

Building a Bridge to Achdus, One Article at a Time

Several months ago I had the pleasure of meeting a wonderful individual: Rabbi Yitzchok Frankfurter, executive vice president and Torah editor of the Jewish weekly magazine *Mishpacha*. In our discussion, Rabbi Frankfurter mentioned that he was in the process of writing a cover story about our very own Rav Hershel Schachter, shlita, halachic posek for the Orthodox Union. What can I say about Rav Schachter, other than that in the eyes of all of us at the OU he is a tzaddik, a humble, sweet, brilliant individual who personifies everything that is right about a Torah-true Jew?

I was excited to hear from Rabbi Frankfurter because *Mishpacha* is perceived by many to be a Chareidi publication. I eagerly anticipated the publication of the article. When the issue finally arrived featuring Rav Schachter on the cover, I was ecstatic. In the article, Rabbi Frankfurter does a masterful job of portraying the relationship between Rabbi Schachter and his rebbe, Rav Yosef Soloveitchik, zt"l. It was obvious that he spent many hours writing the piece



with sensitivity and thoughtfulness, carefully choosing each word. With the publication of the article, I knew something significant was taking place in the Orthodox Jewish world. It was clear that *Mishpacha* was going out on a limb and would possibly suffer repercussions, both from a financial and from a public relations perspective, because of this courageous move.

Rabbi Frankfurter was kind enough to send me many of the e-mails he received in response to the article; I beamed as I read one after the other from readers throughout the Orthodox world who felt that the article was a positive step toward bringing Torah-true Jews back together as one family.

I was so inspired by this experience that I wrote an article, which I submitted to *Mishpacha* and which was published shortly after the article on Rav Schachter appeared. While Jewish Action generally does not publish reprints, we felt that that the topic addressed is so important, it should be read by our readers.

ARE WE REALLY SO DIFFERENT THAT WE CAN'T TALK TO EACH OTHER?

Looking around the world and realizing how miniscule the Jewish population really is—just 13.5 million out of a population of 6.5 billion—I wonder if the time will ever come when we, the descendants of the Avos and *Imahos* can be more cohesive. I have come to the conclusion that until we in the *frum* community can come together, there is no way that the rest

of the Jewish world will emulate our Torah ways and follow suit.

After all, when we *daven*, we say, “*Oseh shalom bimromav, Hu ya’aseh shalom, aleinu v’al kol Yisrael*,” God, who has found a way to achieve peaceful coexistence in the heavens, should find a path to also find common ground for us and for all the people of Israel. Who is the “us” the *aleinu* speaks

about? I believe it is us, the *frum* Jewish community, the people who say this prayer three times a day. We are the role models for the rest of the Jewish world. In our *davening*, we ask *Hashem* to please find a way for us to achieve his *shalom*. We who believe in Torah, the halachah, *Shabbos*, *kashrus*, *taharas hamishpachah*; whose lives are guided by the *Shulchan Aruch* and the *Mish-*

nah Berurah; who have great respect for our *talmidei chachamim*—we are the *aleinu*, and it is our responsibility not only to come together for the sake of the *frum* community but for all of Klal Yisrael.

Several years ago, when I was elected president of the Orthodox Union, I arranged a meeting with one of the *gedolei Torah* in the *Chareidi* world. When I came to visit him, he asked me the purpose of the visit. I told him that I was lonely and that I missed him. He put his head down for several minutes and then with tears in his eyes, he said to me, “And I miss you too.”

I realized at that time that we have to work very diligently to find a way to break down these artificial barriers that do not allow *frum* Jews of different stripes to meet publicly and privately. I remember attending a meeting at the headquarters of another national Torah organization. The meeting took place in a conference room with a glass enclosure. I was astonished as I watched people walk by and stop for a moment and look on with amazement that I was meeting with key executives in that organization. I said to people in that room, “One day, wouldn’t it be wonderful if no one stopped and looked, and instead assumed it was a natural thing for Orthodox leaders to meet together on a regular basis?”

Today, we live in a world in which everyone has to fit into a predetermined box. We must look exactly the same, dress the same, and not deviate one iota from what is the accepted norm of that particular group. This has created a very difficult situation for the Orthodox community. We have become so polarized that it is next to impossible for organizations and even individuals to get together to discuss important issues that affect all of us in the *frum* community.

Unity of the Jewish people does not mean uniformity. It means that when it comes to the very basic elements of life we agree. However, it doesn’t mean that each group can’t have its own *posekim*, rabbis steeped in Torah. It doesn’t mean that we all have to dress exactly the same. We have to find a way of accepting the differences among us and highlighting all the major areas we share in common. I long for the day that this issue becomes a non-issue, when *frum* Jews

Prior to becoming president of the OU, I was the chairman of the *Va’ad HaKashrus* of the Five Towns and Far Rockaway, neighboring communities on the Queens/Nassau border in New York. During my tenure, we merged these two *va’ads*, which was viewed as Modern Orthodox and *Yeshivish* communities coming together. During that time, I managed to make enemies in both camps. The Modern Orthodox community did not want the Five Towns to become more *Chareidi*, while some in the *Chareidi* community felt that a merger might compromise their *kashrus* standards.

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who share so much in common find it completely natural to seek each other’s companionship and friendship.

I believe we should do away with labels. I remember talking to a sincerely *frum* young man who continued his learning for many years after marriage while at the same time pursuing a degree in higher secular education. During the course of our conversation, he mentioned that he thought of himself as “Modern Orthodox *machmir*.” I expressed my confusion with that new label, and asked him why he couldn’t just be a *frum* Jew.

It took almost two years and the cooperation of more than forty-six rabbis, who represent the entire spectrum of Orthodox life, to complete the merger. While there were many difficult moments, the merger finally happened and the community has never looked back. Today there are seventy-five establishments, all under one *kashrus* supervising body, and it has brought together and united the community more than ever before. It wasn’t easy. There were many challenging moments, and there were zealots in both camps who would have loved to see this wonderful blend of *achdus*

disappear. It took the strong will of the rabbis and community leaders to realize the greater good of the *frum* community was far more important than satisfying fringe elements who would never acquiesce to anything that was different from their way of life.

Sometimes when a situation reaches epidemic proportions, it is time to act. Community-minded Jews, rabbis and *roshei yeshivah* cannot allow the small minority to undermine the wishes of the majority of the Orthodox community. So what can be done to change this?

It will take a concerted effort on the part of the *frum* community to create opportunities in which all of us who believe in *Torah M'Sinai* can work together to create a family of many stripes. Joint programs should be arranged on issues that affect all of us. The high consumer cost of the *frum* community is one example. We should work together on affordable housing and job opportunities. These are issues that unite all *frum* Jews. We should find ways of exchanging speakers, inviting *roshei yeshivah* from different camps to speak in shuls and *ba'atei midrash*, so we all become familiar with different dimensions of Orthodox life, while being mindful and respectful of our different approaches. We should be working on *kiruv* projects together.

Sometimes small steps have to be taken. This problem will not be solved overnight. As much as I would like to see this problem addressed by the heads of major institutions, I believe that a grass-roots approach will be necessary to achieve our goals. If enough of us will it, it will happen.

We've started a program called Harry H. Beren ASK OU Outreach in which our *kashrus* personnel educate the *frum* community on the details and *halachos* of *kashrus*. We've gone to Chassidic, *Yeshivish*, Ashkenazic, Sephardic and Modern Orthodox communities to bring this knowledge to the Jewish people. It's going to take a real commitment on the part of all of us to leave our egos at the door and to find ways of addressing this issue.

There is much at stake. I am reminded of a letter I saw in the *Jewish Observer* after the last *Siyum HaShas* in

which the writer, Rabbi Moshe Shochet of Brooklyn, wrote:

One scene will remain with me forever [after the Siyum]. After we exited the Continental Arena [in New Jersey] on a high spiritual note, we crossed the Pedestrian Bridge to our buses. It was very crowded, with families trying to make their way home after a very uplifting event. The traffic was moving very slowly, however, due to the large crowd. Instead of pushing or being impatient and causing a problem, the men joined [together] and danced to Torah songs be'achdus uveshalom.

There was a mixture of Klal Yisrael there, dancing shoulder to shoulder—some with black hats and some with no hats, some with up-hats, and some with kipot serugot—all united under one banner of Torah and celebrating the Siyum HaShas!

The Chofetz Chaim was once asked—to which group or organization should he belong. He answered that in Shamayim, Hashem will open up the Torah and ask a Yid if he kept the entire Torah—not to which group he belongs.

Sixty years ago, during the Holocaust, they also danced united, and sang: "Ashreinu ma tov chelkeinu uma na'im, goraleinu uma yafa yerushaseinu."

Now, sixty years later, we danced and sang together as one: "Yisroel veOraisa veKudsha Brich Hu chad hu!"

I think Rabbi Shochet was right on the money. But it can't be for just one moment. It has to be a way of life. When the Jewish people were at the brink of destruction at the hands of Haman, Esther tells Mordechai, "*Lech k'nos es kol haYehudim*"—go and gather all the Jews. She didn't say, "Send this kind of Jew or that kind of Jew." She said "*kol haYehudim*"—all of them. To accomplish her goal of bringing all Klal Yisrael together, it has to start with us, the *aleinu* I mentioned earlier. We are the role models for Jewish society. We are the ones whose children and grandchildren grow up loving Jewish learning, Jewish values, traditions and Eretz Yisrael. We, the role models, must come together. Now is the time to act. Now is the time to break down the imaginary and unnecessary barriers and find a way for the Jewish world to come together as one.

I welcome any and all suggestions and ideas that will further help us achieve this most noble and important challenge that we face. [Contact me at savitskys@ou.org.] Hashem should give us the strength and guidance to find the correct solution.

It's been quite a few weeks since the article appeared, now the hard work of making Jewish achdus a reality begins. We have many plans for taking this initiative to the next level, including seminars and workshops as well as working with leaders across the spectrum in the Orthodox world. We are truly excited about this opportunity and know that in Shamayim, Hashem is looking down and smiling as his children make genuine efforts to come together, united as one. ■

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