

# A SINGLE NATION

by Rabbi Pinchas Winston

*Moshe assembled all the congregation of the Children of Israel, and said to them: "These are the words which the LORD hath commanded, that ye should do them." (Shemos 35:1)*

"A house divided against itself cannot stand." The words are famous, and they were part of a speech made by the 16th President of the United States of America, Abraham Lincoln. He, of course, was making a pitch to abolish slavery in the United States and bring an end to the Civil War, which he did.

He, of course, was right. The Jewish people are weak politically today amongst the nations, and the Torah community is struggling amongst its own here in Eretz Yisroel. Barely a week goes by in a Charedi publication that does not decry the attack taking place against the Orthodox community in one form or another. And, all of it, as this week's parshah indicates, has to do with the divided house of Israel.

"United we stand, divided we fall." It means the same thing, and one of the more subtle messages of this week's parshah. In fact, it is more than just interesting to note what the Arizal inserted in the preliminary morning prayers, something which, at first, seems kind of out of place:

I am hereby am ready to fulfill the commandment to love my brother as myself.

I am? Aren't I ready instead to fulfill the mitzvah of prayer? Perhaps after prayer is over such a statement is fitting to make and focus on, as we leave the sheltered world of the synagogue and head out into the world of people, a world in which it can be so much easier to hate your neighbor than to love him.

But that is true only if you look at prayer as an individual experience, and not as the communal activity it is meant to be. In fact, though the person standing next to me, or even across the shul from me, may annoy me, the truth is that I need him. For, he is part of my minyan, and it is a minyan that, for many today, allows the prayers of the individual members to make it to Heaven and be heard on high.

This is because praying to God may be a simple matter of opening up a prayer book and reading the words, but having one's prayers accepted in Heaven is another matter altogether. The upper world is a perfect world, the most sincere of all. On earth, perhaps you can fake your way into exclusive organizations, but in Heaven, they read everyone like a book, and that goes for our prayers as well.

So, before we blame God for not listening to our prayers, we have to first examine our prayers and see if they even have the umph to make it to God in the first place. For, even though God can know our prayers the moment we think of them, even before articulating them, there is a system in place that must bring our prayers before Him, and until it does, He acts as if He can't hear them.

This is what it means when it says:

It came about in the course of those many days that the king of Egypt died. And the Children of Israel sighed because of the bondage, and they cried out; and their cry for help because of their bondage rose up to God. (Shemos 2:23)

Until that time God hadn't seen what His people were going through? Until that moment, the Omniscient didn't hear the crying of His children? Of course He did. However, until that time the Jewish people had adapted to the situation, and whatever complaints they had did not qualify as cries for help, at least not enough to penetrate all the levels between God and man to trigger Heavenly mercy.

Once upon a time, man was exceptionally close to God. In fact, prior to the sin of the Tree of Knowledge of Good and Evil, Adam HaRishon talked to God in very much the same way we speak to one another. And, when he decided to do something, God gave him immediate permission to carry it out. The first man, by way of his closeness to the Almighty, was a very powerful human being.

However, Adam HaRishon made a critical mistake, resulting in a great reduction in his spiritual level, and therefore, greatly distancing him from God. The direct connection to the Master of the Universe man once enjoyed was gone, and after his spiritual demotion, his prayers required Heavenly intermediaries to bring them before God. The further away from God the person is, the longer the chain of angels between his mouth and God's ear.

But angels are not robots. They are spiritual beings created by God but fueled by the good deeds of man, be they acts, words, or thoughts. This way, in order for mankind to rectify the First Man's mistake, personally and globally, he is forced to work on himself to come closer to God. The result is to reduce the amount of angels necessary for the person to connect to his Creator, increasing the chance of being heard and answered by God more immediately.

This is what it means when it says that righteous people decree, and God fulfills. Righteous people are those individuals who constantly improve themselves spiritually, bringing them closer to God on a momentary basis. As they climb the spiritual ladder, they eliminate the need for levels of angels, reducing the distance their words have to travel to God and increasing the chances of being heeded on high.

But, what about the rest of us? Does that mean our prayers often do not make it to Heaven, God forbid?

It depends. For, there are some things in Creation that count a lot to God, so-much-so that He can give a person, or his prayers, a certain status even when the person himself lacks the actual merit to attain such a level on his own. One such 'thing' is a collective and cooperative body of Jews. God just loves when Jews care and look out for each other, even making sacrifices for one another.

Hence, the power of a minyan. Indeed, a minyan is so powerful that it can boost the prayers of a person Heavenward in a way that the individual could never do on his own. The synergy of many Jews working together at the same thing—for good of course—can create a connection to God that the same people could never create as individuals.

In fact, this is what k'ish echad b'leiv echad—like a single person with a single heart, is really indicating (Shemos 19:2). It isn't just saying that the Jewish people achieved an unprecedented level of national unity at the time the Torah was being given. It is saying that this is what made possible the giving of Torah, for without such unity the spiritual level of the Jewish people would have been below the necessary level for Kabbalas HaTorah. Their unity changed something significant.

The question is, what? The answer is the reason why the Arizal inserted the declaration of loving one's neighbor as himself at the beginning of the morning prayer service, considering the Ramban's explanation of the mitzvah.

What does the mitzvah to love one's neighbor as himself actually mean? Wouldn't a better mitzvah be to love one's neighbor more than himself? If that were the case, would it not be easier to care for other people, and be self-sacrificing for them? As the Talmud points out, the mitzvah stated as is can get tricky sometimes given some of the situations life can throw at a person (Bava Metziah 62a).

As it has been pointed out previously a few times, though the mitzvah to love your neighbor as yourself sounds like a mitzvah of chesed, the truth this, the Ramban points out, there are other mitzvos that already teach us to be that way. For example, there is a mitzvah to be like God, which the Rambam explains means to care for others just as God cares for everyone.

Rather, explains the Ramban, the mitzvah to love others as you love yourself is really a mitzvah to be objective, which is why I can't love my neighbor more than me. For, the moment I love myself more than another person, I will be personally subjective and distort the truth to suit my personal agenda. However, the moment I love my neighbor more than myself, I will be subjective for him, and distort reality to make his life better. Either way, I am distorting reality.

When it comes to doing chesed, the latter is not such a problem. Some times people need more than the truth so that they can return to it later. However, when it comes to one's relationship with God, there is no room for any falsehood or distortion of truth especially when it comes to learning His Torah and transmitting it to others.

If so, then we can appreciate the Arizal's insertion in the morning prayers. At the start of a new day, especially first thing in the morning, it is easy to be self-focused. With things to do and people to

see, it is easy to already be after dovening even before you have started. Some people don't even show up, though they are physically there, having already started their work day before they even left for work.

What kind of a minyan can that end up being? For, a minyan is more than just 10 or more bodies collected together for a common event. The minds and hearts have to be there as well, to some degree, working together for a common cause. People have to be there for God, to seek Him out, to talk to Him, and to feel His Presence. Unity is a matter of the intellect, not one of the body, what Rashi called b'leiv echad k'ish echad, the reverse of the Sinai Experience, when referring to the Egyptians who chased the Jewish people into the sea.

And, how does one know when one is 'there' in the full sense of the term, if he is a part of the whole and not wholly a part? When he is objective about the moment. And, how does one know when he has achieved such objectivity? Says the Ramban, says the Arizal, when he can love his neighbor as himself, not less than himself and not more than himself.

This is the kind of objectivity that allows a person to build an undivided house. This is the kind of intellectual impartiality that allows the Jewish people to overcome their differences and become a united front against the darkness of history. This is the message that Moshe Rabbeinu imparted at the beginning of this week's parshah by gathering everyone together. He wasn't just bringing together a lot of individuals for a group gathering, but rather, he was building Klal Yisroel, synergizing the nation to become Am Echad—A Single Nation.

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