

# WITH A SINGLE HEART

*by Rabbi Pinchas Winston*

In the third month after the Jewish people left Egypt, they arrived in the Sinai desert. They had traveled from Refidim to the Sinai desert, and they camped there, opposite the mountain. (Shemos 19:1-2)

If we were to write the words in English as they appear in Hebrew, it would say, "and he camped there," in the singular. As to why the Torah used the singular form of the word instead of the necessary plural form, Rashi explains: for the moment, the Jewish people were so unified that they acted as if they were a single person, with a single heart.

Sigh. How many times have we tried to create unity amongst the Jewish people since then, only to find that our nation has more factions to bring together than there is energy to do it? And that is just amongst the Jews who seem to get along with each other, at least in general! As they say, "Two Jews, three opinions ..." and, plenty of opinions about what the three opinions are actually saying.

Clearly, Jewish unity can only result supernaturally. Hence, we say on Shabbos Mevarchin, when we announce the upcoming new month:

The One Who performed miracles for our fathers, and redeemed them from slavery to freedom, will redeem us shortly, and gather in our exiles from the four corners of the earth, friends, all of the Jews.

In other words, just as the future redemption will be a function of great miracles, likewise is the unification of the Jewish people dependent upon a miracle, indeed, the same one. Achdus, or Jewish unity, comes together with redemption, and until we realize that, a lot of well-meaning people will put in a lot of time and energy to accomplish that which is actually beyond their reach.

That does not mean that it won't be worth it in any case, since we get rewarded in the World-to-Come for the efforts that we make, not the successes we bring about (Pirkei Avos 5:26). But, wouldn't it be nicer to be able to taste the fruits of your labors in this world as well? Achdus may require a miracle, but it is a miracle that we can engineer, theoretically-speaking.

What will do it? I can tell you what probably won't do it. It is a great to talk about the importance of achdus, and all the good that will result because of it. However, experience shows that when unnatural change is engineered cerebrally, it either doesn't work, or, if it does work, it doesn't for very long. Usually, it is just a matter of time, and of life's pressures, before old habits return, and with them, old negativity towards others who are different than we are.

Recently, I came back from a trip to Tzfas. It is always a spiritually uplifting place to spend time, and there are very few sunsets as spell-binding as the ones over the hills of Tzfas. And, of course, there is the Arizal's mikvah, an enclosed natural spring of water that feels as if it is only a few degrees above freezing point. Dunking in this mikvah can only be a purely spiritual experience.

Ironically, one of the main reasons to come to Tzfas is not because of the night life, but because of the dead life. The place is surrounded by cemeteries, which are filled with many famous and holy Torah personalities from the past, including the Arizal himself, Rabbi Moshe Cordovero, Rabbi Yosef Karo, any many others, all within a very small area.

Hence, many people make the trip to Tzfas, in order to visit and pray by the graves of these righteous people from the past. As a result, the cemetery, which is built on a hill, has been set up in such a way as to accommodate the many visitors to these holy burial grounds, the center of which seems to be the burial place of the Arizal.

Books could be written about how holy the Arizal was, and what he contributed to the Jewish world during his short life on earth. And, many great teachings of the Arizal could have been inscribed upon his stone, which is why it is surprising to see something written there as simple as telling people to accept upon themselves the mitzvah of loving another as oneself as a prelude to prayer. Surely such simple advice that can be found just about anywhere, no?

For example, the great Rebi Akiva, also known for so many contributions to the world of Torah, told us that it is a great principle of Torah to love another as oneself. But come to think of it, the same question can be asked of Rebi Akiva: Why did he feel so compelled to make such a bold statement about what seems to be such a simple concept?

Because, looks can be deceiving, especially when it comes to a mitzvah such as this one. It seems as if it should be enough to simply campaign for achdus to bring it about, until one realizes that Rebi Akiva's own students, 24,000 of them to be exact, died because of a lack of it. How could such great Torah scholars, students of such a great Torah leader, miss the point about achdus so completely?

Because, believe it or not, achdus is not always a function of becoming a greater Torah scholar. For, as one increases his Torah knowledge, the greater his picture of Torah perfection becomes, and the easier it is to become critical of others who do not work as hard at keeping the mitzvos. The more perfect one's knowledge of Torah becomes, the more one seems to expect perfection of others, as one sees Torah perfection.

There is a solution to this problem, alluded to in the following Talmudic statement:

Rabi Elazar said in the name of Rabi Chanina: Torah scholars increase peace in the world, as it says, "All your children will be students of God, and your children will have peace" (Yeshayahu 54:13). Do not read *baniyech*—your children, but *bonayich*—your builders. There is peace for the lovers of Torah, and there is no stumbling block for them ... (Brochos 64a)

Perhaps, this is why the Talmud feels compelled to make a play on the word baniyech, which means "your children," in order to read it as boniyech, "your builders." For, as history has proven countless times ever since we left Mt. Sinai, to merely be a talmid chacham can result in a person creating just the opposite of peace, as he tries to convince others to see the Torah reality as he does, and he rejects those who do not. One has to be a certain type of talmid chacham: a builder, and a lover of Torah.

A builder of what? Houses? Apartment buildings? Shopping malls? Of what?

A builder of peace. A builder of peace? What is that? How does one build peace?

The answer to that question is in this week's parshah, when the Jewish people rose to the level of k'ish echad, b'leiv echad—like a single person with a single heart. The \$64,000 question is, how did such a quarreling nation achieve such sublime unity, in so short a period of time? Answer it, and you unlock the key to achdus, and what it is that talmidei chachamim build to achieve it.

In a nutshell, this is it: history has to become bigger than the people living it. Whatever is happening, it has to be bigger than anything else that Jews find meaningful at that moment, no exceptions. Whatever is going to trigger achdus has to be like Kabbalas HaTorah, inasmuch as it is distracting enough that, for the time being, everyone forgets their own personal opinions and agenda.

The Holocaust did that, in an evil way. The Holocaust was so negatively overwhelming that Jews all around the world became unified as they tried to mitigate its destruction, and cope with the issue of survival. The Nazis, y"s, went so far as to even remove all external differences that might have interfered with achdus, until we all looked alike. And, the fact that they numbered each Jew consecutively, regardless of from which group of Jews he or she came, only emphasized how we are all one people, regardless of our differences.

More recently, and positively, the war in Gaza also brought about a higher level of achdus, because it gave us a common purpose, once again. During the war, religious Jews reached out to secular Jews, and secular Jews reached out to religious Jews, and all around the world, Jews banded together for the common cause of Jewish survival. The seriousness of the war, and its potential to become even worse, trivialized the trivial, and as a result, made us a single people, once again.

But who wants war? Who wants unity at the cost of safety and freedom? Then, what is a big enough issue that can accomplish the same purpose, positively?

Jewish destiny. It's the only thing that is bigger than each individual Jew, than every group of Jews. When we stop focusing on local goals, and refocus ourselves on the national goals, we will become unified, and the redemption will come. The day each group of Jews becomes real with the long term, national goal of the Jewish people, and makes it their primary concern, that is the day that achdus will naturally, and automatically, become the permanent approach of every Jew to life.

Naturally. Automatically. Permanently.

We experienced that in this week's parshah. We tasted it at Har Sinai. Perhaps, that is why we pursue it to this very day. Now it is up to the talmidei chachamim of Klal Yisroel to build it in the minds of the people, in the form of a real yearning for national redemption, and all it is destined to result in. In this way, they will express their love of Torah, and harness their innate ability to increase peace in Yisroel.

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Rabbi Winston has authored many books on Jewish philosophy (Hashkofa). If you enjoy Rabbi Winston's Perceptions on the Parsha, you may enjoy his books. Visit Rabbi Winston's [online book store](#) for more details! [www.thirtysix.org](http://www.thirtysix.org)