

Blessings of "Shalom"

Photo: Yossie Melamed, Jerusalem



I have been invited to offer my blessings for this gathering. This could actually be done privately, in the manner of all *brachos*. Only the blessings of the *Kohanim* require public proclamation, in a loud audible voice. Yet there is good reason to pronounce a blessing aloud—so that all within earshot can add their own affirmative "*Omein*."

RABBI KAMENETSKY, Rosh Yeshiva of Mesfita Torah Vodaath, is a member of the Moetzes Gedolei HaTorah of Agudath Israel of America. The first essay is based on his address at the opening session of the Knessia Gedolah; the second, on his greetings at the "Dvar Moetzes Gedolei HaTorah" session. These were prepared for publication by Pinchos Meyers, an American studying in Mir, Jerusalem.

The Individual Blessing

We have a precedent for public expression of personal blessings, when Yaakov Avinu gathered his sons around his death bed to bless them. He realized that he was leaving his family at the onset of the Egyptian bondage and therefore proceeded to delineate the respective roles they were to play in *Klal Yisroel*, blessing each son as the progenitor of his tribe—each individual according to his talents, his gifts, and his destiny. *Klal Yisroel*, then, was not to be one homogeneous community, but rather twelve tribes—each with its own function—yet each but a part of a whole. No tribe was to impinge on the functions of the other.

The consequences of such an encroachment would be disastrous, as evidenced by the disappearance of the Chashmonai lineage. The *Ramban* explains that this was a direct result of this family—members of the tribe of Levi—having assumed the monarchy, a responsibility clearly devolving upon the descendants of Yehuda. Each tribe must accept the individuality of its fellow tribe.

It is natural for one who excels in a particular *mitzva* to consider that *mitzva* not only as important but imperative, surpassing perhaps most others. A wealthy person would naturally feel that the *mitzva* of debt repayment is of paramount importance. There is some truth to this. The *Chazal* declare: "G-d wanted Israel to be meritorious and therefore gave them Torah and *mitzvos* in abundant measure." The *Rambam* (Commentary to the *Mishna*, end of *Makos*) explains this to mean that if a Jew observes a single *mitzva* with all of its ramifications, it will lead eventually to his observance of the other *mitzvos* as well. We find, for example, that the people who lived in the region of Rabbi Yehuda (in the times of the *Mishna*) were exceedingly careful in regard to *Shvi'is*—the laws pertaining to the Sabbatical year. They became identified with that particular *mitzva*.

Despite the importance of each group's unique method of divine service, each person and every persuasion must realize that they are part of an aggregate whole, and must respect their fellow's way of serving the Creator. To underscore this point, all of Yaakov's sons were present when each son received his individual blessing, as if to say: take note of the distinctive

gift of your brother, and his specific role within *Klal Yisroel*.

In Pursuit of Harmony

This mutual respect can be described as "*Shalom*"—but this does not simply mean peace in the conventional sense, a total absence of differences. By the same token, *machlokes*—commonly thought to refer to contentious quarreling—can even be beneficial. As long as it is *Le-Shem Shomayim* it can even be consistent with *Shalom*—but with one condition: it must be confined to situations such as when one group conforms to the opinion of the *Rambam* and the other to that of the *Ravad*. This definition is evident from the *Rambam*, who rules that during the time of *machlokes* or war, it is necessary that Jewish kings be anointed to dispel doubts regarding their rights to the throne—e.g. *machlokes* such as when Yoav and Evyasar Hakohen sided with Adoniah in his claim to the crown, in opposition to Solomon—not a dispute that grew out of rivalry or envy, but a dispute in which each side was led by spiritual leaders.

Corroboration to this definition of *machlokes* is apparent from Rabbi Eliezer's dispute with the sages, in which the majority rule prevailed despite numerous heavenly signs that seemed to verify Rabbi Eliezer's position. In the end, Rabbi Eliezer was excommunicated for refusing to submit to majority rule because Rabban Gamliel declared "there should not be excessive *machlokes* in Israel." Such is the meaning of *machlokes*—a polemic for the Sake of Heaven—not motivated by jealousy and petty rivalry.

Important, Yet Not Dominant

This was Yaakov Avinu's will and testament to his descendants. Each tribe is to have its own role. Each one's role is not merely important, but crucial. But—of paramount importance—each must realize that the future of Judaism does not rest on his shoulders alone.

When Agudath Israel was established, it was a synthesis of widely divergent views and ways of life. It was the meeting of East and West—the coalescence of the worlds of the Gerrer Rebbe and Moreinu Yaakov Rosenheim זכרונם לברכה. At the time, people were amazed that such dissimilar outlooks could blend so harmoniously. But the Torah giants of that generation

successfully bridged this enormous gap to create a cohesive and therefore powerful force to fight for the Torah ideal. In view of the importance of diversity in Torah Judaism, one of the original by-laws of Agudath Israel was that each country was to be directed by its own Torah leaders. This conforms with the *Rambam's* ruling that after the completion of the Talmud, the decrees of the *Gaonim* were only binding in their own region. Indeed, the three decrees of Rabbeinu Gershom were never accepted in Sephardic countries.

The diversity of Judaism is its source of strength. It was in regard to divergence in points of view that the Talmud says: "These and those are the words of the living G-d," and indeed each group has its own unique concept of the "words of the living G-d."

And so it was that when all the sons of Yaakov declared in unison: "Hear O Israel, the Lord our G-d, the Lord is one" that Yaakov Avinu was able to respond "Blessed is the name of the glory of His Kingdom for ever." Only when Yaakov was assured of the *unity* of Israel was he convinced that the glory of G-d will surely be manifested by his descendants.

"Shalom"/Peace and "Machlokes"/Differences

"The Almighty found *Shalom* as the only suitable vessel for His bounteous blessing." "*Shalom*" does not mean identical views.—That is impossible, and undesirable, as well. Nor does it mean the end of warfare.—If that were so, then the verse "He makes peace in His firmaments" would imply that the Almighty brings peace to warring angels—and no mention is ever made that Gavriel and Michael were at battle with each other. "*Shalom*" means harmony, where melody and counterpoint complement rather than clash with each other, and each understands the other's strengths and appreciates his respective mission, tailored to fit his specific abilities. This, then, is the status in the heavens, the goal of Yaakov Avinu in blessing each of his sons in the presence of the rest, and the substance of my prayers on this assembly's behalf: that we *together*—cohesively—work to further the Divine purpose, with each group contributing its way of Torah life—its "word of the living G-d."

Now that I have expressed my blessings to you—that the harmony that grows out of mutual respect reign in our midst—I ask everyone here to please affirm my sentiments with an "*Omein*."

What is an Agudist?

What is an Agudist? What are his responsibilities over and above that of any observant Jew?

An Agudist must be like "Shimon and Levi, brothers who usurped weapons of war," as Yaakov Avinu referred to them—brothers who avenged the violation of their sister's honor. Yaakov continued: "I will

scatter them . . . and disperse them among Israel." The descendants of Shimon and Levi were to travel throughout Israel as teachers, *Kohanim* (priests) and *Leviim*.

What connection is there between the description of the two and their assigned role? The *Ramban* explains

that although all the brothers participated in avenging the violation of Dinah by Shechem, Shimon and Levi were the moving force behind this retribution. It was they who so deeply felt her shame. It was they who were shaken to their innermost core by the travesty perpetrated by Shechem—so shaken were they that they could not idly stand by and witness “their sister treated like a harlot.” Only owing to Shimon and Levi’s extreme distress were the other brothers galvanized into action.

It is therefore precisely Shimon and Levi who were most worthy of being the teachers and spiritual leaders of Israel. For who is better qualified to teach and to lead spiritually than he who is anguished when he perceives something in opposition to the honor of G-d and His people—he who is *not* content with painful thoughts and pious statements, but translates this heartache into action . . . because his very nature compels him to respond. That extra sensitivity and drive should be the

distinguishing feature of an Agudist.

The list of tasks to be accomplished and wrongs to be corrected is painfully long, but we *must* act and dare not silently stand by. But as with Shimon and Levi, this must be the result of our brotherly love and concern.

By the same token, this brotherly affection must not blind us to our brothers’ shortcomings—especially in Israel, where the distinctions between the holy and the profane are infinitely more difficult to discern. For even the negative can be easily polished and made to glitter in this land, where a carpenter is not merely a laborer, but one fulfilling the *mitzva* of building *Eretz Yisroel*. In a land where the blandishments necessary to portray the immoral as pure, and the profane as holy are so readily available—in such a land we must be doubly vigilant to correct wherever and whatever is humanly possible. Our zealousness and its consequent responses must be measured and responsible. This is the clear and present obligation of every Agudist. ✡

Rabbi Yaakov Yitzchok Ruderman שליט"א

An Agenda of Restraint and Vigilance for a Sacred Gathering

Photo: Frank Storch, Baltimore



RABBI RUDERMAN, Rosh Yeshiva of Ner Israel in Baltimore, is a member of the Moetzes Gedolei HaTorah of Agudath Israel of America. This essay is based on his address at the opening session of the Knessia Gedolah.

This large assembly, gathered together for the Knessia Gedolah, should merit the presence of the *Shechina*—the divine presence—on two counts: first, any time a group assembles, even if it consists of only ten Jews, it merits the *Shechina*’s presence. Moreover, the common purpose of spreading *Kavod Shomayim*, giving glory to G-d, also should endow this assembly with the *Shechina*’s presence. For even a much smaller group than this grand assembly can be an entity unto itself if it has some central binding force that endows it with a specific identity.

An interesting example of this concept may be found in the *Gemora* (*Berachos* 47) that discusses the criteria for forming an *eida*—a quorum of ten. The *Gemora* considers the suggestion that nine people and the *aron hakodesh* (the ark containing the Torah scrolls) might comprise an *eida*, but rejects this suggestion by pointing out that the *aron hakodesh* is inanimate and the prototype *eida* consists of ten people.

This surely seems strange: How could the *Gemora* have possibly considered that an *aron kodesh* might