

Parshiot Vayakel-Pekudei and Hachodesh, 5770, 2010:

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*Understanding the Role of the Entire Congregation of Israel*

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

The expression “*kol adat B’nai Yisrael*” (“the entire Congregation of Israel”) appears a total of 16 times in *Tanach* (the Hebrew Canon of Scripture). The beginning of our first *parasha*, Parashat Vayakel, contains two of these instances:

Moses called the entire congregation of the children of Israel to assemble, and he said to them: “These are the things that the L-rd commanded to make...” And Moses spoke to the entire congregation of the children of Israel, saying: “This is the word that the L-rd has commanded to say” (*Sefer Shemot* 35:1 and 4, this and all Bible translations, *The Judaica Press Complete Tanach*, with my underlining and emendations)

Rabbeinu Shimshon Rafael Hirsch (1808-1888) suggests that the root word of “*eidah*” (“congregation”) is “*ya’ade*” – which connotes the idea of establishing a purpose. Thus, an *eidah* is “a grouping that is connected through a singular purpose.” (*Commentary on the Pentateuch, Sefer Shemot* 12:3, translation from the Hebrew my own). With Rav Hirsch’s explanation in mind, we are ready to ask ourselves, “What is the purpose and role of *kol adat B’nai Yisrael*?”

Yeshiyahu (Isaiah), the great eighth century BCE Judean prophet, shared the visions that Hashem bestowed upon him with the entire world. In doing so, he helped shape and define the ultimate purpose of the Jewish people for all time to come:

I am the L-rd; I called you with righteousness and I will strengthen your hand; and I formed you, and I made you for a people's covenant, for a light to nations. And He [G-d]

said, “It is too light for you to be My servant, to establish the tribes of Jacob and to bring back the besieged of Israel, but I will make you a light of nations, so that My salvation shall be until the end of the earth.” (*Sefer Yeshiyahu* 42:6, 49:6, underlining my own)

Yeshiyahu proclaimed to the world that our *tafkid* (our purpose) is to be a “light to nations” (“*l’or goyim*”). What, however, does this mean? In his explication of our term, the renowned Spanish exegete Rabbi David Kimchi (1160-1235), known as the Radak after the Hebrew initials of his name, suggests that the Jewish people have a two-part mission in our relationship to the non-Jewish nations of the world:

When [Yeshiyahu] states: “*l’or goyim*,” this is the functional equivalent of the verse, “And the nations of the world shall walk by your light.” (*Sefer Yeshiyahu* 60:3) The “light” is the Torah that will go out to them [the non-Jews] from Zion. The Jewish people are the motive force behind the continued existence of the nations of the world (*yihiyu kium haumot*) in two distinct ways: The first is that there will eventually be peace amongst the non-Jew as a direct result of the Jews, as the verse states in regard to the [one and only] Messiah: “And he will speak of peace to the non-Jews” (*Sefer Zechariah* 9:10) and “And he shall judge between the nations and reprove many peoples, and they shall beat their swords into plowshares and their spears into pruning hooks; nation shall not lift the sword against nation, neither shall they learn war anymore.” (*Sefer Yeshiyahu* 2:4) The second purpose inherent in the relationship of the Jewish people to the non-Jewish people of the world is [that as a result of the nations of the world’s contact with *B’nai Yisrael*] they will keep the Seven Commandments (*Sheva Mitzvot*) incumbent upon them. Moreover, they will [finally] walk on the good path [of ethics and purity]. As it states: “And many nations shall go, and they shall say, ‘Come, let us go up to the L-rd’s mount and to the house of the G-d of Jacob, and let Him teach us of His ways, and we will go in His paths,’ for out of Zion shall the Torah come forth, and the word of the L-rd from Jerusalem. (*Sefer Michah* 4:2) (*Commentary on Yeshiyahu* 42:6, translation my own)

In summary, Yeshiyahu’s famous phrase “*l’or goyim*,” is a clarion call to understanding our relationship with the non-Jewish world. It teaches us that it is literally our obligation as Jews to change the world. We are mandated to share some of our light (i.e. the Torah) with the non-Jewish nations of the world, to bring about a world of peace, righteousness, ethics, and morality. Our example as G-d’s chosen nation provides the impetus for positive change and the ultimate sanctification of all mankind. Just as we as an entire

nation will one day embrace the Torah in its entirety, so, too, will all the nations of the world one day accept and keep their part of the Torah (the *Sheva Mitzvot B'nai Noach*).

Based upon our discussion, it appears that one of our fundamental goals as a nation is to emulate Yeshiyahu's words and truly be *l'or goyim*. Therefore, we must never shy away from our universal obligation, stated so succinctly in the second paragraph of the *Aleinu*, "*l'takane haolam b'malchut Shakai*" ("to perfect the world through the Almighty's sovereignty). In order to achieve *Tikkun Haolam* (the Improvement of the World), however, we must give primacy to our credo as found in the first paragraph of the *Aleinu*: "It is our duty to praise the Master of all, to ascribe greatness to the Molder of primeval creation, for He has not made us like the nations of the lands..." (Translation, Artscroll). This goal can be achieved if, and only if, we keep Hashem's holy Torah, live lives of honesty and purity, and strive to fulfill His will with our entire beings. As always, we fervently pray that Hashem will give us the strength and vision to do so.

We longingly await the realization of the *Geulah Shlaimah* (Total Redemption), the coming of *Mashiach Tzidkeinu* (the Righteous Messiah), and the moment when the entire world will stand shoulder to shoulder with us in recognizing the One and Only G-d. Then, and only then, will the role and ultimate purpose of *kol adat B'nai Yisrael* become manifest to all mankind. May this time come soon and in our days. *V'chane yihi ratzon*.

Shabbat Shalom