

## Coming Together As One

Parshat Vayikra/Shabbat Zachor  
 Anshe Sholom B'nai Israel Congregation  
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This past week, there was an unusual event: a global recitation of the Shema. It was live streamed from the Kotel and coincided with Ta'anit Esther, which commemorates Esther's fast in the Purim story.

The global initiative was put on by the families of the hostages, was called the "Greatest Kriat Shema Event in Jewish History," with participants reciting together "Shema Yisroel" at the very same time from each location. Here were the times and locations listed (I was upset to see Chicago wasn't listed!):

Israel 5:30 PM / New York 11:30 AM / Los Angeles 8:30 AM / London 3:30 PM / Paris 4:30 PM / South Africa 5:30 PM

On the livestream, there were songs and tefilot at the Kotel. There were at least 20 or so shofarot being sounded. And then the moment came, and I sat at my desk, covered my eyes, and said the Shema, along with possibly hundreds of thousands of Jews around the world.

We were all reciting the Shema individually, all together as one.

There is a strange grammatical discrepancy hidden in Parshat Zachor, today's special maftir, which our tradition teaches is a biblical commandment to hear is written entirely in the singular:

זָכוֹר אֶת אֲשֶׁר-עָשָׂה לְךָ עַמְלֵק בַּדֶּרֶךְ בְּצֵאתְכֶם מִמִּצְרָיִם:

*Remember what Amalek did to you on your journey, after you left Egypt...*

...תִּמְחָה אֶת-זֵכֶר עַמְלֵק מִתַּחַת הַשָּׁמַיִם לֹא תִשְׁכַּח: {פ}

*Therefore, when your God grants you safety from all your enemies around you, in the land that your God is giving you as a hereditary portion, you shall blot out the memory of Amalek from under heaven. Do not forget!*

All the verbs in this famous passage address the Jewish people in the singular: You, *zachor*, remember (written in the singular). You, תִּמְחָה, erase the memory of Amalek. Do not forget, you. לֹא תִשְׁכַּח, also written in the singular.

However, when describing the Jewish people leaving Egypt, the *pasuk* refers to them in the plural: **בְּצֵאתְכֶם מִמִּצְרַיִם**, remember what Amalek did to you all, on your journey when you [all] left Egypt.

Why the shift from singular, to plural, back to singular? To address this question, we can briefly look at other famous “לכם”s in the Torah.

For counting the omer, the Torah says, **וּסְפַרְתֶּם לָכֶם מִמַּחֲרַת הַשִּׁבֹּת** *and from the day on which you bring the sheaf of elevation offering*. Or for Sukkot, **וּלְקַחְתֶּם לָכֶם בַּיּוֹם** *on the first day you shall take the product of hadar trees, branches of palm trees*.

“You shall count” means that each one of us has to count the omer. I can’t count the omer for you or for a family member. Similarly, each one of us has to take and shake the lulav, I can’t shake it for you.

When the Torah gives us a commandment as individuals, it expresses it, paradoxically, in the plural. The Torah is saying in other words, each one of you, every single person has to count the omer or shake the lulav for themselves. I can’t fulfill it for you.

However, there are other times when the Torah speaks to the Jewish people as a single collective: **זָכוֹר אֶת אֲשֶׁר-עָשָׂה לָךְ עַמְלֶק**, remember what Amalek did. Or perhaps even more famously: Shema Yisrael! Listen, Israel - not each and every Jewish person but the people of Israel as a collective whole.

This distinction also explains why the word **לָכֶם** is used when talking about sanctifying the new moon, as the Jewish people are just about to leave Egypt (Shemot 12:2): **הַחֹדֶשׁ הַזֶּה לָכֶם רִאשׁ חֳדָשִׁים**, *This month shall mark for you [all] the beginning of the months*.

When the Jewish people were leaving Egypt, they were not yet unified, nor were they when Amalek attacked them: **בְּדַרְךְ בְּצֵאתְכֶם מִמִּצְרַיִם**, “on your journey, from Egypt.”

Plural commands in the Torah are addressing each one of us, or, referring to a group of individuals who have not yet come together. One final example of this occurs at Sinai, where the Jewish people travel in plural but camp as one:

**וַיִּסְעוּ מִרְפִּידִים וַיָּבֹאוּ מִדְבַּר סִינַי וַיַּחֲנוּ בְּמִדְבַּר וַיַּחֲ-שֵׁם יִשְׂרָאֵל נֶגֶד הָהָר:**

Early on in the Purim story, it is the quality of disunity that Haman identifies when describing the Jewish people to Ahasherosh (Esther 3:8):

יִשְׁנֻ עַם־אֶחָד מִפְּזָר וּמִפְּרֹד בֵּין הָעַמִּים בְּכָל מְדִינֹת מְלֹכֶיךָ וְדִתֵּיהֶם שְׁנוֹת מִכָּל־עָם  
וְאֶת־דִּתִּי הַמֶּלֶךְ אֵינָם עֹשִׂים וְלַמֶּלֶךְ אֵין־שׁוּה לְהִנָּחֵם:

*Haman then said to King Ahasuerus, "There is a certain people, scattered and dispersed among the other peoples in all the provinces of your realm, whose laws are different from those of any other people and who do not obey the king's laws; and it is not in Your Majesty's interest to tolerate them.*

The Jewish people were dispersed. They were an *am echad*, a single people in name only, but actually, they were spread out all over the place.

Compare this characterization with Esther's instruction to Mordechai (4:15): לְךָ כָּנוּסִים "Go, assemble all the Jews who live in Shushan, and fast on my behalf..."

Esther's call for unity comes in a moment of crisis. Indeed, crises can be profoundly unifying, at least for a while. But as we know, the unity born out of a crisis doesn't last; to remain connected and attached to one another, people need something more tangible and long lasting.

The Ramban (commentary on Bava Metzia 78b) notes that the four mitzvot of Purim are unlike any other holiday. Tonight and tomorrow we will read the Megillah, give *matanot l'evyonim* [gifts to the poor], *mishloach manot* [food baskets to friends], and eat a seuda, a festive meal together with others.

Other holidays have some these elements as well: On Pesach, we retell a story and have a meal of sorts. We even gather *ma'ot chittim*, funds for purchasing matza. But we don't do *mishloach manot*! Regarding Rosh Hashanah, there is an explicit pasuk in the book of Nehemiah which describes sending *mishloach manot* to people:

וַיֹּאמֶר לָהֶם לֶכְוֹ אֲכָלוּ מִשְׁמַנִּים וּשְׁתוּ מִמֵּתֻקִּים וְשַׁלְחוּ מְנוּחַ לְאִין נֶכֶן לֹא כִי־קָדוֹשׁ הַיּוֹם  
לְאֲדֹנֵינוּ וְאֶל־תַּעֲצְבוּ כִי־חֻדַּת יְהוָה הִיא מַעֲזָכֶם:

*He further said to them, "Go, eat choice foods and drink sweet drinks and send portions to whoever has nothing prepared, for the day is holy to our Lord. Do not be sad, for your rejoicing in the LORD is the source of your strength."*

Still, we don't send *mishloach manot* for Rosh Hashana? Why?

The Ramban explains as follows:

ואין מדקדקין בדבר לומר עני זה ראוי ועני זה אינו ראוי אלא נותנין לכל כדי שיהו הכל שמחין עמנו בין ראוי בין שאינו ראוי, דימי משתה ושמחה כתיב ומשלוח מנות נמי כתיב וכן מצאתי בירושלמי פ"ק דמגילה אין מדקדקין במעות פורים אלא כל הפושט ידו ליטול נותנין לו וכן מנהג בכל ישראל

*[On Purim] we are not careful to say this poor person is deserving and this one is not, rather, we give to all to be joyful **with us**, whether or not we think they deserve it. For it is written in the megillah, "Days of feasting and gladness, and sending gift baskets," as it says in the Yerushalmi, that we are not precise with our giving on Purim, but rather anyone who reaches out their hand, we give to, and this is the custom in all of Israel...*

The Ramban says that we are not supposed to restrain our giving on this holiday. It is not the time to be discerning. "We give to all, to be joyful with us," **imanu**. If someone extends their hand to you, we give.

This year, Purim comes at a time of continued crisis for the Jewish people (or perhaps multiple crises at once). Some have wondered if we should be celebrating, or celebrating as fully this year. If you have been thinking about this question, I would refer you to the beautiful tefilah by Rabbanit Esti Rosenberg, "permission to rejoice," a prayer which echos Yom Kippur and asks for permission not to stand before God but to be joyful during a time like this.

Our tradition offers another recipe for joy following a crisis: simply being together with our fellow Jews, no matter who they are, their status or their opinions. (And if you think all of the Jews of Persia got along well even after the threat against them had abated, you haven't spent enough time with Jews!)

Each of the mitzvot of Purim were meant to create a lasting sense of togetherness. At its core, Purim fundamentally is about *achdut*, a sense of oneness, unity and solidarity. Yes, there was a horrific threat to the Jews of Persia in that particular year. What is the Jewish response? To celebrate, retell the story and connect with our fellow Jews, every year, for all time.

During this year perhaps, we need Purim more than ever. We need to laugh, to have a *lechayim*, to do some real good for someone else, and be less discerning in our kindness. When we do this, we will fulfill the Torah command to remember when our community was many and how to come together as one.