

“*Achdus* and Torah”

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Achdus! Many Jews who don’t know much Yiddish or Hebrew seem to know this term. It is a Yiddishized pronunciation of the Hebrew term for “unity” from the word *ehad* (one). It almost always refers to unity of the Jews; that we Jews must remain unified as we face every adversity. The root *echad*, or one, is a term more familiar to Jews as the final word of the SHMA “the lord our God, the Lord is ONE.” The word *achdut* does not appear in the Hebrew Bible and when it appears infrequently in biblical commentaries it is almost always in reference to something metaphysical. For example, commenting on the SHMA in Exodus 17:16 MaHaRal of Prague in his super commentary to Rashi writes,

Shma Yisrael ...H Ehad” (Deut 6:4) this name is a unique name [of God] (*shem m’uhad*). One does not find this place anywhere else in the world. And since this name is unique, every moment where there isn’t unity (*achdut*) in the world, we see the seed of Esau who opposes it. There is duality in the world, in that moment, one does not find completion in this world...

Elsewhere (to Deut 12:1) MaHaRal writes, “In idolatry there is no *achdut*.” In fact, idolatry is often viewed as the opposite of unity as it depicts the fragmentation or plurality of the divine world. In most midrashic literature *achdut* is still only in reference to God.

So then where does this notion of *achdut* begin to apply to Jews, which is how it is often used today? In the Talmud Tractate Gittin, there is a lengthy discussion about the destruction of the Jerusalem Temple in 70 CE. Again, MaHaRal, who seems to like this term *achdut*, in his gloss to a Talmudic passage, writes as follows,

The second Temple was destroyed because of baseless hatred, because it was more fitting for there to be unity (*achdut*) in Israel without divisions, as there was in the first Temple, with the [division of the] Kingdom of Judah and the Kingdom of Israel. The advantage of the first Temple is that the *shekhina* dwelled among them [and thus one could assume the divisions among Jews was not so detrimental] , and the advantage of the second Temple was that there was no division between them.

The assumption of course, is that when God dwells among Israel there is no need for unity of Israel as God serves as the unifying force, even in a divided people (as was the case in ancient Israel). But when the *shekhina* does not dwell among Israel, as in the Second Temple, division among them is what destroys them, as there is no unifying force to hold them together.

We do have some passages in the Talmud that speak of the value of *achdut yisrael*, the unity of Israel. For example, in the Jerusalem Talmud Peah 1:1 we read, “In the generation of Ahav [an evil king] even though the Israelites were idol worshippers, they went to war and were successful because there was *achdut* between them.” Put otherwise, if they are unified among themselves, they can be successful. Is this sayint that if are unified, Jews don’t need God for their success? Or perhaps the need for God is

precisely *because* unity cannot be attained, or maintained? This may be one early iteration of the whole idea of “peoplehood.” The unity that once described God, now describes the Jews.

But more generally, what does *achdut* really mean in reference to Jews? Is it more kind of a fantastical aspiration of something that is unrealizable? Were Jews ever really “one”? And if not, is that a bad thing. And so, what work does this fantasy of unity really do?

Sometime in the 1950s, Jewish philosopher Simon Rawidowicz who taught in the Near Eastern and Judaic Studies Department at Brandeis from 1948 until his death in 1951, penned an essay entitled, “Israel, The Ever-Dying People.” In this essay Rawidowicz explored the notion of anxiety and survival as Jews made their way through a diasporic history where persecution accompanied relative tolerance. Throughout this ever-dying history, as Rawidowicz sees it, Jews held onto, and also abandoned, many “myths” of collective existence. And they viewed themselves on the precipice of dying, always dying, but always managing to survive.

Perhaps the last big myth to fall out of favor for Jews as they integrated deeper into societies that accepted them, has been the notion of divine election, that the Jews are a chosen people, chosen by God, the creator of heaven and earth, above all others. The idea is first openly challenged by Amsterdam philosopher Spinoza and then more comprehensively discarded by the American Jewish theologian Mordecai Kaplan. While many American Jews still maintain the doctrine of divine election in our democratic and tolerant society, they do so with the awareness of its complexity in ways that their ancestors did not.

Lately we have been hearing a lot about the term Jewish peoplehood. Jewish peoplehood is an odd term as a descriptor of a historical phenomenon, in part because, as Noam Pianko has shown us in his book *Jewish Peoplehood: An American Innovation*, the very term only emerges in early twentieth-century America through the work of Mordecai Kaplan and the leading Reform rabbi of that generation, Stephen Wise. Pianko demonstrates how Jewish peoplehood is different from other similar terms such as *Am Yisrael* (the People Israel, think of Leo Baeck's book *The People Israel: The Meaning of Jewish Existence*), and Pianko shows how "Jewish peoplehood" was used to identify an American Jewish diaspora that was both loyal to its country of residence and faithful to the Jewish nationalism that brought about the state of Israel. It also shines light on one of the more interesting turns of our time. In the peoplehood model as I understand it, Jews are not a people held together by Torah, or Judaism, or even tradition, but by the mere fact of their existence as a people. There has been a Jewish people for a long time. But adding the suffix "hood" to *peoplehood* suggests a state or condition, not of being a Jew, but of being a people. But what does it mean that our existence can be boiled down to the fact that we simply exist. Is there any reason for us to exist, beside the fact that we do?

Put otherwise, what *of* the Jewish people in Jewish peoplehood? Does the concept of a Jewish people still function in any coherent way given the changing reality of 21st-century America? In an interview with Rabbi Joshua O. Haberman the rabbi of Washington Hebrew Congregation in Washington D.C. in the early 1990s, the Israeli scientist and philosopher Yeshayahu Leibowitz was asked about the Jews as a "chosen people." He replied, "We are chosen to be a people responsible for *mitzvot* [and] we

accepted the task...[for] many generations.” When asked if this was still true, Leibowitz replied, “No, it ceased in the mid-nineteenth century.”

Leibowitz is essentially saying that the notion of a coherent Jewish collective, a “Jewish people” founded on fidelity to Torah, ceased to exist in the 19th century precisely because what constituted it, what gave it life — accepting the *mitzvot* — was rejected among a large enough group that it no longer functioned as a unifying force. At the same time, emancipation undermined the political foundation of peoplehood. Once Jews pledged their allegiance to societies outside the Jewish collective body by accepting citizenship in democratic countries, even as they retained fidelity to Jewish identity, the notion of peoplehood as previously conceived collapsed. I think this is what Leibowitz may have meant, or at least how I am reading him. As a Zionist Leibowitz maintained that there may be a reconstitution of “peoplehood” through political sovereignty but the price is the loss of a people founded in Torah and mitzvot. In terms of the construction of *peoplehood*, Zionism for Leibowitz undermines Judaism.

Jews could feel aligned with one another in a tribal sense (hence the MOT — members of the tribe, an expression that arose with multiculturalism) but the condition of being a Jew that one shared with all other Jews in all other locales began to erode. And in some way, this is in part what gave rise to the call of “*Achdus!*” as a life raft on a sinking ship of Jewish collective solidarity.

Jewish nationalism emerged to take the place of a people bound together through Torah, which evoked a whole other set of issues. How are the Jews one if only part of them belong to a Jewish collective that exercises political sovereignty? And what does it mean to be part of a Jewish nation and live outside of it? If you are a Jew, the 2018

Nation State Law that says Israel is only the country of the Jewish people, it is essentially saying Israel is *your* country. But for many of us, most of us here, it is not. But on their terms (the Jews only have one country) we are living outside of our true country. In this sense, the 2018 Nation State Law doesn't present Israel as the solution to exile but rather presents Israel as a deepening of exile for those who choose not to live there (even if they choose to support it).

As Pianko shows in his book, Jewish nationalism is not Jewish peoplehood — no matter how Zionism may have coopted the diasporic term for its own use. The Museum of the Diaspora in Jerusalem was recently re-named “The Museum of the Jewish People.” In its earlier iteration the Museum of the Jewish Diaspora was precisely about chronicling the Diaspora experience in a Jewish state. Another museum was called, and remains, The Israel Museum. Changing the name to the Museum of the Jewish People (in Tel Aviv) makes a certain claim, or perhaps connection, between the Jewish people, and the state of Israel. This came though even more openly in the 2018 Nation State Law that defined Israel as “the state of the Jewish people,” even though almost half of the Jewish people don't live there.

Ironically, it is precisely when the rupture of peoplehood shows itself most openly in 20th-century America, where Jews find a home where we are truly accepted, even given the rise in antisemitic acts, Kaplan and Wise come up with the term “Jewish peoplehood” to enable Jews to feel both a part of and also distinct from the Jewish nationalism that threatened to evoke the ominous accusation of dual-allegiance. Jewish peoplehood was supposed to circumvent the fissure made by Israel and the Jewish

Diaspora. It was supposed to be, in some sense, to sew together a disparate people as a way to salvage *achdut*.

What I am suggesting is that the myth of Jewish peoplehood enabled Jews who no longer anchored their Jewish identity in religion and chose *not* to immigrate to Israel, to make sense of their identity as part of a larger collective, without bumping up against national affiliation or dual allegiance. But today the nature of American Jews' relationship to Jewish nationalism and American nationalism, or just Americanness more generally, is more complicated, and the fact of Jewish community as comprised solely of Jews is no longer a reality. Most American Jews are multi-ethnic. Most American Jews have non-Jewish family members or relatives. Most Jewish communities include non-Jews as members, tacitly or formally. Instead of trying to hold onto a myth created almost a century ago to meet specific social and religious needs, perhaps we need to re-think the nature of Jewish collectivity considering changing circumstances?

Regarding the new reality of the American Jewish community, one that contains Jews, half-Jews, non-Jews, spousal Jews, Jewcurious etc. we need another model of thinking about collective identity that can transition us from the old myth of a coherent, cohesive, and well-defined notion of who is and is not part of the Jewish people, that is, *achdus!*, to one that contains the rubrics for more expansive thinking. Can we still be a people, and not be one? It doesn't mean we are divided *against* ourselves but that we have different, even contradictory ways of constructing our Jewishness. We may be divided *amongst* ourselves. To some degree we deploy the term pluralism to express such sentiments but pluralism is both too complicated and too simple a term in my view to capture what I am trying to say. Pluralism begins with a stable core and then extends

inclusiveness and tolerance from that core. I am suggesting that the core is not one, the core contains plurality and contradictions. Without a stable center out of which boundaries can be drawn, pluralism kind of collapses into plurality.

Here I want to bring back a figure from the past, Felix Adler who in his time was one of the most influential Jewish thinkers in early 20th century America. He was Mordecai Kaplan's teacher and MA advisor at Columbia and Kaplan was deeply influenced by him. Deciding to abandon Judaism and, I suppose, the notion of the Jewish people, after briefly serving as the senior rabbi of Temple Emmanuel in Manhattan, then one of the largest Reform congregations in America (where his father Samuel Adler served as rabbi), Adler left Temple Emmanuel to found The Society for Ethical Culture as a new model of spiritual and intellectual community. It is now known as the Fieldston School.

In the prestigious Hibbert Lectures he delivered in England 1923 entitled "The Reconstruction of the Spiritual Ideal" Adler proffered a new paradigm of community he called "group morality." Each group, he suggests, is constituted by unlike individuals exercising unlike functions. He wrote, "The unlikeness of function is the mark that distinguishes a group from a herd." I am not suggesting we adopt Adler's model of the Jewish collective as a group of unlike individuals, meaning those of many ethnic groups. And this is not a call for universal cosmopolitanism either. Rather, I am offering a rubric whereby we can re-think the notion of "unlikeness," even ethnic unlikeness, as part of a collective that can have Jewish value, albeit not in an absolute sense. But then, what holds us together as "one"? And is that even necessary? And who is us?

Here American Jewry and Israeli Jewry face some similar yet also different challenges; the former in relation to a diasporic collective (living as a minority), the latter in terms of a polity (living as the majority). Israel is a Jewish society that needs to re-think its integration of its non-Jewish citizenry as integral parts of that society, in short, civil rights for all who reside under its jurisdiction. That's always been the question voiced mostly in a whisper throughout the history of the state, labeled by some early Zionists as "the Arab Question" and what some right-wing Zionists today call the "Arab problem." (recently, a Knesset member said "There is no solution to the Arab problem because the Arabs' *are* the problem).

We can see how this year in some way this has become the very *raison de etre* of the Israeli protest movement. Israel needn't abandon the "Jewishness" of the society to address that issue, few among the protestors want that, as we can see by their adaptation of the Israeli flag as their symbol. But the "unlikeness" of the Israeli Arabs to say nothing of the Palestinians, needs to be more than tolerated but fully and seriously integrated which, as some suggest, would require revising the Israeli national anthem which also needs to be the anthem to many Israeli non-Jews or, perhaps more realistically, creating an Israeli constitution.

In America, we need to re-think ethnic identity as a pre-requisite to membership in our community, not to simply tolerate the non-Jew as a kind of compromise, but, when applicable, to make non-Jewish members of our community an integral part of the community which may mean the reformulation, or creation of rituals that would include them in the religious life of the community.

As we move further into this new century, any restructuring of Jewish collective identity in what I am calling a post-peoplehood phase should thus include two additional components: first, a positive sense of diasporic existence — one might say positive and even proud integration into to an increasingly post-ethnic America (other diasporic venues may require something different) — founded on the premise of security, prosperity, and political and cultural investment that America offers. And second, that any new vision of Jewish collective identity must face the reality that this category now includes non-Jews, not as potential converts, and not even as “converts” but as Jews who happen not to have been born Jewish, and even those who remain outside the Jewish people orbit, all as fully functional members of this new Jewish collective body, even *as* non-Jews. They should not only be tolerated but also included as part of that collective spiritual identity, part of a new Jewish group morality.

Spinoza believed divine election could not survive the modern state. And Kaplan believed it could not survive American democracy. And Leibowitz believed a cohesive idea of the Jewish people could not survive Jews rejecting the yoke of commandments. Maybe they were all right even as we have struggled mightily to claim they were all wrong. And maybe it’s time for us to begin re-thinking what we mean when we say the Jewish people or Jewish peoplehood as more than a slogan to rally the troops and as a broad idea to give to the next generation as an inheritance.

Certainly, Jewish communities where Torah, mitzvot, and tradition remain the center will continue to exist, as they should. But it has been a long time since those communities have been able to claim exclusive rights to authenticity enough to dictate norms for everyone else. Those communities can claim pride of place as representing a

past era and, as is their want, to make a nostalgic case for authenticity. But those of us who chose to live our Judaism, or our Jewishness, outside that framework need to more forcefully and honestly think about what Jewishness means to us outside of nostalgia and the fear that we will be the last ones to turn out the lights. In some way, that is how some traditionalists portray us and make us feel, the last ones out of the door, and it often succeeds. Jewish traditionalism in America is supported generously by non-traditional Jews.

Perhaps this need for *achdus*, for unity, for oneness, too easily compels us to see that we are the ones outside and we need to find a place in the tent that traditionalists provide. “They have the goods” they say, and many of us always cede, and thus they promote *achdus* on their terms. And we buy in all too easily, perhaps because we have little to show in return and because, in some way, our Jewishness is not about unity in traditional terms. Or, because while it means something to us, it doesn’t really mean that much.

Maybe those who call most vocally for *achdut* are the ones who make *achdut* impossible precisely because they set the terms of oneness all must adhere to and if one doesn’t, they are guilty of upsetting the cart. In an older world of the Middle Ages, this is largely how heresy functioned. The church defined doctrine and those who did not agree were excluded. So the terms of *achdut* were defined by the ecclesiastical authority. We, of course, live in a different world.

Let me illustrate this with a Hasidic text. The Hasidic work *Imrei Menachem* by the Polish Hasidic master Menachem Danziger of Alexander offers an interesting perspective on the verse in Psalms 29:11, *Ha-Shem oz l’ami yeten H’ yerabekh et amo*

b'shalom. He writes, “By divisions in Israel there is a blemish in Torah as Torah is *achdut gamur*. As a result, “life” departs, because there is no life without Torah as the midrash on Psalms teaches... The hint is that by means of *makhloket* or controversy, which is the opposite of peace, life itself departs.”

There seems to be an implied binary here between *achdut* as unity, and *perud*, or division. Between life and its opposite, which is existence without Torah. But what is at stake here is really the unity of Torah; that Torah itself stands at the center of what constitutes Jewish living. Now what exactly Torah means is an open question, or perhaps it should be. Even for those of us who maintain Torah as divine in some sense, its contours are humanly defined. What creates a sense of unity among us is the common project of creating Torah, of renewing Torah, of taking ownership of Torah since it is Torah whose very essence is *achdut*. *Achdut* is not tolerating another position, it is seeing how different parts actually emerge from the one, the *ehad*, that is Torah.

I understand that for many Jews today, peoplehood functions precisely because Torah does not, in part because it has been dictated to us by a group that claims ownership of it, and presents it to us in a way that does not speak to us as Jews today. The unspoken battle for authenticity. But isn't it that very claim of ownership that is the source of division? *Achdut* then simply means playing by “my terms.” Peoplehood as a non-Torah-centered template for Jewish flourishing is good as far as it goes but we must find some way to reattach ourselves to Torah, which, as our Hasidic text suggests, is the real unifying force. On the other side of modernity, we must find a way back to Torah which, really a way forward to Torah. Not by abandoning our values to do so, but by

interpreting our values for the greater good of the world mediating by an embodiment of Jewishness that is about fixing the world, not simply enjoying it.

I think *perud*, or division, is often necessary to foster this. If done for the sake of heaven division can foster a new set of parameters whereby *achdut* can function. Otherwise *achdut* implies a unity on someone else's terms. Maybe we shouldn't call *achdut* unity but something closer to a complex web of tenuous contradictions that grow from, with, and in site of one another.

Maybe we should consider letting go of Jewish peoplehood and should consider the critique of its viability from Spinoza through Leibowitz and also a new diasporic frame that embraces rather than laments the non-Jew in our midst and celebrates rather than resists the opportunities of diasporic existence. As Israelis will have to learn to co-exist with its non-Jewish people on equal terms, we in the Diaspora may have to learn how to integrate the non-Jew into our Jewish communities. It may contain some nostalgia that compels us to keep myths alive long after they become obsolete. But I suggest today we also need to find a way back to Torah, a new Torah that will be our contribution to the world. There is no unity without Torah, and there is no Torah that is not constantly being renewed.