

## Pinchas: When Are We Unified?

In one of his first major popular works, *The Dignity of Difference*, the late British Chief Rabbi Jonathan Sacks took up the questions of universalism and particularism, multiculturalism and diversity, that had reached the center of social conversation in the mid-1990s, and which took on new urgency following the tragic, fractious events of September 11, 2001. In the book, Sacks made a forceful argument, which he would repeat countless times in his subsequent writings, in favor of a particularism that leads to universalism. We learn to love people in general, Sacks argued, by loving particular people, not the other way round.

Importantly, Sacks did not advocate a focus on Jewish particularism at the expense of the world. Just as he embodied in his own public life, first as Chief Rabbi and also later as a member of the House of Lords, Sacks saw the particulars of Jewish life – Jewish language, the Jewish calendar, the Jewish textual tradition, Jewish ritual – as a home in which Jews learn how to be part of a larger community. The aim, he suggested, was that Jews, and by extension all people, would be “secure in one’s home, yet moved by the beauty of foreign places, knowing they are someone else’s home, not mine, but still part of the glory of the world that is ours.” For Sacks, having this sense of identity within one’s own home enables one to understand their life as part of a larger whole of humanity and Creation. “Those who are confident in their faith,” he wrote, “are not threatened but enlarged by the different faith of others.” Writing in the wake of 9/11, he concluded, “In the midst of our multiple insecurities, we need that confidence now.”<sup>93</sup>

The question at the root of Sacks’ book, and of much of his larger oeuvre, has to do with the seeming tension between uniformity and diversity, wholeness and division. In an increasingly global, interconnected world, how do we hold up and embrace the manifold diverse expressions of humanness and Creation on the one hand, even as we, on the other, stay rooted in a sense of interconnection and sacred relationship by virtue of our shared identity as dwellers on planet Earth? In recent years, these questions have taken on increasing urgency on a socio-political level – and on a personal one as well. How might our Jewish spiritual practice help us hold them and live within them in a healthy, wise, and mindful way?

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<sup>93</sup>Jonathan Sacks, *The Dignity of Difference: How to Avoid the Clash of Civilizations*. Continuum, 2003, 65-66.

## Shabbat and the Workweek, Evening and Morning

To help us explore this question, we turn to the Maggid of Kozhnitz, Rabbi Yisroel Hopstein (1737–1814), in his *Avodat Yisrael*, and specifically a comment on the Shabbat sacrifice outlined in Parashat Pinchas.

עבודת ישראל, פנחס

עולת שבת בשבתו וגו'. דאיתא בזוה"ק לית מלכא בלא מטרוניתא. והוא הענין כי אין מלך בלא עם, וכביכול אין נקרא בשם מלך ואינו מתענג כי אם בעת עבודת ישראל עמו והם עולים אליו. נמצא מה שישאל שובתים למטה ועולים בשבת במוסף הם עולים בשבתו כביכול שהוא שורש השבת והתענוג. על עולת התמיה, פירוש שעל פי היחודים שאנו עושים כל ימות השבוע ועושים הכנה לקדושה, על זה עולה בשבת ומצטרף היחוד דחול להעלות בשבת היחוד יותר ויותר:

ואגב אשמיעך מה שנראה לפי עניות דעתי בנוסח התפלה מ"ש רז"ל אשרינו שאנו משכימים ומעריבים ערב ובוקר ואומרים פעמים בכל יום שמע ישראל וכו'. דלכאורה מלת ערב ובוקר מיותרים והיה די באמרנו משכימים ומעריבים, אלא על פי מ"ש האר"י ז"ל כי היחוד נעשה בבוקר ונכלל מדת לילה ביום ובלילה בשעת היחוד נכלל מדת יום בלילה כנודע ליו"ח. וזהו פירוש שאנו משכימים ערב ובוקר, דהיינו שאנו מיחדים בהשכמה מדת ערב במדת בוקר, וכן מעריבים להיפך מדת בוקר במדת ערב והבן:

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"A burnt offering for every Sabbath, [in addition to the regular burnt offering and its libation]" (Num. 28:10). The Zohar teaches: "There is no King without a Queen." This is related to the teaching, "There is no King without a people." Thus, it would appear that the Divine is only called "Sovereign" and only receives delight when Israel, the Holy One's people, offer their service and so ascend to God. Thus, when Israel cease from labor below on Shabbat, and then rise up through the additional Musaf service, they ascend through the Holy One's Shabbat (as it were), as ultimately the Holy One is the root of Shabbat and its delight. "In addition to the regular burnt offering:" by means of the *yichudim* [mystical unifications in every dimension] that we bring about during the workweek, we prepare for holiness. Through this preparation, we ascend on Shabbat, and connect the unifications of the workweek, so that on Shabbat we can raise them up higher and higher.

Along the way, let me share with you something of what I perceive in our prayers. The Sages wrote: “Happy are we that we get up and go to sleep, morning and evening, saying, twice each day, ‘Hear O Israel [YHVH is our God, YHVH is One].” Now, in this formulation the phrase “morning and evening” is superfluous; it would have been sufficient simply to say, “we get up and go to sleep.” But the AR”I [Rabbi Isaac Luria, 1534–1572] taught that the unification we bring about in the morning must incorporate the quality of the evening in the daytime. And at night, when we enact that unification, the quality of day is incorporated in night. This is the sense, then, of “we get up [and go to sleep] evening and morning:” we unify at our arising the quality of “night” in the day, and at evening we do the opposite, incorporating the quality of day in that of nighttime. Understand.

At the heart of this teaching lies a conundrum: We confront, simultaneously and repeatedly from moment to moment, a complex reality in which we are both part and whole, discrete and united, uniquely us and yet inseparable from everything. In our spiritual practice we often set an intention of counteracting our sense of *pizur hanefesh*, disunity of the spirit. We do so to experience a sense of centeredness and wholeness in ourselves, in all of Creation, and in the continuous life of the Infinite and Ineffable. As we sit in stillness and allow our awareness to expand, we seek to unify the disparate sensations and movements of our bodies, hearts, and minds, to uncover the Divine that is part of us, of which we are part, and which is present in everything. As the *Avodat Yisrael* teaches here, Shabbat is one of the foundational practices by which we do this, bringing the various unifications we perform during the workweek – the acts of gathering, centering, experiencing wholeness – into their original register of primordial wholeness. For me, that practice enables an experience of renewed interconnection with myself, my family, other people, and the world, and, in the same breath, not only interconnection, but communion.

Yet in the second paragraph, I think the *Avodat Yisrael* is gesturing toward the simultaneous reality that we live in a world of time and space, a world of limitation, in which there is, alongside the mystical reality of unity, another reality of distinctiveness. Day is not night, sky is not land, you are not me, God is not me – even when, as explained above, God is the ultimate reality of all these things, too. Just as both night and day are worthy of their own blessings, so are you, so am I, so is the Divine. As the AR”I teaches, our practice enables us to both honor the distinctiveness of each time of day – and,

by extension, every other facet of Creation (night and day are just the first). This leads up to the culminating bi-reality of the workweek and Shabbat – which completes the Creation process – through which we actively remember that both are rooted in the same Divine origin. We do this particularly by being aware that the edges of what we perceive as distinct entities are not really edges: When precisely does day begin and night end? Where does my body end and the chair or the air or the earth begin? Bringing awareness to moments and sites of transition helps us both to honor the integrity within each entity, and to recognize a larger integrity in which borders of separation dissolve.

This, I suggest, is something we might discern from the *Avodat Yisrael's* cryptic “*v'haven*,” “understand,” with which he closes his short commentary here. *Haven* points us toward *binah*, the *sefirah*, or aspect of the Divine, in which a larger, *both/and* consciousness is rooted. For all of his emphasis on unification (*yichud* in Hebrew), we might understand that term only partially to express this paradoxical reality, which might better be captured in the term *shleimut*, wholeness (from which we derive *shalom*). I find this to be true in my own experience: When I put my focus on oneness and unification, I find it can produce a pressure of its own, as if to say that if I don't achieve a sensation of unity – within myself, in my relationship to the Jewish people, in my relationship with humanity, the world, the Divine – I am somehow failing. Yet if I shift my focus to inhabiting a sense of wholeness, that pressure is lessened. Instead, my awareness can take in my own sense of unique identity and integrity and, simultaneously, the sense that I am part of an infinite whole.

### Wholeness in Self, Wholeness in Society

I find this orientation can be helpful as well in approaching the vital questions of diversity that are always present in a democratic society, and which have become especially pronounced in recent years. As contemporary political theorist Danielle Allen observes, “A speaker cannot use the word ‘one’ to mean multiplicity, but the word ‘whole’ entails just that.”<sup>94</sup> Beings are diverse and multiform, and humans particularly so in their cultural and personal expressions of self. To make space for this diversity, and to avoid subsuming them under a homogenizing label, wholeness, rather than oneness, is a more fruitful conceptual foundation. Allen goes on to discuss the importance of this shift from oneness or united (think, for instance, of the

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<sup>94</sup> Danielle Allen, *Talking to Strangers: Anxieties of Citizenship Since Brown v. Board of Education*. Chicago: University of Chicago Press, 2009, 17.

motto emblazoned on American currency, *e pluribus unum*) to wholeness for contemporary social-political life: “The effort to make the people ‘one’ cultivates in the citizenry a desire for homogeneity, for that is the aspiration taught to citizens by the meaning of the word ‘one,’ itself. In contrast, an effort to make the people ‘whole’ might cultivate an aspiration to coherence and integrity of a consolidated but complex, intricate, and differentiated body.”<sup>95</sup>

Allen’s work helps us draw a link between our personal spiritual work of *tikkun hanefesh* and our social-political spiritual work of *tikkun ha’olam*. The orientation we bring to our inner life is interwoven with and gives shape to our orientation to our outer life. Seeking *shleimut* within and among our inner many selves, we learn to witness, embrace, and celebrate the many diverse others in the world, and of the world, as an expression of *shleimut* as well. To embrace the diversity and multiplicity of Creation, and of the many communities and publics of which we are each a part, cultivating our capacity to be aware of and embrace difference – within ourselves and others – is essential. This is the invitation of every Shabbat, every evening, every morning, every moment.

### Questions for Reflection & Conversation

- *Avodat Yisrael* writes, “By means of the *yichudim* [mystical unifications in every dimension] that we bring about during the workweek, we prepare for holiness. Through this preparation, we ascend on Shabbat, and connect the unifications of the workweek, so that on Shabbat we can raise them up higher and higher.” Are there ways you prepare spiritually for Shabbat? What do they include? Do you find spiritual preparation for Shabbat to be a challenge? If so, why? Are there things you might do to deepen your awareness of your activities (and spiritual practice) during the week as preparation for Shabbat?
- In your own practice, how do you relate to the paradox of both being distinctively *you* and, simultaneously, a part of the infinite? Do you find one or the other to be more pleasant or appealing? More difficult or uncomfortable? When, how, why or why not?
- Danielle Allen points us to a distinction between oneness and wholeness, or *achdut* and *shleimut*, in Hebrew. Do you find one or the other of these terms to be more inviting or more challenging as a spiritual orientation? If so, why?

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<sup>95</sup> Ibid.

### Ideas for Practice

This week, consider making a *kabbalah*, a commitment, to notice and hold in your attention a perspective of wholeness. You may find it in any variety of places, but here are a few to guide you:

- Consider a twist on an old exercise you may have learned as a child (I remember first encountering it as a proposed way to stop hiccups) of bringing your pinky fingers as close together as possible without touching. (The actual hiccup cure came when an older brother would, after a period of silence, shout really loud to “scare the hiccups out of me.” Pay attention to the sensation. Where do you notice one finger ending and the other beginning? What happens if you shift your perspective, and no longer see them as two fingers, but as (mirroring) parts of one body? What happens if you try it with someone else? What do you notice? How does the experience help you reflect on oneness and wholeness?
- Try a mindful eating exercise. As you bring food into your mouth, try to notice the sensations of each stage of the process: crossing the threshold of your lips, chewing with your teeth, tasting on your tongue, swallowing and traveling down the esophagus, landing in the stomach. At what point is the food separate from you? At what point does it become you?
- In the spirit of the *Avodat Yisrael*, make an intention to prepare for Shabbat each day this week. At least once a day, try to set aside something – an item of food, something you want to read, a picture you intend to look at, a prayer you wish to spend time with – and, with intention, say, “I’m setting this aside for Shabbat.” Try to notice the bodily sensation and emotions that arise as you do this. What are they? Do they change as you get closer to Shabbat? Does it affect how you sense time during the week? Does it give you a different appreciation for *this* day, *this* moment? How, when, why or why not?