

Echad: We are One – Rosh Hashanah Morning 2015 / 5776

One of our most beloved and well-known prayers is this one, a quote from the book of Deuteronomy, chapter 6, verse 4. *Shema Yisrael, Adonai Eloheinu Adonai echad*. Our tradition says that these words shall fall upon our lips when we lie down and when we rise up. We teach it to our children and we utter it as our souls leave this earth. Its words are so important to us that in many congregations, we rise to sing them with jubilation. We find the words on the doorposts of our houses, on the jewelry that adorns our bodies, and on the artwork that welcomes others into our homes. The Shema holds such significance that the rabbis ordained that it may be recited in any language and that we should cover our eyes in order to fully contemplate and understand its meaning. What is it about this prayer, this pasuk of Torah, that is the essence of Judaism for many of us? First of all, what IS the meaning of Shema? Sometimes various prayerbooks will include commas in the Hebrew and the translation to denote a certain meaning to the text. In the *machzor* that we currently use, Gates of Repentance, the translation reads: Hear, comma, O Israel colon: the Lord is our God, comma, the Lord is One. Other prayerbooks translate it differently. Listen, Israel, Adonai our God is One, or Hear, O Israel, Adonai is our God, Adonai alone. Depending upon how one translates the Shema, one can emphasize certain truths, for example, that the God whose name is spelled *Yud Hey Vav Hey* is God, not this other god over here. Or that Adonai is OUR God and no one else's. Or that God is not three, not a trinity, but ONE God. Or that we worship ONLY Adonai. And we can choose to agree with every single way of viewing the text. That's the beauty of Judaism.

But what would you say is the most important of these six words: Shema? Yisrael? Adonai? Eloheinu? Adonai? or Echad? I have to say that it is ECHAD. ONE. UNIFIED. To most Jews, ECHAD is the very essence, the very definition of God – how we see and understand God.

In Hebrew, words are created typically with a three-letter root. These three letters create nouns, verbs, adjectives and adverbs in masculine, feminine, and plural forms, and the words all have a core meaning. The root for ECHAD is Alef – Chet – Dalet. In our TaNaKh there are 967 occurrences of this combination of letters meaning one, certain, altogether, single, unified, together, unique and each among others. The word ECHAD and its derivatives are used often as numbers, but in its other uses the word often is used to describe relationships.

One interesting tidbit is that the letters that make up the word ECHAD are all found at the beginning of the Hebrew alphabet, alef being the very first letter. Thinking midrashically here, I am going to posit that the letters are a commentary on the importance of relationship and how oneness and togetherness should always be at the beginning of our focus when dealing with others. To find the oneness of God, we must find the oneness in each other. Martin Buber wrote: “When two people relate to each other authentically and humanly, God is the electricity that surges between them.”

How does this oneness relate to us here at B’nai Chaim? First of all, we can apply oneness in the idea of community. The Merriam Webster definition of “community” is as follows:

- 1: a unified body of individuals:
- 2: society at large
- 3: joint ownership or participation, common character or likeness, social activity or fellowship, a social state or condition

That sounds like us. We are a group with similar beliefs and interests that likes to be together. B’yachad. Together. Hear how it sounds like ECHAD? B’yachad. It even sounds like what it means. The “ch” sticks everything together.

What are the things that can make our community come together? This is the theme for our congregation this year. Last year we said “Hineini” – HERE I AM. This year we will say ECHAD B’YACHAD. We are one – together.

How can we be one together? Let us be one together by being welcoming. To welcome the stranger is one of Judaism’s most valued teachings. Placed right in the center of the Torah, is a section called the Holiness Code that we will read on Yom Kippur afternoon. Found in the Book of Leviticus, chapter 19, these verses set the standard for Jewish behavior. There we find words which have framed Jewish attitudes for centuries: “The stranger that lives with you shall be to you like the native, and you shall love him [or her] as yourself; for you were strangers in the land of Egypt. I am Adonai your God.” By adding that Divine seal at the end, the Torah is sending a strong message making clear the origin of this command. There can be no question as to how we are to act, and this signature text for the Jewish community is meant to be a core value. So, let us welcome all to this special home that is B’nai Chaim: Let us greet folks at the door, say hello, hand out books, and smile. Let us invite each other for Shabbat dinner. Let’s go eat together before services. Let’s have play dates with our religious school friends. Let’s contact new members. Go up and talk to someone you don’t know yet. The worst feeling in the world is to feel left out or not a part of the group. Brian and I have visited synagogues where during the entire service and oneg afterwards not ONE PERSON said Shabbat Shalom or welcome or hello or anything. In a way I feel as though I’m preaching to the choir because nowhere have I seen more welcome and kindness than here at our own B’nai Chaim, and I want you to know that this makes us a unique and special community. We do it better than any place I’ve ever seen, but I think we can do even better. Remember last year, with Project Hineini, we signed up to participate in various programs, and many of them came beautifully to fruition. I am so thankful to all of you for taking the steps to say “Here I am.”

One project that I would like to see be more successful is to have more of us at the door --- to see even more of us become the friendly faces of B'nai Chaim. It's great to greet your friends as they come in and to have a presence to greet new folks. It can be daunting to walk in to a new place... and how nice it is to be welcomed with a smile. Oftentimes we are spread a little thin, and one or two folks are trying to help set up for the oneg and pour the wine and set up the sanctuary and the door is left unattended. All it requires is coming 15 minutes early for services, smiling (we are all great at that), and making sure our congregants and guests have a prayer book and that they feel they are wanted and welcomed. That's all. If each of you did it for just one service, just ONE, we'd have several people welcoming and greeting at each service, you'd make a couple of new friends, and I'd get to see more of you. Just ONE service. ECHAD...ONE. And what a difference that would make. ECHAD B'YACHAD...

In what other ways can we be one together? We can be inclusive. Several weeks ago I attended a workshop on inclusiveness. I've always thought, "I'm inclusive. I accept everyone," but this workshop demonstrated that I and we at B'nai Chaim still have quite a ways to go in order to become truly accepting of everyone and their needs. It's not so much our mindset, for we as a congregation are really accepting of all kinds of people. Our down-to-earth, comfortable feel is one of the things that attracted me so deeply to this community, but we must actively reach out to embrace the Divine spark in every person, and to make everyone feel truly comfortable and truly welcomed, and these projects will take time and great consideration.

I would like us to think about ways we can better welcome and accommodate those who often feel they are on the fringe of the Jewish community, who feel as if they are strangers and do not belong. How can we reach out to those who were born Jewish but have no connection to synagogue life, those who are choosing to be Jewish, those who know little but want to learn, those who believe in God and those who don't,

those with physical disabilities who want to participate but have difficulty, those with invisible disabilities who feel they will be misunderstood, those who embrace Judaism but are from different races, and our LGBTQ friends and family who wonder what Judaism can offer them. As we strive for ECHAD B'YACHAD, to be one together, let us embrace our commonalities and our uniqueness, for that is what makes us stronger. Following the High Holy Days the board and I will be exploring concrete ways to involve all of us on a path of outreach and inclusion through our activities, programming, publicity, and more, and I'd like you all to be a part of it. Only when all in our community feel a part of that community can we acclaim that we are ECHAD B'YACHAD.

One year during these days of awe, the Baal Shem Tov, the great founder of Chasidism passed near a small shul. The baal habatim, the leaders of the congregation, rushed out to meet him and invite him in to pray with them. The Baal Shem Tov agreed but when he reached the door of the shul he stopped and did not enter. "What is the problem?" they asked him. "Why do you just stand here and not enter to pray with us?" The Baal Shem Tov answered: "There is no room for me. Your words of welcome and prayers of teshuvah, of repentance and change cannot rise to heaven. They fill the room from wall to wall, from floor to ceiling." "What can we do?" the people asked. Gently he replied: "Match your actions to your words, welcome the stranger, reach out to help those in need and truly direct your prayers to God and then your prayers will ascend in a whirlwind to heaven."

This year and every year, as we strive to be one together, may our actions truly match our words. May we reach out to those who feel as strangers among us, get to know them and help them become strangers no more. And may all our prayers ascend in a whirlwind to heaven.

Kein y'hi ratzon. May it come to be. And let us say: Amein.