

United by Action, Not Words

Moshe Taragin

One word is on everyone's mind. During the past year, Israeli society was plagued by corrosive social rifts and vitriolic political disagreements. October 7th changed everything, and the ensuing war left us little choice but to unite in defense of our lives. Unity has been involuntarily thrust upon us. The atmosphere of unity in Israel has suffused across the Jewish world. The entire Jewish nation, across many continents and across all denominations, has banded together to defend our people and its homeland. The word "achdut", or unity, has become a motto: yachad ninatzeiach (together we will triumph).

We have all considered the pressing question: what will the "day after" look like in Gaza? What political arrangement in Gaza can provide Palestinian stability without threatening Israel. A different, but equally important version of this question is: what will the "day after" look like within our society? Will we revert back to division and discord or will we preserve our current condition of unity. We are all in search of a magic solution to preserve our resuscitated national solidarity.

Typically, we articulate unity in broad ideological terms. We envision ways to bridge the differences between ourselves and those who possess different religious or political views. By celebrating the common ideas or values which unite us, rather than accentuating the values which divide us, we coexist with people whose lifestyles differ from our own. We bridge ideological chasms by stressing shared values and common narratives.

Unlike ideological achdut which is achieved through common ideas, a more powerful version of unity, which can be termed "social achdut" is achieved by common experiences. We are deeply interconnected when we step outside our social standings and professional titles and perform common ordinary tasks. Action is always more compelling than thinking. Acting together yields deeper solidarity than merely thinking about common values.

Moshe the pallbearer

Parshat Beshalach portrays the triumphant liberation of our people from Egyptian persecution. After two centuries of humiliation and dehumanization, we victoriously marched out of Egypt with our eyes set upon the promised land. Leaving in breakneck speed, we furiously darted around Egypt, organizing our families and livestock for the journey. It was a chaotic scene, with little time to remember an ancient promise to a long-forgotten grandfather. Everyone was far too busy to extract Yosef's remains from his Egyptian crypt. On this day of mayhem, no one had the time or presence of mind for this chore. No one, except Moshe Rabeinu, arguably, the busiest man on Earth. Preoccupied with an entire nation, Moshe still found the time to personally excavate Yosef's coffin from Egypt. More impressively, during the entire forty-year desert trek, Moshe never delegated this menial task to others, but instead, kept the coffin in his constant presence. He didn't view this assignment as beneath his dignity or unfit for his lofty station. This man, who humbled a tyrant, split the seas, and scaled the heavens, didn't regard towing a coffin as undignified.

Moshe Rabeinu refused to erect social barriers between himself and the common people. By performing common and ordinary duties, he experienced social unity, not allowing himself to be locked into a specific profile based upon his professional standing. Unlike the bones of Yosef, Moshe refused to be put into a box.

War is a Leveler

Over the past few months, the war in Israel has helped us step outside our own boxes and, through common experience, achieve social unity. Our soldiers are fighting side-by-side, regardless of socio-economic status or professional occupation. War is a great leveler as everyone, regardless of social status or rank, performs the exact same tasks and missions. Previous status in civilian life doesn't affect wartime assignments. Students are fighting alongside lawyers, while Hi-tech entrepreneurs are sitting in tanks next to farmers and fishermen. IT specialists next to factory managers. New fathers next to grandfathers. Newly married husbands next to grizzled war veterans. In the battlefield, everyone is equal.

A middle-aged rabbinic colleague of mine (name withheld for privacy reasons) is a brilliant Talmudic scholar, as well as a revered community

Rabbi in Israel. He was drafted into a reserve tank unit and has spent the past 100 days in active combat. During this period, in his spare time, he published an advanced Torah essay in memory of a student who was killed in battle. During those 100 days he was an ordinary soldier, no different from the younger or less educated members of his unit.

This week, his entire platoon was released, and he received the award of "ot hitztaynut pelugatit" honoring him for being the most diligent and hardworking soldier of the entire 50-member platoon. I am inspired that someone of his caliber didn't allow his professional profile to stand in the way of working hard, alongside many younger soldiers. This is just one of many examples of how war has erased the social and professional boxes which often define us and limit us.

Taxi drivers

This home front or the "oref" has also leveled us. We have been pressed into emergency service, stepping outside our typical comfort zones to perform tasks and errands which were never part of our normal routines. Over the past few months, in addition to being a Rabbi and teacher, I have become a taxi driver, food deliverer, babysitter and stand-in parent for my grandchildren, whose own parents have been drafted. We have tried not to let our titles and social standing impede our wartime assistance. No tasks are too high or too low.

One vivid story perfectly captures this home front unity. During the war, out of security concerns, the yeshiva's Arab kitchen staff was barred entry. Facing this manpower shortage, students volunteered for kitchen detail. A month ago, on a day that no students were available, our executive director volunteered for kitchen duty. To everyone's astonishment, he was quickly joined by Rav Meidan, our 73-year old Rosh Yeshiva, who himself was preoccupied both with yeshiva obligations, as well as with dealing with his own son's serious battlefield injuries. For Rav Meidan, washing dirty dishes was never viewed as beneath his dignity or unfit for his title.

True leadership does not mean influencing others through loud announcements or through popular social media posts. True leaders set quiet examples of self-sacrifice as they role-model core values of life. Watching the Rosh Yeshiva donning an apron, I immediately thought of

Moshe hauling a coffin out of Egypt. Nobility has little to do with the wallet or with clothing. True nobility lies in our spirit, and can surface while performing any task, high or low, honorable or menial.

Life on the battlefield, as well as on the home front has helped us step out of our narrow profiles, allowing us to share common tasks and common experiences. I feel more unified with my people when we all perform the exact same tasks and chores, regardless of any professional profile or social standing. It is refreshing to be ordinary and to be common. I feel this unity more viscerally and more authentically than ideological unity, which is built upon common values and ideals. Experience is always more powerful than ideas. Unity of experience will always be more powerful than unity of ideas.

Experiencing social unity, I don't just respect other people's opinions, but I act as they act. They act as I act. In this, we are one.

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