



Rediscovering Achdus: Transforming the Cliché into Something Real

There is a fascinating paradox that impacts many areas of life: increased awareness leads to decreased appreciation. The more we know something — often — the less we value it. An excellent example of this phenomenon is the concept of *achdus*; everybody knows the importance of unity and everyone declares their fidelity to it. And yet, it is precisely for this reason that I am afraid that we tend to ignore the truly central role that *achdus* should play in our religious lives. It is mentioned so ubiquitously that it tends to become a cliché, devoid of meaning.

One way to counter this damaging trend is by highlighting examples where commitment to our fellow Jews and sensitivity to others' needs and feelings plays a clear role in a religious experience or mitzvah. Instead of viewing *achdus* as a vague concept,

we must internalize that it carries real obligations, requiring us to act in concrete and meaningful ways.

The Yamim Noraim — a uniquely intense period on the Jewish calendar — provide several opportunities to demonstrate this essential truth.

A core message of Rosh Hashana is that we are “*mamlich*” Hashem, we proclaim His kingship over the entire world. Our Musaf prayers are structured around three themes, the first of which is *malchiyus*, where we elaborate on ten verses that each declare the monarchy and majesty of Hashem (see *Rosh Hashana* 16a, 34b).

R. Simcha Zissel, the Alter of Kelm, a prominent disciple of R. Yisroel Salanter and a leading mussar authority in his own right, strikingly noted that there is a link between coronating Hashem and *achdus*. After all, he reasoned, any monarchy depends, to a



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large extent, on the unity of the king's subjects in loyal service of the Crown. If we are not unified then we cannot fully proclaim Hashem's dominion.

Remarkably, as a result of this insight, R. Simcha Zissel would hang up a notice on door of the Kelm Talmud Torah every year for the entire month preceding Rosh Hashana, which reminded his students of this vital truth. The note emphasized to the students that without first committing unreservedly to each other, their declared commitment to Hashem would be inauthentic (“*dover shekarim*”). R. Simcha Zissel, the quintessential educator, ultimately

boiled this lofty idea down to its practical essence: “*achdus ha-avadim hu kiyum ha-malchus*,” the fullness of the monarchy is sustained by the unity of the servants.

Throughout the Yamim Noraim we say *Avinu Malkeinu*, proclaiming our relationship with Hashem as both a Father and a King. That we have a common Father is an obvious call for *achdus*. Yet what emerges from R. Simcha Zissel is that genuine *achdus* among the Jewish people is integral to proclaiming Hashem as *Malkeinu*, a prerequisite for truly observing Rosh Hashana.

As we move through the *Aseres Yemei Teshuva*, eventually culminating with Yom Kippur, teshuva and the need to repent takes on added urgency. Here too *achdus* plays a critical and concrete role — in two ways.

When it comes to repentance, we distinguish between sins against Hashem, *bein adam la-Makom*, and interpersonal transgressions, *bein adam la-chavero*. To achieve atonement for a *bein adam la-Makom* sin you must regret your past actions, commit to not repeating the transgression in the future, and then verbalizing your confession. However, when it comes to a *bein adam la-chavero* sin, you must first ask forgiveness from the person that you hurt and only then can you begin the process of being forgiven by Hashem (*Shulchan Aruch*, O”C 606:1).

While this basic halacha indicates the importance of interpersonal

relationships, some authorities, such as the *Birkei Yosef* (O”C 606:1), go even further and assert that all atonement — even for transgressions *bein adam la-Makom* — is only possible after you have been forgiven by all individuals you have sinned against. Incredibly, according to this view, no teshuva — for any sin — is possible without first properly repenting for interpersonal sins.

The implication of this position is truly breathtaking: repairing ruptured relationships and creating social harmony is a linchpin for restoring our connection with Hashem.

A third, related, example of the importance of *achdus* is the wholesale impact it can have on our judgement during the Yamim Noraim.

Aside from the responsibility to repent for specific sins that we have transgressed, the *Meshech Chochma* (Vayikra 8:7) suggests that connecting to the community so intensively that we essentially merge our identity with the collective identity of the *tzibur* may itself allow us to “purify” ourselves from all of our individual inadequacies. As a source for this seemingly radical and novel idea, he cites a ruling from the agricultural laws of *orlah*. Even though fruit that grows in the first three years is prohibited, if a branch from such a tree is grafted onto an older tree, the fruit that subsequently grows from that branch is permitted because the branch loses (“*batlah*”) its identity and is now viewed as part of the larger — and older — tree (*Sotah* 43b).

Similarly, argues the *Meshech Chochma*, if we “graft” ourselves to the larger community, we can take on the identity of the community and thereby “cleanse” ourselves from our individual sins and shortcomings. The *Shev Shmatsa* (Introduction) suggests a similar idea, rooted in the laws of “nullification” (“*bitul*”) of non-kosher foodstuff (see *Zevachim* 78a): “submerging” ourselves in the larger community can “nullify” all of our sins — in one fell-swoop — in the larger whole of the Jewish people.

It thus emerges that during the period from Elul through Yom Kippur there are multiple instances where we can actualize the value of *achdus* — and related principles — in a tangible way. We must be unified to properly coronate Hashem as King on Rosh Hashana; we must make peace with each other before we can be granted full atonement, and total identification with the broader community can help us be “cleansed,” allowing us to escape a more severe, individualized judgement.

Far from an empty cliché, *achdus* properly understood and practiced is the key to our relationship with our fellow Jews and with Hashem.

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