

Parashat Massey, 5771, 2011:

Achdut (Unity): The Need of Our Time

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Dedicated to the sacred memory of my sister-in-law, Ruchama Rivka Sondra, and the *refuah shlaimah* of Yosef Shmuel ben Miriam and Sheva bat Sarah Rivka.

The main subject matter of our *parasha* is the multiple journeys of our desert-bound ancestors:

These are the journeys of the children of Israel who left the land of Egypt in their legions, under the charge of Moses and Aaron. Moses recorded their starting points for their journeys according to the word of the L-rd, and these were their journeys with their starting points. ... (*Sefer Bamidbar* 33:1-2, this and all Bible translations, *The Judaica Press Complete Tanach*)

These *pasukim* (verses) are followed by over 40 other instances of the term “and they journeyed” (“*vayisu*”). One such journey and its subsequent encampment was truly unique, and is highlighted earlier in the Torah in *Sefer Shemot*, Parashat Yitro: “They journeyed from Rephidim, and they arrived in the desert of Sinai, and they encamped [*vayachanu* – plural] in the desert, and Israel encamped [*vayichan* – singular] there opposite the mountain.” (*Sefer Shemot* 19:2, brackets my own) The Halachic *Midrash* to *Sefer Shemot*, known as the “*Mechilta*,” revealed a fascinating insight regarding this verse:

In every [other] instance wherein the Torah states: “*vayisu vayachanu*” (“they journeyed and encamped”), they travelled amidst dissension and encamped in manifest disagreement. But here, [where the singular expression “*vayichan*” is utilized regarding this particular encampment] all of the Jewish people joined as one entity with one heart as it were. Therefore the Torah states: “... and Israel encamped [*vayichan* – singular] there opposite the mountain.” (*Masechta d’b’Chodesh, Yitro*, end of section I, translation and brackets my own)

Rashi’s (1040-1105) summation of our midrashic passage focuses upon the peace and *achdut* that marked this moment:

[They encamped] as if they were one person with one heart [i. e. without dissension]. All the other encampments, however, were marked by contention and argument (translation and brackets my own).

The “desert of Sinai” was the place wherein our ancestors were poised to receive Hashem’s holy Torah. It seems their imminent meeting with the Master of the Universe put our forebears in the proper frame of mind to rise above their usual conflictual behaviors, and embrace peace and unity. Moreover, the great Chasidic master, Rabbi Yehuda Aryeh Leib Alter (1847-1905), known as the “Sefat Emet” after the title of his monumental work of Torah exegesis, noted that *achdut* was the necessary pre-condition for the Revelation to have taken place. If we had not achieved *achdut*, we would have lacked the requisite level of holiness to encounter our Creator:

... as a result of unity amongst the Jewish people, we come to merit holiness. This is the meaning of [the verse in *Sefer Devarim* 23:15] “For the L-rd, your G-d, goes along in the midst of your camp...” [When will this be the case?] If your camp is a singular entity, complete, and united, [then Hashem will go along “in the midst of your camp.”] (*Parashat Kedoshim* 1:1, translation and brackets my own)

In stark contrast to the glorious moment of the Sinaitic Revelation, we live in an age that is quite often defined by *pirood* (separation) and *sinat chinam* (groundless hatred). Each one of us, even if we do not label ourselves, is labeled and defined by others as to what kind of Jew we are and where we stand on the religious/non-religious/not-yet-religious spectrum. The result of this kind of thinking is alienation and disaffection from our fellow Jews. Instead of banding together in *achdut* (unity) and tolerance, we distrust one another and view others who are not like us in a negative light. This led Rabbi Yitzhak Avraham Kook (1865-1935), the first Ashkenazi Chief Rabbi of Palestine under the British Mandate, to suggest that *pirood* and *sinat chinam* run counter to the very nature and existence of the Jewish people:

Am Yisrael (the Jewish nation) cannot stand to be in a state of confrontation and disharmony since our nature is one of peace and unity. Therefore all our arguments are temporary, our goal being complete harmony - to become a “*goy echad ba-aretz* (singular and united nation among the peoples of the world,” *Orot Ha-kodesh, Ma'amar Ha-shalom* Chapter 11, as quoted in the *drasha* of Rabbi Yehuda Amital *zatzal*, Parashat Korach 5757, 1997)

How can we truly become this “*goy echad ba-aretz*,” and achieve *shalom* and *achdut* once again? Beyond a doubt this is not a simple or easy goal to achieve. It will take concerted and consistent effort to realize this lofty, but accessible, objective. At a minimum, it will require us to learn to trust one another, to respect one another – even when we seem to be very different – and to reach out to one another as brothers and sisters dedicated to becoming one nation under the dominion and welcoming arms of the Al-mighty. Yes, *achdut* is truly the crying need of our time, and with G-d’s help, may it be achieved soon and in our time. *V’chane yihi ratzon*.

Shabbat Shalom

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<http://reparashathashavuah.weebly.com/>

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