

## **The Rabbi's Sermon for Rosh Hashana, Day 1 5769**

### **The Value of Echad by Rabbi Asher Lopatin**

Just over a week ago, my friends, our shul hosted two important events, both were connected to our love of the State of Israel, and our passion for our Jewish identity: First, on Shabbat, we hosted a well respected politician, Member of Knesset, Aryeh Eldad, and his wife, Elyorah. MK Eldad is from the right of center Moledet Party.– some I know would think them way to the right, others would call them “just right”. And he has strong views against many of the policies of the former government and the main ruling parties. Moledet used to be the party of voluntary transfer, but now is a little more discreet . But this is Anshe Sholom and we believe that someone who loves Israel and loves the Jewish people and is a civil, menschlich person, deserves to be able to address those in the community who want to hear him.

Then, just two days later, we hosted our fourth annual Iftar co-sponsored with the Jewish Council on Urban Affairs, which many would describe as a left of center, social justice organization. The Iftar, literally, a breakfast in Arabic, has been a time to share our Jewish religious passions with Muslims in Chicago who are interested in coming to a synagogue to break their Ramadan fast. Who came? Of the 80, about half were Jews, some from our shul, some not from any shul, about thirty Muslims, men, women and children, and a few Christians and people from other religions. People from all over Chicago . Some were individuals who worked for organizations I have to say that are not seen as great friends of Israel .

But everyone who came was interested in learning about Judaism, eating a kosher meal, and, if they were observant Muslims, breaking their Ramadan fast in a synagogue. As typical of our own members, people did not all arrive exactly on time at 5:30 – even Imam Ryan was late. But by 6:00 PM, thirty or forty, Muslims, Jews and others sat in the Marovitz Sanctuary, with our Israeli and American flags flying high over all of us, and listened to me and Imam Ryan talk about Tzedaka and Zaqat, about Ramadan and the Jewish month of Elul, and about how our religions speak to us about issues in the community.

Imam Ryan, wanting to be respectful, asked his five year old son, Omar, to cover his head in shul. So of course Omar took out what looked like a black, knitted kipa from his pocket. And when it came time to daven mincha – about 18 minutes before sunset that ends the Jewish day and ends the Muslim day of fasting – everyone stayed, and all the men in shul – and all the religious Muslim women – covered their hair out of respect for our shul.

In fact, everyone seemed so into the davening – especially the women – that after we started Ma’ariv, I had to tell those Muslims who were fasting: Higya z’man shel Kriyat Shma shel Arvit! It’s sunset, time for evening sh’mai, but also time to go downstairs to the Shlensky Social Hall to break your Ramadan!

My friends, hosting the Moledet Party and Iftar in one weekend, all at our shul, is not only the Anshe Sholom way, but the embodiment of the Sh'ma of the evening and sh'ma of the morning: Where we tell ourselves that God is ECHAAAAAD. Where we tell ourselves to think of how Hashem can bring together all of reality, and challenge ourselves, Can we do something like it as well? Can we fulfill Vehalachta bidrachav – you will go in God's ways – with the mitzvah of Echad?

Echad is not easy and it doesn't always make sense.

In today's world, we know all too well that Yishmael – who in the Jewish tradition represents the Arab peoples - is still Metzachek – still overwhelmingly plotting against Yitzchak – Yitchak who was not allowed by God to leave Israel . We take Achmedinajad seriously, when he calls for our destruction the destruction of our beloved State, and is allowed to address the community of nations with impunity. It's fine to come together and pray and talk and eat, but the reality is that Yishmael and Yitzchak are not "Echad", and were not Echad even in the house of Avraham. But the reality also is that Avraham wanted Yishmael and Yitzchak, his two boys, to one Echad. He was desperate for them to grow up together – to learn from each other, to help each other in an idolatrous world. Sarah new the reality – they were not going to survive as Echad. Yishma'el had to be sent out. But our instinct to drive towards Echad needs to be there. We can't just ignore Avraham – we need to feel his frustration – we need to feel his irrational desire – even blind desire for Echad.

This passionate yearning for Echad is even more important when we are not talking about Yitzchak and Yishmael, but when we are talking about Yitzchak and Yitzchak.

Just a week before MK Eldad and the Iftar came to Anshe Sholom, I was invited to be part of The Conversation which is an annual Jewish think tank with people from all over the world talking about anything we wanted to talk about relating to Judaism and Jews. The session that I initiated came from my own frustration and passion for Echad: Starting with the Conversion issue, but then moving on to issues of Who is a Jew? Who is a halachic Jew? Who's grandmother didn't have an Orthodox conversion? Boy meets girl, Jewish boy meet Jewish girl –Bubbie is delighted – Who tells her that a Reform conversion was involved 60 years ago? Reports from Birthright Israel : So many passionate Jews, who grew up totally Jewish, but found out there mother wasn't Jewish. Soldiers who came to Israel as Jews, fought for the IDF, gave up their lives for Israel and for us, but are not "Jewish" enough to be buried together with other "halachic" Jews. How do we deal with this? How do we deal with those who fall outside those laws?

Should the Orthodox community tell them: Sorry, no luck for you: Either you become fully observant, every detail, or we are not interested in your converting, we don't need you, we are fine without you! And those who want to marry passionate, committed Jews who are not-halachically Jewish – what do we say to them? Are we Sarah and say "Go away"? Ahah- it was easy being Sarah when it came to her sending away Yishma'el, but is it so easy being Sarah when it comes to chasing away hundreds of thousands in Israel, and, millions in America, who are part of the Jewish community, part of the destiny of Judaism, but are not halachically Jewish by Orthodox standards?

And in my session there were voices there who spoke like our mother Sarah, and said: Look at the entrance of the conference center lobby– and we were in a nice conference center: The sign says Shoes and shirt required: Well we as the community can say: Halacha required! Halchic Jews only! Keep our standards, or you don't belong here! There were voices who said: That is our right – to defend who we are, to protect our autonomous selves. You are welcome to come in, but on our terms.

And yet, Echad screams out at us – are we really going to complacently reject so many – so many who are part of us, so many Yitzchaks who are so passionate about their Judaism, so committed to the Jewish people, willing even – in Israel – to die for the Jewish people by fighting for the Jewish state – are we willing to tell those people: Chaval – sorry, “Shirt and shoes required”. And you just don't have the right shirt, or the right shoes to make it in to our definition of who is a halachic Jew. Is that Echad?

And don't think that God doesn't hear Avraham: Vegam et ben Ha'ama l'goi asimenu, KI ZARACHA HU – the son of the slave – Yishmael – God says is also going to be a great nation, God tells Avraham, because he is your descendent. He may not be your halachic descendent, but he is your son because you love him like a son!

My friend – there has to be tension and struggle: We need to jump into the lives of Avraham and Sarah, and we need to be the voice of both of them.

Rav Yosef Shalom Eliashiv, sh'lita, has heard the voice of Avraham – and he has heard the voice of Echad: He has directed his followers to reach out to those who are Jewish only through their father, and not their mother, those who are Jewish because of a non-halachic conversion, or merely clutching on to the Jewish people by being in a serious relationship with a Jew. Rav Eliashiv – the leader of Hareidi Orthodoxy –hears the voice of Avraham, and the answer of God - Avraham I hear you – and I struggle with you as well. Echad.

Tova Hartman, an Orthodox thinker and practitioner in Jerusalem , finds the voice of Echad in feminist thought, which is Jewish thought, not just feminist thought. Tova Hartman challenges the classics of Modern Orthodoxy who are not as sensitive to Echad in her new book, *Feminism Encounters Traditional Judaism*: She writes:

“Modern Orthodox thinkers have to a large extent assimilated Western liberal ideals and values in their religious philosophies, especially the ideal of human autonomy... “The Modern Orthodox person must see him/herself as committed to ...autonomy ... and individualism” (Ravitsky). Thus for example, Rav Soloveitchik did not hesitate to integrate some of modern philosophy's view of autonomy into his phenomenology of Halakic Man. “...The most fundamental principle of all is that man must create himself.” (108 – 109)... Y. Leibowitz (1976) establishes a strong connection between the performance of mitzvot and the achievement of a form of human autonomy as its outcomes. “The one who lives in the world of Halakha... is autonomous... free... only the autonomous creature deserves to be called Man” (Hartman's translation of p. 60).

“Feminist theory,” continues Hartman, “has called into question the assumptions, presumption and contentions of autonomy as a universal human value. It has posited alternative models of morality and identity, based on women’s experience, that hold relationship as a central concern. . . [I]t asks: How can I grow in connection to the friends, relatives, traditions and institutions that figure so prominently in my life?”

So we struggle for relationship; we struggle for echad; we struggle to connect with our brothers and sisters, and even, sometimes, with those beyond. And sometimes Avraham wins, and sometimes Sarah wins: Sometimes we can come together and build a lasting relationship, and sometimes an Iftar is just once a year, and we go back to our passion for Israel, and they go back to their passions. But we can never forget that Echad is a value; Echad is a something worth fighting for and struggling for. If Rav Eliashav can tell his Chareidi Talmidim to look harder for Echad within halacha, we can do so as well.

Yes, sometimes we may have to say, “Shoes and shirt required.” But it should hurt us, it should cause us to squirm, and to struggle– that we had to put “Echad” aside. And then there are the moments when maybe Echad can break through: When we realize Hashem’s Oneness through our own efforts at oneness. When we realize that if our State of Israel – not the Rabbanut, but Israel itself - can bring together Jews of such diversity, maybe we should as well. Maybe we should see who struggles for their Jewishness, who would die for their Jewishness, and we should re-examine how to open the gates of halacha to such blessed people.

In a few minutes we will surround the every single broken t’ruah and the broken sh’varim with the connected sound of t’kiah.

We hear the arguments of Sarah and Avraham – but we don’t let Sarah’s autonomy along without a t’kiah – without the sound of Echad. Do we want God to tell us, “Shirt and shoes required?” Of course we need to shape up, to do t’shuva, but we need to know that Hashem wants “Echad”, that Hashem believes in Echad, that Hashem hears the voice of Avraham as much as the voice of Sarah.

Let us answer God not only by putting on our shirt and shoes, but by understanding Echad – the eternal struggle, the eternal value, to connect with our brothers and sisters, and even with those who have been our enemies. Sarah and Avraham call out to us: Let us listen to both of them as we say every day, twice or three times a day, Sh’ma Yisrael...Hear O Israel, God is our Lord – God sets our standards - but God is One.

May this year bring Echad to the Jewish people and bring Hashem’s blessings to God’s one land – to our beloved State of Israel – and to God’s united city of Jerusalem and may we continue to struggle for Echad – for the T’kiah – in a broken world of T’ruah – to bring all Jews together and bring peace to our world.

L’shana tova tikateivu veteichateimu  
A Happy and Healthy New Year for all of us

