



What does unity FEEL LIKE?

Barry Manilow was onto something when he sang: “I feel sad when you’re sad, I feel glad when you’re glad” | BY RABBI MOSHE KURTSTAG WITH ROBERT SUSSMAN

WE MAY NOT BE ABLE TO SAY WHAT UNITY LOOKS like, but we can describe how it should feel.

In 1911¹, a blood libel was brought in Kiev against Menachem Mendel Beilis, a Russian Jew, who was accused of murdering a non-Jewish child. While Beilis awaited trial in prison for more than two years, anti-Semitism raged, as accusations of a secret ritual murder lodged against him and the entire Jewish people. Jewish communities all over the world stood up in support of Beilis, increasing their daily tefillos (prayers), sending letters of support, and doing whatever they could to help. As is generally the case in such situations, it wasn’t only Beilis who was on trial, as the episode was used as an opportunity to put the entire Jewish people, and even our holy Torah, under the microscope, as people frantically searched for statements in the Torah and Talmud that could be interpreted as denigrating the existence of non-Jews, thereby showing that Jews did not value their lives and would think nothing of their murder.

One of those attempts involved a famous passage in the gemara that states²: “Atem [you in the plural form, ie, the entire Jewish people] are called ‘adam’ – man [in the singular, ie, a reference to a single person], but non-Jews are not called ‘adam’ – man.” Based on this excerpt from the Talmud, the prosecutor in the Beilis trial argued that Jews do not consider non-Jews to be human beings, but rather the equivalent of animals and, therefore, it would be understandable that we would consider their lives to be, chas v’shalom, of lesser value and entirely dispensable.

Among the many rabbis who came to the defence of Beilis and the Talmud was Rabbi Meir Shapiro³, z”l, who is today best known as the person who instituted the daily study of Talmud (gemara) known as Daf Yomi (the learning of a single page, back and front, of gemara each day, which takes place throughout the world and enables a person to complete the study of the entire gemara in a period of roughly 7.5 years), who sent an explanation of this gemara for Beilis’ defence attorney to use at the trial. Rabbi Shapiro argued that the Jewish people are referred to by the singu-

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lar ‘adam’ – man – rather than the plural, ‘anashim’ (men), because we are really a single entity that happens to be made up of many different parts, in the same way that a single human body is comprised of many different parts: skin, bones, sinews, muscles, organs, etc. Although the Jewish people are spread out all over the entire world, out of these varied and seemingly disconnected parts, we comprise one single, interconnected body. When one of us is in pain, we are all in pain, and when one of us is in trouble, we are all in trouble – and Rabbi Shapiro argued, the worldwide outpouring of support for Beilis in terms of the many letters, etc, should be clear enough evidence of this for the court. Fur-



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thermore, the gemara⁴ teaches: Kol Yisroel areivim zeh la’zeh – “all Jews are responsible for each other” – the Jewish people care about and feel a unique responsibility for the welfare of one another. A single Jew on trial in Russia is of tremendous concern to every other Jew, whether those Jews are in Amsterdam, or London, or New York – such a thing touches and affects every single Jew, no matter where he may be in the world; it is, from the perspective of the Jewish people and their holy Torah, as though the entire Jewish people were on trial! And we see this idea throughout Jewish history; whenever Jews are threatened, we put aside our differences and the entire people come together and unite.



Does such a thing happen when a non-Jew is on trial? We do not see such concern from non-Jews throughout the world when one of their own is on trial in another country, let alone one's own country or even one's own town – because non-Jews simply do not have this intrinsic sense of connection between them. The pain felt by one non-Jew does not elicit any sort of reaction from another non-Jew, even when they are from the same place and even when they share the same religion. Accordingly, Rabbi Shapiro explained, the Jewish people are correctly referred to by a singular name, 'adam', whereas non-Jews can only be referred to by the plural form of that same word, 'Anashim', men (or people). Thankfully, the jury eventually acquitted Beilis – and seemingly, the entire Jewish people and our Torah along with him.

This unique quality of Jewish unity – what makes us laugh and rejoice together at each other's smachot (as we sing, "Siman tov u'mazel tov yehe lanu u'lechol Yisrael – may there be a good sign and a good fortune for us and for all Israel") and cry and mourn at each other's losses – is actually something we see in the mitzvos that Hashem commanded us, such as lo titor⁵ (don't bear a grudge) and lo titom⁶ (don't take revenge), as well as v'ahavta lere'acha kamocho⁷ (love your fellow as you love yourself), all of which, we should note, were commanded in the very same passage in the Torah. Rashi, our great teacher, explains⁸ what is meant by revenge: A person says to someone: "Lend me your sickle,"

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and the other person responds: "No." The next day, the person who turned down the previous day's request approaches the person who had asked him and says: "Lend me your axe," and the other person responds: "No, I will not lend (my axe) to you, just as you would not lend (your sickle) to me" – this is taking revenge. What is bearing a grudge? If instead, the person was to answer: "Here is (my axe), I am not like you who did not lend (your sickle) to me" – this is bearing a grudge, for he bears hatred for the other person in his heart, even though he does not take revenge on him (by refusing to loan him the axe).

But, how can a person really be expected to rise to such an occasion and behave in such a manner, giving the item wholeheartedly without any trace of ill feeling in his heart towards someone who refused to do the very same thing for him only the day before? The Talmud Yerushalmi⁹ offers an analogy to help us better understand this seemingly impossible obligation of not taking revenge. Suppose a person was cutting meat and the knife slipped while he was doing so and he cut his other hand in the process. Would one think that the hand that was cut should now take revenge on the hand that had been doing the cutting and strike that hand in return? Of course not!

The Jewish people are one people – difficult as it may be in practice, we are meant to see each and every other Jew as merely an extension of our own selves. Moreover, this also explains why we are meant to share reciprocal feelings for what transpires in each other's lives.

On the other hand, suppose a person was to injure his arm – to bruise it or cut it or damage it in some way – but not take any notice of the injury? What would we say in such a case? Surely, we would have to conclude that the injured arm had somehow been paralysed, that some sort of nerve damage had taken place that prevented the message of the injury from being transmitted to the rest of the body via the brain. Similarly, if we do not experience joy at the smachot of other Jews or, the opposite, pain when something unpleasant befalls them, then we must conclude that we have become spiritually 'paralysed', insensitive to the feelings of our brethren, and we must, accordingly, do everything we can to urgently find a remedy for such a situation, seeking whatever intervention is available – just as we would if it was a physical part of our body experiencing this paralysis. The Jewish people exist intrinsically as a singularity – as a unity – comprised of many different, but essential, parts. Only by embracing this unity via the natural connections that exist and allowing such connections to grow and flourish, will we find our true place in the world and achieve our true potential. ■



Menachem Mendel Beilis arrest

¹http://en.wikipedia.org/wiki/Menachem_Mendel_Beilis

²Yevamos 61a

³Founder and Rosh Yeshiva of Yeshivas Chachmei Lublin

⁴Shevuos 39a

⁵Vayikra 19:18

⁶Id.

⁷Id.

⁸D"h, lo tikom

⁹Nedarim 9:4