

**K'lal Yisrael – The Unity of the Jewish People**  
**Yom Kippur Morning SERMON 5771**  
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My heart sunk last April as the first news of a devastating proposed bill in Israel's Parliament, the Knesset, was circulated. The bill was authored by MK David Rotem, a leader in Israel's Beiteinu Party, an ultra-orthodox party in Netanyahu's ruling coalition made up largely of Russian immigrants. In an attempt at fixing the vexing problem of large numbers of Russian immigrants who were not recognized as Jews, the issue of conversion was brought to the floor of the Knesset and the proposed resolution was supposed to make things easier for these Russians to convert and then to marry. However, the proposed legislation would threaten the very nature of Jewish relations between Israel and the rest of the world and would call into question the legitimacy of every Jewish convert and create a class system between born Jews and converted Jews that never existed before in Jewish life. And it would impact the lives of every one of us as Jews and threaten the cohesion of the Jewish People everywhere.

Many of you know that the World Union for Progressive Judaism, the Union for Reform Judaism and our partners in the Reform and Conservative Movements as well as the Federation system mounted a remarkable campaign to prevent this bill from being read in Knesset before the August and High Holiday recess. We were able to get myriads of emails and phone calls from around the world to flood the Prime Minister's office – and the bill's reading was postponed until Knesset's return in October. The Prime Minister asked that there be a period of time set aside to try to reach a compromise. But it will be brought back – and despite efforts to come up with compromises, Rotem and his supporters have vowed to press ahead.

To get to the heart of the matter there are several disturbing aspects of this bill:

1First- The Ultra-Orthodox and highly politicized "Chief Rabbinate" would be given absolute authority over conversion in Israel. This authority has never before been granted to the Chief Rabbinate and standing in contradistinction to rulings of the Israeli Supreme Court.

Second – This would change the "Law of Return", the Israeli preeminent statement of a guarantee of citizen's rights to anyone who is Jewish. The Rotem bill would make a distinction between Jews-by-Birth and Jews-by-Choice – which has never existed in Jewish Law.

Third- Non-Orthodox Conversions would no longer be recognized. Since the Chief Rabbinate is given ultimate authority, they can choose to not accept any conversion done by a rabbinic court not to their liking. (In fact, a soldier who converted during army service by an army Rabbinic court was deemed not Jewish by the Chief Rabbinate recently!)

Fourth- The bill adds an explicit condition to the validity of conversions done by approved rabbis: that they will be recognized only if the conversion was conducted according to religious requirements after the acceptance of the yoke of Torah and commandments according to Halacha (the majority of Israeli citizens – and government officials fail to live by those standards!)

Fifth- The bill contains a threat of sanctions against approved rabbis if they do not satisfy the Chief Rabbis' strict requirements.

Sixth – The bill allows the Chief Rabbis the right to nullify conversions if they decide that the conversion was conducted on the basis of misleading information.

What is most disturbing about this months-long saga is that it was not an isolated incident or series of incidents. In past two decades, the Ultra-Orthodox community – both in Israel and here in the US has tried to assert its power and authority over the non-Orthodox communities. In fact it comes on the heels of increasing antipathy that has been built up in many quarters

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1 I am grateful for the research of Steven M. Bauman who culled material from Rabbi Gilad Kariv and Rabbi Uri Regev, as well as published material from the Religious Action Center and the Israel Religious Action Center.

between the Orthodox community and the Liberal community. Just a little over 10 years ago I sat as a member of the Board of the Synagogue Council of America, an institution which for over 75 years brought together Reform, Conservative and Orthodox Jews to discuss various issues of Jewish life in the United States and to represent the Jewish community to the American public. I sat in those meetings and watched as the antipathy between the Orthodox and the Liberal communities grew to such a fever pitch that the organization was dissolved. Although the individuals around the table remained cordial and in some cases, might even consider themselves to be friendly, it was clear that the Orthodox community and the Liberal community, as represented by their official institutions, had divided itself into camps. The organizations which represented the various streams of Jewish life in America could no longer sit around a table and find ways to speak with one voice. Luckily, of late, the New York Board of Rabbis has found more and more cooperation among its members – but that is here in New York – and it is the rabbis, and not the communities that come together. There is no national organization that serves to bring all the denominations together in the United States anymore – and that is a SHANDA!

For years we have talked about the concept of K'lal Yisrael -- the totality of the Jewish people, and yet the expression today is nothing more than a lie, for there is no K'lal Yisrael. There is no unity unless we decide to do something about it.

The concept of K'lal Yisrael can only have validity if we see ourselves as a unified Jewish people. What has become unfortunate is the rise of intransigence on both the part of the leaders of the ultra-orthodox Jewish community to refuse to accept anybody who deviates from the norms they set for Jewish behavior -- and the Liberal community for whom pluralism has become a watch-word and can no longer tolerate the intransigence and self-righteousness of the orthodox community. However, this lie is created because of us as human beings and is not part of Jewish tradition.

In Pirke Avot -- the Mishnah's tractate which contains the sayings of the early rabbis, the concluding verse of the first chapter reads: "Rabban Shimon ben Gamliel said, ' by virtue of three things does the world endure: truth, justice and peace.' *Al sheloshah devarim ha'olam kiyam. Al ha'emet v'al hadin v'al hashalom.*"

Commenting on this verse great Orthodox commentator Samson Rafael Hirsch states, "If truth should be removed from human speech... so that truth can no longer be known, ... speech would serve humanity only to conceal thoughts and to spread error, falsehood and deceit. If justice should be eliminated from the deeds and the affairs of humanity so that people would no longer honor right as the most sacred of inalienable valuables..., and there would be no supreme authority to defend the rights of all with steadfast determination.... If peace should be banished from the sentiments and the esteem of humanity so that there would be no one who ... would waive for the sake of peace whatever {can be} sacrifice{d} save, of course, conscience and duty. If truth and justice and peace should vanish from the earth, then no matter what else the world has in which to glory, the affairs of human beings will attain neither stability nor permanent value."

This statement that the world rests on these three things: truth, justice and peace, should be guidance for all of us. But what is truth? Truth has been called by the rabbis "the seal of God." Truth is the ability to speak that which one sees, but for the sake of peace, truth must always be spoken in love. In fact, Dr. Joseph Hertz, who was formerly the Chief Rabbi of the British Empire and also one of the great Orthodox commentators quotes Blake, "A truth that's told with bad intent beats all the lies you can invent." It is truth that we depend upon when two meet in conversation. Yet, when we call upon our texts to provide us with that basis of truth, it is here where we get into the greatest difficulty. I, like my Orthodox brethren, have no question that God's revelation to us is perfect. However, I am more than willing to admit that our perception of God's perfect revelation may not be so perfect. Hence those who cite chapter and verse of a text to prove that they utter the truth can only depend upon their own imperfect perception of that truth.

The same goes for the issue of justice. Justice should be our ability to call the innocent "innocent" and the guilty "guilty." Yet we all know that, as much as we hope for issues of justice to be painted in black and white, the reality of the human condition has demonstrated over and over again that justice can only be painted in shades of gray. Justice, we pray, is truth in action. Certainly the Book of Deuteronomy chides us all: *tzedek, tzedek tirdof*. Justice, justice you shall pursue. These words are also inscribed on the Liberty Bell and the words that were inscribed on the hearts of the founding fathers of this country. And justice executed without compassion is no justice at all.

The third of the issues upon which the world rests is *shalom* -- peace. Peace can exist even where people disagree. Peace can exist where views may differ. Peace can exist as long as respect can exist. Respect is the lynch-pin of peace.

And respect is precisely what is missing in our Jewish community. The liberal and orthodox communities have lost respect for each other.

We often have a myopic view of Jewish history that it is only in the recent past that the Jewish community is as divided as it now finds itself. Truth be told, we know that throughout our past our people have been divided. In fact, the earliest rabbinic period, in those decades around the destruction of Second Temple -- the earliest group of rabbis were known as the Zugot -- the pairs. There were five great pairs of rabbis. The fifth great pair were known as Hillel and Shammai and they each had disciples known as schools. More often than not, these two schools disagreed about the application of Jewish law and the understanding of the way to live out God's decrees. One of the great examples of that disagreement is preserved in the way we light Chanukah candles. For Beit Shammai -- the disciples of Shammai had said that we start with eight candles and reduce one candle per day. Hillel and his followers suggested quite the opposite -- that we start with one candle and build up, adding a candle each day. The law follows Hillel, yet with a nod towards Shammai, for we light the newest candle first.

In Talmud 2 Rabbi Abba stated in the name of Samuel: "For three years there was a dispute between Beit Shammai and Beit Hillel, the former asserting Jewish law is in agreement with our views and the latter contending Jewish law is in agreement with our views. And then a bat kol -- a voice from the heavens -- issued forth, announcing '*eylu v'eylu devarim elohim chayim*' - the utterances of both, these and these, are both the words of the living God. But the *halacha* -- Jewish law -- is in agreement with the rulings of Beit Hillel.' Hence, from the earliest time of the common era, the Jewish community remained divided in opinion as to the application and interpretation of Jewish law -- and thus lived as a divided people.

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2 Talmud Bavli Eruvin (13b)

Further in this Talmudic text we read, "Our rabbis taught for two and a half years were Beit Shammai and Beit Hillel in dispute, the former asserting that it would have been better for humankind not to have been created than to have been created and the latter, Beit Hillel, maintaining that is better for humanity to have been created than not to have been created. Finally, {the rabbis} took a vote and decided that it would have been better for humanity not to have been created than to have been created, but now that humanity has been created, let human beings investigate their past deeds and let them examine their future actions."

Two thousand years ago the community was divided and yet, regardless of the disagreements between Hillel and Shammai, the rabbis believed that a *bat kol*-- a voice from the heavens -- rang forth: *eylu, v'eylu devarim elohim chayim* (these and these are the words of the living God). How much I wish we could hear those words today. How much I wish that the Orthodox community would look at what we do and say, "We might not agree with what the Reform movement is all about but their interpretation and their understanding is in pursuit of the living God." And how much we need to be able to say the same of the Orthodox community. What for us may be intransigence is for the Orthodox community vigilance. When the Orthodox look at us and they accuse us of turning away from Jewish law, they fail to see how much we turn the law over and over again in order to find the words of the living God.

The recent past has demonstrated that we have lost respect for one another. And if we are to erase the lie of K'lal Yisrael and make it into a truth for our days, we must begin by developing respect for each other. Yes: we fight over Jewish law. We fight over the interpretation of that law and the application of that law. Our Orthodox brothers and sisters would accuse us of completely ignoring the law or twisting it in order to meet our own circumstances. But what we do is no different than what Hillel did two thousand years ago.

The great example of this is in the application of the laws concerning the sabbatical year. You'll recall that every seventh year the Torah commands us to let the land lie fallow. One cannot harvest that which grows in the seventh year. The law also continues that in the seventh year all debts must be forgiven. Hillel discovered a remarkable problem. He looked around and he saw that towards the end of the seven year cycle -- if

somebody was destitute and needed a loan from another member of the community, that person would be reticent to extend the loan knowing that in a few months hence the sabbatical year would begin and the loan would be forgiven. Hillel realized that in the fulfillment of the words of the living God which demanded that justice be pursued at all costs, the law was providing an opportunity for injustice to occur. So Hillel created what was known as "The Prozbul" -- an escrow account. Instead of completely releasing individuals from paying back loans, they would pay their loan into an escrow account in that seventh year, which, at the end of the year, would be turned over to the person who gave the loan. Thus, the letter of the law would be followed in that the person would be released from paying the loaner, and yet loans would still be extended in the sixth year of a seventh year cycle because the person who gave the loan would know that he or she would be paid back. Hillel turned the law upside down in order to make it just. And throughout history, we see examples of the rabbis turning the law inside out in order to pursue what they believed to be the words of the living God.

Jewish law is not so inflexible as one might portray it to be. The innovations that the Reform movement has brought to Jewish law have all been done for the sake of communicating the words of the living God. What we need to do now is turn our thoughts inward. For 30 years, the Jewish community has worried about explaining ourselves to the non-Jewish world, through inter-faith relations. We've had quite a number of successes in that arena, especially with the Catholic, Protestant and Muslim communities. But perhaps it is time to put our efforts into intra-faith relations: creating opportunities for open and honest dialogue between the orthodox community and the Liberal community. We can make the lie of K'lal Yisrael into a truth to be valued and honored.

In the 1980's Rabbi Eliezer Berkowitz (orthodox scholar) wrote: "Within halacha there are possibilities for an approach between the various ideological groupings of the Jewish people. The responsibility of striving for unity in the spirit of Ahavat Yisrael (love of Israel) is equally binding on all of us. Halacha has to be stretched to its limits in order to further Jewish unity and mutual understanding."

And so we turn our attention back to the bill of friend Rotem. We will continue to work through the differences and strive to find some compromise that would preserve the unity of our people. There are voices of moderation

arising from the orthodox community in Israel that sees the intransigence and corruption of the system of the Chief Rabbinate and are calling for an end to its hegemony. We must support their efforts – which will help ease the tension, not just in Israel, but among the orthodox communities in the US and around the world, whose own authority has been questioned by this politicized institution of the Chief Rabbinate. And we must work hard to find a way to allow anyone who wants to profess a faith in the community and heritage and faith of the Jewish people to be welcomed in with open arms – and not made to jump through impossible hoops or make false promises to behave in ways that the majority of the world’s Jews do not to satisfy a few old white men. Our work is laid out for us and there is much to be done, but for the sake of our community and for the sake of heaven, it must be done.

Ultimately, we must build bridges of respect between the various streams of Jewish expression. As Rabbi Joseph Epstein wrote <sup>3</sup> it is "only when all Jews work together as a community that the whole Torah can be fulfilled." In this way, the world will be sustained by truth, by justice and by peace. And thus we will be able to live out this axiom for the sake of Heaven.

May this New Year find the entire community of Israel; unified as one people bound together by One God. And may this unity begin with the work of our hands -- and our hearts, for the sake of peace.

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<sup>3</sup> Kitzur Shnay Lukhot Ha--brit, 6b