity with our unique and chosen status as children of Hashem can be delicate. Some Jews are so universalistic that they have all but abdicated any sense of “chosenness.” To them, the notion that a Jew possesses a unique status or is “more” beloved, as

1 *Shemos* 4:22–23.

God's child, feels racist and bigoted. Conversely, many other Jews are so nationalistic in their outlook and parochial in their experience that their view of non-Jews borders on xenophobia or outright racism.

Our great visionary, Rabbi Akiva, threaded the needle between these two complementary truths, "Every human is beloved [*chaviv*] [to Hashem] because he was created in the Divine image...The Jewish People are beloved [*chavivin*] because they are called Hashem's children..."² Our selection as Hashem's children should not diminish our respect or care for the rest of mankind. If anything, our mission, the basis of our special status, demands greater sensitivity for general human welfare. Just the same, our shared experience with other human beings cannot blur our pride in being selected.

How does our preferred status affect our religious identity and practice? First, it should bolster our faith in the face of tragedy. This designation as "children to Hashem" is embedded in a section of the Torah that cautions against overreaction to death or excessive grieving by disfiguring our bodies.³ When facing devastating and perplexing tragedies, we may not possess all the answers, but we should maintain confidence that our lives aren't random; our fate has not been cast to chance or whim. Poise and confidence lie at the core of faith. Reminding ourselves that we are Hashem's children assures that we are cared for, even if we can't fully decipher the outcome.

Being a child of Hashem doesn't only steady our faith; it also demands that we behave with dignity and class. As Hashem's children, we represent Him and His majesty. In addition to obeying Him, we must also honor Him through lives of nobility and grace. Any mutilation of the human body, even when self-inflicted or even in response to grief, is vulgar and incompatible with our profile as children of Hashem. Interestingly, after prohibiting bodily mutilation, the Torah restates the laws of kosher food. Beyond the specific details of *kashrus*, there is great benefit to the general idea of limitation on the range of foods we consume. Limitation lends

2 *Avos* 3:14.

3 *Devarim* 14:1.