

Jewish Unity: The Underlying Concept

The reunification of East European Jewry with the rest of world Jewry is an appropriate occasion to raise a problem that concerns all Jews who retain even a minimal connection to their people, their heritage, their culture--or any one of these. That issue is: Jewish unity and, underlying it, the more nettlesome problem of Jewish identity.

Let us admit it openly: we are a fractious, contentious, argumentative people. Consider the raucous and dangerous polarization in Israel on political and religious issues. There is much truth in the old joke about two Jews stranded on an island who build three "shuls"--one for each and another they wouldn't step into. There is a beautiful legend or agada that at Mt. Sinai, as the Children of Israel were gathered to receive the Torah, they were united "as one person with one heart." That, I believe, is the last time we were truly united as one people--and that took a divine revelation to effect!

It is therefore pollyanish to expect that we can, in this era which celebrates pluralism and individualism, find a formula to ensure unity on all issues amongst Jews. Since Sinai, there has been no such occasion and we should not expect one. Our ambitions must be more modest--to explore the *concept* of Jewish identity and unity, so that we may be able to build on that, each Jew individually, and together respond to each as members of a historic community that emphasizes the commonalities of its members without ignoring the differences.

I invite you to join me in a brief foray into halakhic discourse, using Talmudic sources not, in this case, in its usual role as an authoritative source of direction, but more as a metaphor, an analogy.

Jewish law places great importance upon the concept of a *neder* or vow. A word once given is holy; it 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 vow called *modern 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*). Hence, I may derive no benefits, receive no favors, from anyone who has lived there for 12 months or more.

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. We have here 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, know as the "Rogatchover Genius." (The Rogatchover was a rabbi in Dvinsk, not far from where we are now in Riga.) 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.)

Hence, say "the Rogatchover," 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, all agree that "Israel" as a people is an organic, metaphysical, indivisible, real entity, and not merely a sociological collectivity that is but the sum of its parts. 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 Diaspora Jewry are partners. I deny this. No 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 with Israel or with each other. Whether we like it or not, our destinies are interlinked: I as an American Jew, you as Jews of the former Soviet Union, and the Jews of Israel. As *Kelal Yisrael*--the hallowed name for the Jewish collectivity, hallowed by centuries of usage and resonant with both sacred and national sentiment--the global

Jewish community is an indivisible family. We can argue with 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 Jewesses 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.

That means that we must always think of *all* of us, and if there is today no *pater familias*, no great, charismatic, universally accepted figure to consider *Kelal Yisrael* as his special responsibility, then we must all of us, individually and collectively, do just that. The Mishnah (*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, meeting *as Jews* at this historic occasion, 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. Knowing that consciously will help us to achieve mutual rapport and to understand intellectually what we already perceive intuitively.

Now, accepting this view of *Kelal Yisrael* as our leitmotif does not release us from the obligation to make serious and often painful choices. And as you, distinguished Jewish members of the academic community, take your place as leaders in your countries and in the larger Jewish world, this insight into *Kelal Yisrael* can and should be meaningful even on a 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 should take 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 as entrees. But priority must be assigned by the *Kelal Yisrael* test. By this criterion, Jewish education must rise to the very top of the Jewish agenda. Without it, large numbers of Jews will continue to disappear as Jews, especially if the society becomes more liberal and democratic.

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. 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 eliminates 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 two 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 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 requires that we rely upon more than noble intentions and uninformed reason. They require knowledge and constant learning. The Danish philosopher Soren Kierkegaard once said, "Life must be lived backward." Certainly we have to go forward. We must make decisions for the rest of this century and the first part of the next. 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 we choose to feel bound by Torah or not, know it we must if our leadership of the Jewish community is to be *Jewish* leadership and if our choices are to be more than personal or bureaucratic decisions.

Finally, this awareness of *Kelal Yisrael*, especially an educated consciousness of and commitment to the transcendental unity of our people, will give us the confidence and the hope to contribute to the welfare of our people and exercise responsible leadership on its behalf.

That is not an easy task. The future of our people, to judge by statistics, is clouded. I am a great believer in "running scared." Sociologists, demographers, and economists offer us rather gloomy predictions about Jewish survival that should really worry us--but also stimulate us to work harder and, above all, 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 Every Dying People." 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 millennia) 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 epistle, his very own works were creating a dynamic body of scholarship that continues to this day, eight and a half centuries later; the great Ashkenazi 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. So, 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, spiritually unified historical community of *Kelal Yisrael* will never cease to exist. So we must "run scared," but deep down remember *ode avinu chai*, Israel will remain the *am ha-netzach*, the eternal people. Our work, therefore, is not only for now, not only for tomorrow. It has enduring value and it is eminently worthy of our 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 in 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 chime 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--*all* our people, one family indivisible--yet another hour closer to redemption.