*heasfu –* Assemble Yourselves!

by

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*Schechina rests only upon one in a state of simcha…*

2017 dawns on an age in which anger, negativity and personal animus is spiking across the nation and the world. Disturbingly, this same trend seems to be etching its way ever deeper into our own Orthodox community. For more and more Orthodox the *sine qua non* is “us versus them” with the “us” being a narrow “just like me” Jew and the “them” being *other Jews* who do not meet a pre-ordained criteria of how to look, how to act, where to pray, etc.

The extent of the vituperation visited by one Jew upon another is beyond disheartening, it saps the holiness and divine inspiration that should animate our Jewish community and world, leaving us vulnerable to the greatest dangers imaginable – from both within and without!

With so much hate and turmoil roiling our observant community, is it any wonder that so many flee? Is it any wonder that so many stay away? Who *wouldn’t* prefer an accepting, caring environment with people who express love and concern rather than a judgmental, angry gathering that is a “community” in name only?

The question is not, what has become of us? but more importantly, What *will* become of us?

When Yaakov was getting ready to leave this world, he brought his children together to charge them not only with personal goals and aspirations, but also with a national mission. “Assemble yourselves and I will tell you what will befall you in the End of Days.” (Breishit 49:1)

*Heasfu ­*– assemble yourselves, come and receive blessings.

In calling his children together, Yaakov was teaching them that to be together is *in and of itself* a blessing of Jewish existence, that to gather, to assemble – to *avoid dissension* – is a foundational necessity of Jewish existence. Assembled together, we can merit and achieve *geula*. Apart, we are at the mercy of what’s most evil in the world and ourselves.

*Am Yisrael’s* greatest blessing is unity; our greatest curse, *machlokes*. As Rabbi Soloveitchik taught, “If one tribe is eliminated, *Knesses Yisrael* would be stillborn.”  The varied and individual gifts of each son contribute *together* to the fullness of our community. No two brothers are alike in temperament or ability. Our community is not *sameness* but *unity* and joy in our combined individual gifts.

Following the Midrash, Rashi comments that Yaakov wanted to tell his children when the long, bitter *galus* would end and when *Mashiach* would come but the Divine spirit “left him”. The Kotzker rebbe suggests this was so they should always live with the hope, always continue to anticipate, and always need to beseech and pray that they be worthy of the *geula* and so learn that God does not want us to find comfort in deadlines but in deeds that merit the End. Redemption must be earned, not gifted. *Mashiach* sits at Jerusalem’s gates, ready and *waiting for us* to genuinely want him.

In this context, understanding that God did not want to reveal the date of Redemption to Yaakov, the Radomsker Rebbe asks a difficult question, Why have the Divine Spirit leave him? Certainly God could have simply hidden this one data point without depriving him of the Divine Spirit. In wrestling with the question, the Radomsker reasoned that God did not actually remove the Divine Spirit directly. Rather, Yaakov foresaw *Am Yisrael’s* future of ordeals, trials and tribulations and he grew *so distressed and dejected* that he himself *lost his capacity* for Divine inspiration!

How could such a thing be? How does one simply “lose” his capacity for inspiration? Easier than we might imagine. As the Talmud teaches, “…*shechina* rests only upon one who is in a state of *simcha*.” From this, we learn that a basic qualification needed to attain Divine powers – *ruach hakodesh* – is *simcha*, joy. In seeing the harsh future of the Jewish people, Yaakov lost his joy, hope and optimism, causing the *shechina* to separate from him, leaving him only a sense of desperation.

As a people, we have managed to not only survive but to thrive through our many travails and our seemingly endless *galus* because we never lost hope; we never succumbed to a national depression. We remained one, unified, and in our unity we found joy. Even in *galus* we have seen the glimmers of light and hope guiding our way.

We have always been *one*.

But now? Now, at a time when the Orthodox community is showing strengths that were once unimaginable, we risk the greatest gift of all! Rather than invite unity; rather than embrace unity; rather than cling desperately to the one thing upon which our connection to the Divine Spirit rests, we consciously create dissension!

There are many, all too many, in our community today who are on the outs. Their parents have turned their backs on them. Their *rebbeim*, yeshiva rosters bursting with more compliant students, cast them aside. Neighbors, former friends and classmates… no one wants them. They have been stripped of their “membership” in the community.

Dumped by the very people who *should* want them most of all, who should love them most fiercely, who should celebrate them *warts and all* these OTD children have no place to find acceptance they desperately want than the streets. They want community but when their own community will not have them they find community in a gathering of other hurt and broken souls. How they suffer! And *not* because God has removed His Divine Spirit from them, *not* because God does not want to inspire them and reveal to them when their *Mashiach* will herald for them a better day, no, no, no not because God has abandoned them but because *we*, their parents, their *rebbeim*, their teachers and friends have removed from them their joy and optimism. Our OTD children can see no light, no hope. Like Yaakov, they see the darkness of the days ahead and cannot imagine a personal *geula*! They are weighted down by unrealistic demands, unreasonable expectations from home and school, no personal attention or sympathy and they lose hope, they lose *Simcha*. They see clearly the hypocrisy in those who have turned their backs.

How could they *not* be adrift?

We would be wise to understand that in his insightful lessons, the Radomsker spoke not only of Yaakov *Avinu*, but of our own Yankele! Yes, he speaks not only of our patriarch but of our children, once so delightful and curious, now surly and cynical, angry and bitter.

Yes, we live in a harsh time, an angry time. That is sad and unfortunate. That the same harshness and anger has seeped into our own community is a *shande*. That we live in a time of OTD is a judgment not on our children but on us!

We learn from the Ohr Hachayim Hakadosh that when Yaakov met Esau, his hid Dina, his daughter. Why? So Esau would not abduct her. To our modern eyes, we can see no fault in Yaakov’s actions but the Midrash teaches that Yaakov was *punished* for his actions, that had he given his daughter to his OTD brother perhaps she would have caused him to do *teshuvah* and return! So too *Yitzhak* intended all his blessings for his “evil” son so that perhaps if he gave him the most he could give, that would make him a *tzadik*!

Our tradition is filled with examples of small gestures of kindness turning the most recalcitrant sinner into a pious believer!

Yet we do not behave as though those lessons are real, or have power in our world.

We are wrong.

In Vayigash, when Yaakov is informed that Yosef is alive and sees the wagons sent by Yosef for him, the Torah tells us vatechi ruach Yaakov – the “spirit of Yaakov was revived”.

Rashi and Ramban comment on this that, in the years of Yosef’s absence, Yaakov was in mourning. He was sad and dejected. The Divine spirit had left him as it can only rest upon one in joy. But once Yaakov was once again happy and joyful, the Divine spirit returned and he was revived spiritually!

 Our OTD children can also be revived again, if we only gave them uplifting experiences. If we overwhelmed them with optimism and opportunities for growth and self-esteem, they too can have the Divine revisit them and our community can be whole, our community can be one in more than just name.