

Parashat Yitro, 5774, 2014:

“One Nation Under G-d, Indivisible”

Rabbi David Etengoff

Dedicated to the sacred memories of my mother, Miriam Tovah bat Aharon Hakohen, father-in-law, Levi ben Yitzhak, sister-in-law, Ruchama Rivka Sondra bat Yechiel, sister, Shulamit bat Menachem, Chaim Mordechai Hakohen ben Natan Yitzchak, and Yehonatan Binyamin ben Mordechai Meir Halevi, and the *refuah shlaimah* of Yosef Shmuel ben Miriam.

1954 was one of the major years of the Cold War; Communism was running rampant throughout the world and unquestionably threatened all nations that honored freedom and democracy. Based upon this clear and present danger, and its ant-religious stance, President Dwight D. Eisenhower petitioned the United States Congress to add the words, “under G-d” to the Pledge of Allegiance. This created the phrase, “one nation under G-d, indivisible,” and the complete 31 word version of the Pledge that we have today.

The notion of “one nation under G-d, indivisible,” was not a new one, however, since its origins are actually found in this week’s *parasha* (*Sefer Shemot* 19:1-2):

In the third month of the children of Israel's departure from Egypt, on this day they arrived in the desert of Sinai. They journeyed from Rephidim, and they arrived in the desert of Sinai, and they encamped in the desert, and Israel encamped (*va'yichan*) there opposite the mountain. (This and all Bible and Rashi translations, *The Judaica Press Complete Tanach*)

Rashi (1040-1105), basing himself on the commentary of the *Mechilta* on our verse, explains the phrase, “and Israel encamped (*va'yichan*) there opposite the mountain,” in the following fashion:

and Israel encamped there: Heb. וַיִּחַן, [the singular form, denoting that they encamped there] as one man with one heart, but all the other encampments were [divided] with complaints and with strife.

At this point, we may well ask, “What does the phrase ‘they encamped there as one man with one heart (*k’ish echad b’lav echad*)’ actually mean?” As one might suspect, there are multiple opinions regarding its interpretation. As such, let us turn to a brief presentation and analysis of a few of these.

Rabbi Yaakov Tzvi Mechlenburg *zatzal* (1785-1865), in his Torah commentary, *Haketav Ve’haKabbalah*, *Sefer Shemot* 15:7, suggests that *k’ish echad b’lav echad* focuses primarily upon the concept of unity (*achdut*). In his view, this most elusive of all behavior characteristics obtained for one great shining moment amongst all members of the Jewish people, and enabled them to join together as one glorious, G-d-serving collective entity. Thus, *achdut* served as the essential prerequisite for receiving the Torah (*Sefer Shemot* 20).

The great Chasidic master, Rabbi Tzadok ha-Kohen Rabinowitz *zatzal* (known as “Rav Tzadok of Lublin,” 1823-1900), in his work *Pri Tzaddik*, *Sefer Bereishit*, *Parashat Vayeshev* 3, opined that *k’ish echad b’lav echad* emphasizes the uniquely perfect connection the nascent Jewish people had with Hashem preceding the Sinaitic Revelation:

... one heart (*lav echad*) toward their Father in Heaven and not two hearts [i.e. inclinations] as is explained in *Talmud Bavli*, *Berachot* 54a: “*b’chol levavechah*” (“with your entire heart”) – with both of your desires, the *yatzer hatov* (the yearning to pursue that which is proper and holy) and the *yatzer harah* (the desire to seek the negative and profane).

In other words, immediately prior to our ancestors hearing the Voice at Sinai, they were singularly devoted to serving Hashem solely with their individual and collective *yatzer hatov* – i.e. *b’lav echad*. In Rav Tzadok’s view, this remarkable moral dedication was the underlying reason why our forebears received the Torah.

The world-renowned Chasidic thinker, Rabbi Shmuel Bornsztain *zatzal* (1865-1926), was the second Sochatchover rebbe (known as the “Shem Mishmuel” after the name of his famous nine-volume commentary on the Torah). Based upon the analysis of his saintly father, Rabbi Avraham Bornsztain *zatzal* (the “*Avnei Nezer*,” 1838-1910), the *Shem Mishmuel* maintained that *k'ish echad b'lav echad* refers to the unprecedented level of repentance (*teshuvah*) the Jewish people had achieved on their journey from Rephidim to the howling wasteland of the Sinai Desert:

Our Sages may they be remembered for a blessing (Rashi on *Sefer Shemot* 19 in the name of the *Mechilta*) stated: “Just like their [the Jewish people’s] arrival in the Sinai Desert was accompanied by heartfelt *teshuvah*, so, too, was their travel from Rephidim [to the Sinai Desert] invested with *teshuvah*. This is the case, even though we do not find it explicitly stated that their arrival in the Sinai Desert was replete with *teshuvah*. My sainted father, may his memory be blessed, related this idea to me, since it is written: “and Israel encamped (*va'yichan*) there opposite the mountain.” Our Sages noted: “they encamped there as one man with one heart (*k'ish echad b'lav echad*)” – something that would have been virtually impossible unless they had done *teshuvah*.

The Shem Mishmuel expanded upon his holy father’s words in the following manner:

This means that the heretofore unseen level of *teshuvah* that the Jewish people achieved, i.e. *k'ish echad b'lav echad*, would have been impossible unless every individual had become humble in their own eyes and did not view their actual existence except in the context as a member of the Jewish people. This, then, was the type of *teshuvah* that obscured their individuality (*teshuvah bittul mahuto*) [and emphasized their collective persona]. It appears that they merited *teshuvah bittul mahuto* so that they would be able to rise to their highest heights - as has already been suggested by the Maharal [of Prague 1520-1609] ... this gave the Jewish people their ultimate heart (*lav gavohah*) as a collective entity so that each individual could remember that they were a member of the Jewish people. As such, they were even more important than the Ministering Angels. [This was demonstrated by] the Holy One blessed be He when he chose them [i.e. the Jewish people] to receive the Torah and not the Ministering Angels...

Rav Bornsztain clearly equates *k'ish echad b'lav echad* with *teshuvah bittul mahuto* and views this as the reason for our having received Hashem’s holy Torah. It seems that only once we transcended our own individuality, and perceived ourselves solely as members of the glorious community of *klal Yisrael*, were we finally on the level to become Hashem’s chosen people.

Regardless as to whether one follows the approach of Rav Mechlenburg, Rav Tzadok of Lublin, or the Shem Mishmuel, one thing is crystal clear: *k'ish echad b'lav echad* was an unparalleled level of greatness. For just one moment in history, we truly became “one nation under G-d, indivisible.” With Hashem’s help, may we achieve this level once again with the advent of *Mashiach Tzidkanu* (the true and righteous Messiah) soon and in our days. *V'chane yihi ratzon.*

Shabbat Shalom

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