

UNITED WE MUST STAND

by Rabbi Pinchas Winston

SOMEONE ONCE SAID THAT you can tell how difficult something is to achieve by how many segulos there are for it, something you can do to spiritually increase your chances of success. Some are based on time-honored traditions while some are meaningless. It is not always easy to tell the difference.

Take shalom bayis—household peace—for example. There are a lot of things people are told to do to help with shalom bayis, many of which are mystical by nature. If shalom bayis was easy to maintain, its segulos would not be necessary.

I know a shul where every Motzei Shabbos after Ma'ariv they call out blessings. "It should be a good week for parnassah!" one person will call out, to which the rest will answer, "Amen." Another person will call out, "It should be a week of good health!" and again, they will all answer a resounding "Amen." Invariably someone then yells out, "It should be a week of shalom bayis!" and they all yell, "Amen!"

Something else that is similar and difficult to achieve is achdus—unity. Like shalom bayis, achdus is a highly held value. Like shalom bayis, it is one that is hard to create and even harder to maintain. It also works against human nature.

Yet, unlike shalom bayis, there are few if any segulos for achdus. Few if any talk even about the topic. It only really becomes a serious discussion if machlokes—disagreement—gets out of hand, like during shul elections, for example.

The problem with achdus, a shalom bayis issue on a community level, is that the lack of shalom bayis may come from a good place. Torah emphasizes a need to strive for spiritual excellence, which results in high expectations of others. High standards tend to make people judgmental of one another.

The trick is to be demanding on oneself without being demanding on others. You have to expect a high moral standard from yourself without imposing it on others. If anything, we have to lead by example, not through force or rejection. God wants a person to break his own heart, so-to-speak, to serve Him. He doesn't want a person's heart to be broken by someone else.

It has been said that if you want to destroy the Jewish people, God forbid, just leave them alone. They'll do it themselves through infighting. If you want to unify them however, then attack them.

That is when Jews of all stripes and colors actually band together.

Is achdus important? It was at Mt. Sinai. In fact, receiving Torah seems to have depended upon it. Therefore, the Torah tells us that the Jewish people became uniquely unified at that time, "k'ish echad b'leiv echad," like a single person with a single heart.

Achdus also seems to have been a part of the message of the half-shekel, given in the desert and yearly for the Temple upkeep. Just about everyone can afford to give a WHOLE shekel to tzedakah. We gave a half-shekel to emphasize the co-dependency of Jews. As the rabbis teach, "every Jew is a guarantor for another."

Achdus is certainly important for redemption. National redemption takes national cooperation, a LOT of it. Otherwise people find themselves working against one another and undermining the efforts of others.

Unfortunately, achdus also seems to be something that Moshiach will have to make happen. According to the Leshem, the necessary spiritual ingredients to achieve achdus before then just aren't available.

For any achdus? Apparently not. Sports teams seem to have tremendous achdus, and you can find plenty of achdus in the business world as well. You just won't find all that much achdus when it comes to moral issues and the pursuit of truth. There are just too many people with different takes on both.

Even within the Torah world achdus is elusive. All Torah Jews, by definition, strive for the same goals: fear of God, excellence in Torah learning, chesed, etc. The problem is that just about every group has its own approach to the same objectives. They end up competing against one another.

People mean well. It's just that we're all born selfish. Torah tries to make people selfless, but it takes a lot more effort than some know how to put in. The end result can be a tremendous lack of achdus.

Moshe Rabbeinu knew all this. He saw it in everyday life, and tried to help with this. Even though in this week's parsha he gathered everyone together for a practical purpose, he also wanted to instill a sense of achdus in the nation. Whatever happened in the desert had long term spiritual impacts on the Jewish nation.

For example, says the Pri Tzaddik, this is why Moshe Rabbeinu showed the tablets to the Jewish people before breaking them. He wanted the Jewish people to see them, even though they wouldn't receive them. Just seeing the original tablets could spiritually impact their futures.

Similarly, gathering the Jewish people together in this week's parsha instilled a sense of achdus in the nation. Perhaps it is this that allows the Jewish people to unify, at least when threatened from the outside.

This Shabbos is also Parashas HaChodesh, the fourth of the special Maftirs for this time of year. We

first received the mitzvah of sanctifying the new moon in advance of Chodesh Nissan while still in Egypt. Therefore, we read that parsha in advance of Rosh Chodesh Nissan each year.

The moon represents the Jewish nation, which has waxed and waned over history, like the moon. However, there is a more powerful message built into the moon as well. There is a message about achdus in this mitzvah also.

The moon, for all of its brightness, has no source of light of its own. It's merely a rock floating in space reflecting the light of the sun. As long as the moon is in a position to do this, it is visible to man. If the light of the sun cannot make it to the moon, it "disappears."

The Jewish people, for all of their brightness, have no source of light of their own. We're merely a people "floating" through history, reflecting the light of God. As long as we're in a position to do so, we are visible. If God's light cannot make it to the Jewish people, we disappear.

As Rashi points out, nations used to visit the Jewish people and marvel at a single nation with a single legal system, speaking the same language and eating the same food. This apparent unity reflected well on the Jewish people and to the nations of the world. It was a great Kiddush Hashem.

The exact opposite is true when the Jewish nation is fractured. Our disunity interferes with our service of God, preventing the Torah world from being "visible" in the eyes of the nations. We know God's word best, yet the Torah world has little if any credibility in the eyes of others. You can't be a light for the nations if they only see darkness when they look at you.

It's something to think about. It is particularly relevant to consider as we read this week's portions, all of them. It is the right time of year too. Pesach is THE holiday that tends to unify Jews, all around the world.