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THE GLOBAL JEWISH COMMUNITY: ONE FAMILY INDIVISIBLE

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"THE GLOBAL JEWISH FAMILY

ONE NATION INDIVISIBLE"

This fall, my wife and I spent Yom Kippur and Sukkot in Jerusalem. I spoke to many people in stations high and low, and returned with one particularly empty, aching feeling: there are many leaders and many competent people, but nobody who is thinking about all of us. I found people who were thinking of the Army and people who were thinking of Soviet Jewry, people who were thinking of the religious and people who were thinking of the secular, people who were thinking of education and people who were thinking of inflation, people who were thinking of Likud and people who were thinking of Maarakh. But I found no one whose concern covered all Jews, everywhere.

This is the principal reason I accepted the very kind invitation to speak on the theme of, "Global Jewish Community — One Nation Indivisible." Let us use the shorter and more pregnant term, hallowed by centuries of usage and resonant with both sacred and national sentiment, Kelal Yisrael -- the indivisible global community of the Jewish people.

Before such pious sentiments have a chance to act as sedatives and put you to sleep, dimly expecting the usual sermonic bromides about Jewish unity that are the cliches or our communal discourse, let me assure you that I will not at all dwell upon them. They are true, of course — the Talmud's teaching of Kol Yisrael arevim ba-zeh, that all Jews are responsible for each other; that we must learn the lessons of the Holocaust; and that the State of Israel needs us as its only friends. They are true, but I shall not elaborate on them.

Let me ask you to bear in mind that what we take for granted does not necessarily enjoy universal acceptance amongst the Jewish people. We may advocate Jewish unity passionately, but it has not reached the level of a general consensus. Far from it.

A scene just forty-four years ago, aboard a BMT train in Brooklyn: Poland had been invaded by Hitler in September of 1939, five months earlier. A twelve-year-old youngster is shouting above the din and the rattle of the train, appealing for funds for "Vaad Hatzalah" to save Polish Jews. He

approaches a middle-aged, obviously Jewish man who snarls at him and says, "I don't care about Polish Jews. I'm a Belgian Jew."

I was that youngster and I shall never forget that rebuff, not because my request for funds had been turned down -- I have since grown accustomed to that -- but because what I passionately believed in as a self-evident truth was cruelly shattered before my very eyes. The memory of that stupid man's statement will always be an execration that I will never forget. It gave me no joy when three months later Hitler invaded Belgium.

Hence, I have never thought of the concept of Kelal Yisrael as something that is sufficiently obvious to enjoy the status of a slogan. As an adult I witnessed enough polemics between Israel-oriented and Diaspora-affirming Jews to be confirmed in my belief that Jewish unity still requires a great deal of tender loving care and vigorous affirmation. Such acrimonious debates occasionally are so adversarial and latently hostile that they scare me.

Even this very day the Kelal Yisrael idea is not universally honored by Jews, in a functional sense, especially by the political and religious extremes; by those who unthinkingly assimilate; and by Israelis who, as part of their anti-Diaspora notions, effectively deny the underlying oneness of the Jewish people. Indeed, an Israeli diplomat told me this week that in Israel the definition of a Zionist Israeli is an Israeli who also identifies with Diaspora Jewry. That implies that all other Israelis bear no such feelings of relationship with the rest of us -- surely a cause for worry.

Moreover, even on an open, explicit, and deliberate level, there are those (they used to be called "Canaanites") who deny that Israelis and Jews of other countries constitute one people. A little over a decade ago, I was invited to address an "ideological seminar" of the World Union of Jewish Students some thirty miles north of Helsinki in Finland. An ongoing debate developed between myself and a very debonaire Israeli journalist, publisher of a rather decadent, extremely left-wing newspaper.

Throughout the debate, he kept arguing that, "I am a member of the Hebrew Nation, while you are a member of the American Nation, you are a Belgian national, and you are a French national. I am Hebrew national — and therefore we are not the same people. We may have some connection in the remote past, like that of the Australians and the British, but we are basically of different nationalities. I am a Hebrew national." I had had just about enough of this particular line and so I said, "I'd like you to know that in the country I come from, 'Hebrew National' is the name of a firm that produces baloney. The only difference is that their baloney is certified as kosher..."

Now, if we are to keep away from baloney, especially the non-kosher kind, and if we are to discover a guiding principle for our internal discussion in the studying of priorities and the allocation of resources, we have got to affirm this fundamental philosophic view of Kelal Yisrael. The commitment to the indivisibility of the global Jewish family must inform all our deliberations and all our decisions, must inspire our campaign effort, and must dominate our thinking as and about Jews.

But commitment and affirmation are not enough. What is imperative as well is a clear-headed analysis and sophisticated understanding of the concept of Jewish identity. Permit me to invite you to join me in a brief foray into halakhic discourse, using a talmudic source as an analogy.

Jewish law places great importance upon the concept of a neder or vow. A word once given must be respected. Hence, the Kol Nidre prayer on Yom Kippur eve, which annuls vows, is so very solemn. One who does not keep a neder is regarded as utterly beneath contempt. Now there is a kind of vow called moder hanaah: a vow not to benefit from someone. I am angry with Mr. X, and I take a vow to have nothing to do with him and to abjure all hanaah — pleasure or benefit —

from him. The Talmud teaches that if one took a neder not to derive any hanaah from the people of a particular city, that vow devolves upon all inhabitants who have established residence in that town; and "residence," in turn, is defined as living there for twelve months or more (Baba Batra 8a). However, the question arises, what of people who moved into that city and established residence by staying there 12 months after I took my vow? Are such new residents included in my previous neder? The problem occasioned a controversy between two of the greatest medieval Sephardic scholars Ran: (Rabbenu Nissim), of 14th century Barcelona, maintains that such future residents too are covered by the vow. Ritva (Rabbi Yom Tov B. Abraham), of 14th century Seville, disagrees and avers that the vow covers only past and present inhabitants not future ones. Here we have a classical machloket rishonim (controversy between great medieval Talmudists) that begs for further elucidation and analysis. Such analysis is provided by one of the most brilliant Talmudists of our times, Rabbi Joseph Rosen, known as "The Rogatchoser Genius." He suggests (in his Tzophenat Paaneiach) that what divides Ran and Ritva is this: a collectivity, such as a city or a town, can be understood in one of two ways. The city can be seen as nothing more than the sum of its parts. All the people who live there — no more, no less — constitute the town. There is no such thing as a "city" other than its population, the collection of inhabitants, the sum of its parts. The other definition of "city" is that a city has a life of its own and is more than the sum of its parts. It is something organic and there is something metaphysical about it — a quality beyond the people who live there. It is an independent entity, one that has a separate, corporate existence of its own. (This is reminiscent of the philosophic dispute of nominalism vs. realism.) Therefore, says "the Rogatchoer," Ritva holds that the new inhabitants are not included in the vow because he holds the more restricted view of "City" as including only the people who live there and nothing more than the people who live there. Therefore, when the neder was made it did not include those who moved into the city afterwards. Ran's

opinion that the vow does include future residents results from his larger, more metaphysical or holistic definition of "city" as possessing a separate identity, over and above its residents. Hence, if people later moved into that city and lived there for 12 months, they become part of the "city," and it was this concept of city, not merely the sum total of its then citizens, which is covered by the vow.

This controversy holds true for a city, a town, or a country. But unquestionably, "Israel" as a people is an organic, metaphysical, indivisible entity, and not merely a sociological collectivity that is but the sum of its parts. For analytic reasons, it may be looked upon as a discreet social entity, but essentially it has a life of its own that extends far beyond the sum of the Jews and Jewesses who happen to be alive today.

You have heard it said that Israel and American Jewry are partners. I deny this. Not so! Partnerships are made and partnerships are dissolved, and even when they flourish they exist for specific and limited ends. We Jews the world over are not partners. Whether we like it or not, our destinies are interlinked. As Kelal Yisrael, the global Jewish community is indeed "one family indivisible." We can argue with each other, and complain about each other -- but we are one, and our oneness is not only the oneness that includes every Jew and Jewess alive in the world today all over the globe, but a oneness that comprehends all Jews and Jewessess who ever lived and who ever will live — the dead, the living, the unborn; the whole sweep of Jewish history as well as geography. This is why the Kabbalah teaches that another name for the Shechinah (divine Presence) is Knesset Yisrael, a synonym for Kelal Yisrael. The indivisible unity of God is reflected in the uncompromised oneness of Israel.

So when I wonder, as I said at the outset, "who is thinking about all of us?," our response must be that if indeed no one outstanding figure is obviously doing that, then we must all of us, individually and collectively, do just that. The M shnah (Avot) taught: "In a place where there is no man, you must endeavor to be a man." Where there is no mensch, each of us must be that mensch.

What you are doing here throughout the year, severally and collectively, is a tribute to your intuitive grasp of this great truth of Kelal Yisrael as an over-arching vision of unity and not merely a pragmatic partnership. This combined leadership group of UJA & Federation represents a collection of many different and often contradictory viewpoints, but the common denominator of all of us is our commitment to that higher order of Jewish integration -- even in today's fragmented world. You, we, are here to exercise the philanthropic dimension of Kelal Yisrael. Knowing that consciously will help us to achieve mutual rapport and to understand intellectually what we already perceive emotionally.

Now, accepting this view of Kelal Yisrael as our leitmotif does not release us from the obligation to make serious and often painful choices. However, it can and should influence us even on this practical and empirical level. Permit me to adumbrate three ways in which this interpretation of Kelal Yisrael can make a difference to us in our own deliberations and in our own work.

The first is substantive: Whatever has greater impact on the unity and destiny of our people takes precedence over whatever has lesser consequences for the welfare and integrity of Kelal Yisrael. I do not mean to imply that we ought to ignore those other causes, all of which are dear to us. After all, a meal consists of appetizer, salads, and desserts as well entrees. But priority must be assigned by the Kelal Yisrael test. While I do not want to be guilty of special pleading, it seems to me clear that by this criterion, Jewish education must rise to the very top of the Jewish agenda.

The second way is psychological. We are sometimes depressed by the constant bickering, by the clash of interests, biases, and preferences that so often mark our Jewish meetings and deliberations. It can often seem to undo the very basis of our commitment to Jewish world unity. But we should relax. There is nothing wrong with and there is no way to escape the fray and the fracas that frequently accompany the setting of priorities. It is simply a fact of life. That is a major challenge to intelligence and

sensitivity in every domain of human life and endeavor. Whether it is a matter of getting married, running a household, shopping, managing a business, going to school, or going to the country, priority decisions must be made. And they must be made every day. Indeed, the basis of American democracy rests upon a principle first formulated by James Madison, father of the American constitution, in the Federalist Papers. Madison believed that the very clash of self-interest groups, passionately advocated, leads to the greatest good for the largest number, and that the very wheeling and dealing necessary to accommodate disparate views eliminated the tyranny of the majority. This indeed, is the way America operates to this very day.

Now, while it is true that Madison's ideas work better the larger the polity and the larger the group, and that what is true for government is not necessarily true for a voluntary world-wide community such as the Jewish people, yet enough of it is valid for us not to fear confrontation and to welcome diverse opinions. But, the idea of Kelal Yisrael establishes these caveats: (a), that all participants acknowledge the primacy of Kelal Yisrael over its individual parts, and that therefore we reject those views which would undo the unity of Kelal Yisrael; and (b), that the tone of discourse be civil, respectful, tolerant, sympathetic and, even more, evince concern for the other position, the one we may consider as of only secondary importance.

The third way in which the Kelal Yisrael concept can influence our practical deliberations is personal. Socrates taught that the knowledge of the good will lead people to do good. The Sages of Israel were far too skeptical of philosophical speculation to accept that. They knew that doing good depends more on will and motivation and character than upon one's intellect, and that it is more important to learn how to do good than to speculate philosophically on what the good really means. Nevertheless, they by no means dismissed knowledge as a critical factor in human moral development, and they taught that "an ignorant man cannot be pious" (Avot 2:6). Good intentions alone can lead one to

be a "do-gooder," but not to effectuate the good in a consistent manner either in the world around us or internally, in the structure of our own personalities.

Hence, our decision making on the priorities of Jewish life, both philanthropically and in other ways, and our effectiveness in soliciting our fellow Jews, requires that we rely upon more than noble intentions and uniformed reason. They require knowledge and constant learning. Kierkegaard once said, "Life must be lived forward, but can be understood only backward." Certainly we have to go forward. We must make decisions for 1984 and 1985 and 1990 and the year 2000. But if they are to be made out of understanding, we must look backward and consult the past -- Jewish history, Jewish traditions, Jewish law, the Jewish heritage. And if indeed we act as part of that metaphysical organum called Kelal Yisrael, then the corpus of knowledge and value system is: Torah. Whether you choose to feel bound by Torah or not, know it you must if your leadership of the Jewish community is to be Jewish leadership and if your choices are to be more than personal or bureaucratic decisions.

Such Jewishly informed leadership cannot be achieved by consulting academicians or by inviting a Torah Sage to lecture or by establishing a panel of scholars as advisors. That is insufficient. In Jewish life, learning is a mitzvah that cannot be relegated or delegated. Expertise can be bought; wisdom must be earned.

The "global Jewish community" did not arise in 1939, with the beginning of the Holocaust, or in 1948 with the creation of the State of Israel. It has a history which is rich in moral, spiritual, emotional, national, and universal dimensions, and even claims that it had at one time a covenant entered into with the Creator of the universe. "One family indivisible" cannot be led if one is ignorant of the family's past and traditions and values. Moreover, if you deny yourself the mitzvah of studying, you deny yourself a fabulous source of pleasure, inspiration, challenge, and contentment.

Torah need not be done in a school. It may seem strange for you to hear a university president who does not advocate the institutionalization of Jewish education, but

the truth is that on an adult level learning is best done in small groups -- not by yourself, definitely not by yourself, but with one, two, three, or ten other people. Traditional learning was done in a chavruta -- a small group of co-learners.

I suggest you go back to the sources. Don't just read; study. Keep away from best-sellers and anything that is trendy. And do it regularly.

Enough of our great primary sources are now available in English for you to follow intelligently and creatively. I differ from most of those who preach this doctrine. Leave "conversational Hebrew" for later. We are all busy people, and it may not be worth struggling all these months in an Ulpan in order to order roast chicken from a waiter in Tel Aviv who speaks more than a passable -- and possibly less than passable -- Hebrew...study classical Hebrew, the Hebrew of the sources. It may not allow you to read a modern Israeli newspaper with great fluency, but believe me that you will learn more from Rashi that you will from Haaretz, and more from Maimonides than from Maariv. Most certainly it will be more meaningful than any newspaper in giving you the background of Israel within the context of Kelal Yisrael, so that your Jewish dimensions will be richer and more authentic and more satisfying.

Finally, this awareness of Kelal Yisrael, especially all educated consciousness of and commitment to the transcendental unity of our people, will give you the confidence and the hope to exercise your leadership resonsibly.

I am a great believer in "running scared." All the glum and gloomy predictions about Jewish survival that we hear from sociologists and demographers, Rabbis, professors, politicians, and economists should really worry us and stimulate us to work harder -- but never to fall into despair. A number of years ago a great Jewish historian by the name of Simon Rawidowicz wrote an essay called, "Israel, the Ever Dying People." First he pointed out that throughout Jewish history, from the very beginning, every generation feared it was the last link in the chain of the Jewish people.

Our first father, Abraham, complained, "What can you give me, seeing that I am childless?" (gen. 15:2). He saw himself as both the first and the last Jew! Maimonides (I am, of course, skipping a couple millenia) wrote broodingly to the Jews of Lunel and Marseilles that Torah was all but vanished in Spain, North Africa, Palestine, and Iraq, and that only a couple of Southern French Jewish communities were keeping the faith alive. While he was writing this plaintive espistle, his very own works were creating a dynamic body of scholarship that continues to this day, eight and a half centuries later; the great Ashkanazi centers were beginning to form on both sides of the Rhine; and the seeds of Polish and Russian Jewry were being sown. Chapter and verse could be quoted for every generation. We are an "ever-dying people" — and maybe that is why we live so long. It may be a good corrective to our sometimes pollyanish American faith in the future. But an awareness of the special nature of Kelal Yisrael will lead us to affirm that while, unfortunately, the parts may sometimes wither and fall off, the whole will always remain. The metaphysically, spirtually unified historical community of Kelal Yisrael will never cease to exist. So run scared, but deep down remember ode avinu chai, as long as there is a God in the world, there will be an Israel in the world. Israel will remain the am ha-netzach, the eternal people. Your work, therefore, is not only for now, not only for tomorrow. It has enduring value and it is eminently worthy of your finest efforts.

I shall conclude with a Hasidic story. It is one of my favorites. When the great Hasidic Rebbe known as the "Seer of Lublin" died, one of his sons came from some distance to claim his share of the inheritance. All that was left to him was his father's bekesha, rabbinic cloak, and his wall clock, one that chimed every hour. On his way home, he stopped at an inn. Unfortunately, it began to rain and because the roads were unpaved, he had to stay there several days longer than he had anticipated. He did not have enough money to pay the innkeeper, and therefore left behind his father's clock ir lieu of payment for his lodging.

Many years later, a famous rabbi traveled and stopped by at the same inn and heard the chimes. He saw the clock, and excitedly turned to the innkeeper and said, "Where did you get that clock?" The innkeeper told him about the Rebbe's son and why he left it there. The Rabbi told the innkeeper that he recognized the clock and told him that it belonged to the "Seer."

How did you recognize it?," asked the innkeeper.

The Rabbi replied, "Every other clock, when it strikes the hour, has its own peculiar and characteristic message. The chime calls out, 'one hour closer to death.' But the clock of the Seer of Lublin has a message different from any other clock in the world. Its chimes sings out, 'one hour closer to redemption.'"

With confidence in the sacred cause of Kelal Yisrael, and fortified by the high resolve that only such an exalted mission can inspire in us, we shall triumph over all threats and dangers to our communal existence and national life, and bring our people — <u>all</u> our people, "one family indivisible" — yet another hour closer to redemption.