

# Jewish Solidarity and Mutual Responsibility

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Address at the Orthodox General Assembly

**T**he theme of Jewish solidarity (or unity) invariably evokes from the listener an industrial size yawn leading to a religious experience, namely, the recitation of the blessing, המפיל חבלי בא"י המפיל חבלי So, I to rise before you with a large degree of trepidation.

The subject of Jewish unity is much more relevant now than it was before the onset of the recent Intifada #2, with all its attendant dangers. I am confident that world and American Jewry will not, indeed never, abandon Israel; that we are in the right; that our cause is just; that הנה לא ינוס ולא יישן שומר ישראל. What worries me more is the internal dissension within Israel and in the Diaspora—not differences of opinion or life-style, but the intolerance, the bitterness, the incivility, and the שנאת חיים—all at a time when unity is so vital to our future.

Jewish solidarity, according to the Talmud, has one of two sources.

כשניתנה תורה לישראל היה קולו הולך מסוף העולם ועד סופו, וכל מלכי עכו"מ אחזתן רעדה בהיכליהן... נתקבצו כולם אצל בלעם הרשע ואמרו לו: מה קול ההמון אשר שמענו, שמה מבול בא לעולם! א"ל (שופטים שבעולם): כבר נשבע הקב"ה שאינו מביא מבול לעולם שני! ה' למבול ישב וישב ה' למלך לעולם, א"ל: מבול של מים אינו מביא, אבל מבול של אש מביא!... א"ל: כבר נשבע שאינו משחית כל בשר, ומה קול ההמון הזה ששמענו? א"ל: חמדה טובה יש לו בבית גנוזי תתקע"ד דורות קודם שנברא העולם, וביקש ליתנה לבניו, שנא: ה' עוז לעמו יתן ה' יברך את עמו בשלום. (זבחים קט"ז).

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The Gentile kings expected the Jews to be disunited. When they heard the theophany at Sinai and saw the sudden expressions of Jewish unity, they thought it was a new Noahide flood that would engulf the world, and they trembled in fear. Balaam reassured them: this time the unity is not because of an external cause, but internal: מתן תורה.

Hence, there are two separate causes of unity amongst Jews: threats from without, and inspiration from within.

So what unites us today in both Israel and the Diaspora? Both things: the threats from without and the opportunities for renewal from within. The immediate reason for solidarity is the cloud of war and random violence that hovers over us, and the specter of endless and unresolvable guerilla warfare in Israel; and, in the Diaspora, the prospect of more than half of our Jewish population being defeated by success, suffocated by affluence, and crushed by easy acceptance by our enviroing culture. And the danger to Jerusalem concerns all Jews throughout world. But our future remains dismal and dangerous unless we attain minimal unity in the face of the threats from without. And it is by no means certain that such unity will be attained...

Yet, we must make every effort to succeed in the quest for unity. In American history we find an impressive example of the terrible cost of disunity. Before the Civil War, the term "United States" was and is now always used in the plural—as in "the United States are ready to sign the treaty." After the Civil War, however—and 620,000 dead—the

name "United States" was and is always used in the singular—"the United States is ready to sign the treaty." Language reflects both the ordeals and the achievements of national self-identity.

But there is another kind solidarity we must affirm: we Orthodox Jews solemnly believe and declare that there is a greater if more elusive unifying element—one that issues from above and from within: מתן תורה. Our transcendent ambition is to unite all Israel by means of the spiritual power and under the banner of Torah! And Torah must become not a cause of dissension, but a mighty stimulus for the blessing of unity.

However, before we seek unity with other Jews, we must undertake to explore unity within our own ranks. During these fateful days for the State of Israel and all כלל ישראל, we cannot hope to foster unity within all Israel unless we first learn to work together as Orthodox Jews. Those of us who presume to represent מתן תורה must prove to the world--and to ourselves—that "unity" is not an empty phrase, of no value other than propaganda. Let us be realistic: full-scale unity is neither doable nor necessarily desirable. But a minimum and effective degree of unity is both desirable and attainable.

We must try to attain the assent by a maximum number of Orthodox groups and individuals to a minimum number of principles. All who aspire to Orthodox unity must agree to abide by these major elements, and are free to disagree on all others. And those who do not join in these major elements remain outside the consensus. For if we do not work together



we shall separately be overwhelmed by the "Secular Revolution!"

This is the time for the leadership of all Orthodox groups to meet to define and refine these principles--and meanwhile to restrain any overzealous and ubiquitous spokesmen and PR people from rushing to the media...

What are some of the principles that should be considered? I propose a list of Three Loves, the first of which is אהבת התורה, the love of Torah.

We are all committed to the primacy of Torah, the inviolability of Halakha; this is a *sina qua non* for being Orthodox, whether we speak of an individual or a group. But there should be no identification of individual halakhic decisions that may be in dispute, and there should be no insistence upon particular halakhic authorities whose words are law.

On these we may differ, provided the method for arriving at decisions--whether of Halakha or policy--is authentic from the point of view of Halakha. Allow me to cite an example, or perhaps analogy, from a decision of the Rambam regarding heresy. Here is the text:

רמב"ם הלכות תשובה פרק ג--הלכה ז חמשה הן הנקראים מינים: ...והאומר שיש שם רבון אחד אבל שהוא גוף ובעל תמונה, ...כל אחד מחמשה אלו הוא מין. השגת הראב"ד--א"א ולמה קרא לזה מין וכמה גדולים וטובים ממנו הלכו בזו המחשבה לפי מה שראו במקראות ויותר ממה שראו בדברי האגדות המשבשות את הדעות.

This gloss by the Raavad is elaborated in a somewhat revised passage as cited by R. Joseph Albo:

אעפ"י שיעקר האמונה כן הוא, המאמין היותו גוף מצד תפיסתו ולשונות הפסוקים והמדרשות אין ראוי לקרותו מין.

Thus, the conclusion may be erroneous, but the process is such that the person drawing the wrong result from the right premises cannot be considered heretical.

Similarly, if the method of any participant is halakhically legitimate, he or it is entitled to come to conclusions different from those of others.

The second of the three loves or principles is the love of Israel -- אהבת ישראל: We must agree to be exceedingly careful before reading anyone out of the membership of the Jewish people. An alacrity to restrict the fellowship of כלל ישראל to those who think and act exactly as we do--or demand of them-- does not make sense especially when we

Orthodox Jews are a minority of our people. We may disagree with others vigorously, even condemn them, but as long as they are Jews (halakhically), they are entitled to our אהבת ישראל.

The late saintly Kapishnitzer Rebbe זצ"ל, put it beautifully when he said that if you love a fellow Jew because he is learned, that is an act of אהבת תלמידי חכמים. If you love him because he supports Torah, you have fulfilled the requirement of אהבת התורה. If your love issues from admiration of his or her charitableness, that is a case of אהבת צדקה. But if you love a Jew who is neither scholarly nor a supporter of Torah nor a person of charity--that is אהבת ישראל! So, all Orthodox Jews must expand the boundaries of our אהבה to the full limits permitted by Halakha. If the groups or individuals are not halakhically Jewish, but identify with the Jewish people and the State of Israel, and therefore there is no technical requirement for אהבת ישראל, then at least we are obligated to extend to them אהבת הבריות, the love we owe all of God's creatures created in His image.

Thus, we may disagree on the nature of our relationship to non-Orthodox groups, but no one group should refuse to work with another Orthodox group because of different approaches to the non-Orthodox. True, this is one of the things that divide us, but Orthodox unity will never be attained if we insist on controlling each other on this point.

The third of the three principles is the love of the Land of Israel, or אהבת א"י. This commitment can lead to unity whether we accord historic significance to ארץ ישראל or only מדינת ישראל; whether we see it as אמתחלתא דגאולה or as a divine gift that is not necessarily an integral part of the Messianic redemption. But we can all affirm our commitment to the peace and welfare of our people in this holy land. And just as we may disagree on our theological conception of the State, so may we disagree on whether religious political parties are effective or desirable. In order to achieve this goal of unity



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based on the Three Loves, if indeed we can ever agree on them, we must bear in mind two extremely important prerequisites:

First, we must act and behave and speak and do business so that we incur a קידוש השם—or at least avoid חילול השם. Thus, we must be exceedingly careful how we use language especially when we express disagreement with others—whether from within or without our camp. Recent events within the Orthodox world, especially in Israel, unfortunately, make it necessary to plead for the need to be less truculent towards our fellow Orthodox Jews! Remember: historically, חרמות never worked; they mostly proved counter-productive. In our days and our times certainly, excommunication is a direct cause of חילול השם. It confirms the widespread contempt for Orthodoxy because it paints us as medieval, coercive, and exclusionary. We do not need excommunications; we need more communication amongst ourselves

Indeed, קידוש השם must be the very basis of our unity. One wise man once said that Hasidim and Mitnagdim are at odds as to whether we ought recite הודו before or after ברוך שאמר, but both converge when it comes to יהי כבוד ה' לעולם. In our schools and in our shuls, we must teach and preach and emphasize and insist on ethical conduct and sensitivity in the ways we disagree, without which no Jew has the right to the honorific "Orthodox." Perhaps a good working definition of an orthodox Jew is one who contributes to יהי כבוד ה' לעולם.

Finally, if this program is to succeed, leaders of all groups within Orthodoxy need a great measure of courage to stem the tide contributing to disunity rather than unity. There will be criticism and rebuke from both ends of the spectrum. Leadership, especially in our community and in our times, especially in the presence of hyperactive and overreaching media, cannot be effective without taking personal and professional risks. An Orthodox leader today must have the

moral, psychic, and political courage to walk by himself, alone amongst those who disagree and deprecate and defame him (and even when his closest colleagues keep their silence while he is denounced).

He must be ready to defy public opinion and do what is politically incorrect, guided only by his commitment to what he considers is right and true in the eyes of הקדוש ברוך הוא.

The 85 letters of the two verses of the ויהי נוסח which we recite when the Ark is opened, appear in the Torah surrounded by two strange symbols, one at the beginning of the passage and one at the end. They are the נון הפוך, the letters Nun inverted. The reason for this strange use of orthographic symbols is offered by the Kabbalistic work, מדרש הנועם—and it is even stranger than the symbols themselves!

The Midrash Hane'elam states:

הם כבודו של הקב"ה ממש, והם עיקרו של עולם, ובאלו נונים עתיד הקב"ה לפרוק להו לישראל ע"י משיח ובגנים ברכ יעקב לנכדיו "וידגו לרוב בקרב הארץ"

The last item refers to the root of וידגו which is דג or fish, meaning that Jacob blessed his grandchildren that they increase as profusely as the fish of the sea. (so—the Aramaic translation by Onkelos).

I suggest that what this extravagant praise of the inverted Nuns means is this: In order to bring about the Redemption, to set the word aright and justify its continued existence, to bring the spirit of Divinity into the world, what is necessary is—the readiness to do what fish do, namely, to swim upstream, to go against the tide, to dare the raging currents of the foaming sea. It means the ability to hew to your vision even when the masses declare you blind or unfit, even when the powers of the world or community disparage you and isolate you.

Without the readiness to swim upstream when you are convinced it is the only, right way to go, you will never get to the other side. That readiness is we call courage.

So, whether it is the struggle against the

implacable enemies of Israel, such as Arabs and fundamentalist Muslims, or the biased European Union and CNN, or maybe even an American administration; or the many detractors of Orthodoxy in all places high and low, or even within our own camp—we must be prepared to swim upstream. Government leaders need courage as Israel enters uncharted waters, but religious leaders need it as well.

Courage summons us to activity, to power, to protest, to a show of strength; but sometimes, depending upon the circumstances, the greatest expression of courage is in restraint—in knowing when and how to keep silent despite all provocations, to be patient when you are bursting with the need to shout, to restrain yourself for a greater good. Above all, courage demands that we be exceedingly careful about what we say and, even more, how we say it, especially when we feel compelled to be blunt when such bluntness can prove damaging and counterproductive.

In conclusion, the task is formidable. The shrillness of our disunity can lead one almost to despair. But we dare not despair; we do not have the luxury for that. Maybe we can't achieve that unity. But we may never refrain from trying for it. For that may well be our divine mission—to restore the unity of Israel, in the same way the Kabbalah urges us to restore the unity of the Creator.

**We have no guarantees that we will achieve unity on any front. But we do know one thing: that God expects it of us. On the verse in האזינו, we read א-ל א-ל, ordinarily translated that He is a God of faith—whatever that means. The וילקוט, however, gives that expression profound and dramatic meaning: שמאמין בבריותיו, He believes in us. He has faith in us that we will be kinder and more loving towards each other. We must never disappoint Him.**

It is our task to vindicate His faith in us. The mission is daunting, but it is also ennobling. May we never fail Him. ■