

A Manual for Achdut:  
Finding the Middle Line

Yedidah Cohen



*Dedicated in deepest love and appreciation for my diverse chevrotas from whom I learn so much every time we meet.*

### **A Word Before We Begin**

The initial impulse for this booklet came from listening to a recording of a round table discussion that Rabbi Gottlieb held with people from many different walks of life — people who each want to make a contribution to our society. He started with a passage from Rabbi Ashlag's writings and then everyone contributed their particular perspective. Toward the end of the discussion, some of them sighed and said: we lack *achdut*, —unity. But no one seemed to have a clear idea of how to achieve it. That moment stayed with me. I thought I would try to formulate a path toward *achdut* — one that would speak to as many of us as I can.

The other reason I sat down to write this is that I want to contribute toward ending the situation we find ourselves in — the war, the constant threat, the anxiety that has become the background noise of our lives. On a spiritual level, if we can achieve *achdut*, the outer world will conform and reflect our inner peace. This is not wishful thinking. It is one of the deepest principles of the Torah's innermost wisdom.

With my blessings

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## 1. Our True Nature is Achdut (Unity)

בני בכורי ישראל — "My firstborn son is Israel" (Shemot 4:22).

It is the nature of the soul within us to join together, to gather into wholeness. The holy Shechinah — the indwelling presence of Hashem — is also called *Knesset Yisrael*, the Gathering of Israel. The *shleimut* of Israel, its wholeness and completion, depends on all its parts joining together into one.

In the hustle and bustle of daily life, this underlying reality is often concealed from us. But in times of national distress, in times of war and genuine threat, what was always true becomes suddenly visible: the Jewish people are one. The unity was never absent — it was only hidden.

This is the essential point: achdut is not something we need to create. It is already inherent in our being. Our work is not to manufacture something new, but to uncover and reveal what is already there.

## 2. The Root Experience: Mount Sinai

Whatever paths our fathers and mothers have taken since the beginning, we all stood together at Mount Sinai. This is not merely history — it is a root experience embedded within the consciousness of every Jew in every generation.

כאיש — "And the people encamped opposite the mountain" — ויחזן העם נגד ההר אחד, as one person with one heart.

It was at Sinai that the profound connection between the revelation of the light of God and the unity of the Children of Israel was made manifest. And it was not incidental. The unity of Israel was the prerequisite for the revelation — Hashem did not descend upon the mountain until the people were gathered as one.

Together we said נעשה ונשמע — we will do and we will hear — an unconditional commitment to serve God and keep His Torah. We may argue today about what that means in practice. But the fundamental promise was given, and it was given with one heart. That promise has not expired. It lives within each of us still.

## 3. The Sanctuary

The first project which God gave the people of Israel was to build the Sanctuary. ועשו לי מקדש ושכנתי בתוכם — The Sages interpret this command as "they shall make me a sanctuary and I will dwell within them," that is, within the heart of each and every one of us.

But how was this Sanctuary to be achieved? ויקהל משה את כל עדת בני ישראל — It was through the assembly of all the people. And indeed the Torah records: כָּל-אִישׁ וְאִשָּׁה, אֲשֶׁר נָדַב לְבָם אֹתָם — Every man and woman whose heart made them willing to bring for all the work which the Lord had commanded brought a freewill offering to the Lord.

The essence of the Sanctuary was an expression of their unity. Each person acted according to his own heart and his abilities, but with one purpose.

We get a sense of their enthusiasm from the following passage:

“Moses called together Bezalel and Oholiab, and every person of wise heart — all those whom God had gifted with wisdom and whose heart moved them to come forward and give themselves to the work.

They received from Moses everything the Children of Israel had brought for the work of the holy Sanctuary. And still the people kept bringing — freewill offerings, morning after morning.

All the skilled craftsmen came, each one pausing from his own work, and came to Moses and said: “The people are bringing far more than is needed for the work that God has commanded us to do.”

So Moses gave the order, and it was announced throughout the camp: “Let no man or woman bring anything more for the offering of the Sanctuary.” And the people stopped bringing.

What had already been given was not only enough — it was more than enough. (Shemot 36:2-7, Parshat Vayakhel)

### **Building the Sanctuary of Today**

The spontaneous kindness, togetherness, giving and self-sacrifice we see within the people of Israel is most noticeable in times of war. The incredible self-sacrifice of our soldiers and civilians who rushed to help on 7th October, the support and prayers for the wellbeing and return of the hostages by Jews all over the world — these are the furnishings of the Sanctuary in our day.

The Sanctuary is not a building of the past. It is being built, right now, in our midst — in the acts of self-sacrifice and loving-kindness we see among our people, most visibly in times of shared trial, but also in the everyday.

**You shall build Me a sanctuary and I shall dwell within them.**

For my father, Aaron Ben Menachem Mendel z"l

Within them? Within us, within everyone?

Within me also?

It's a bit of a tall order.

I'm going to have to get the decorators in.

I hear the list of furnishings required is extensive.

Some of those items are pretty hard to come by...

I'm ok for blue thread,

but I've run short on the purple,

and I have no idea where you get gold from these days.

I mean real gold, not the fake stuff. That wouldn't do at all.

And what furnishings do I need exactly?

A seven branched menorah of complex design,

a table of shewbread,

a copper, or was it a golden altar with incense?

The actions of the decorators are strange.

They are not bothering with the usual stripping and fixing.

They seem to value ordinary, mundane actions that one would not consider as worth much.

Giving up my place on the bus,

Being there to comfort a friend in distress,

Listening and yes, listening again and again to words spoken and not spoken,

Through my ears and through my heart.

I close my eyes, and begin to imagine,

The potential of a refurbished soul:

Red, copper, gold, blue —

Threads of love,

Woven by blessing.

And I give thanks.

Yedidah

## Twelve Tribes, Twelve Ways of Serving God

If we look at the reality of the journey of the Children of Israel from Egypt to Eretz Yisrael, we find they suffered from many disagreements along the way. And even before that, within the family of Jacob itself, we have the major catastrophe of the brothers selling Joseph into slavery. Where do these disagreements arise from?

The Zohar teaches us that the twelve sons of Jacob — who became the twelve tribes of Israel — each represent a distinct way of serving God. In other words, dissent is built into the very fabric of our experience as a people. So if *achdut* is our true underlying reality, what does this dissent mean? How do we hold these two truths together — that we are fundamentally one, and yet we are constitutionally different from one another?

The answer is that we all have a common purpose, but the vessels or the channels that we use to accomplish this purpose differ in their texture, their approach, their mood and what they see as important. If we look in the Zohar we see for example that:

Reuven — Chesed

Shimon — Gevurah

Levi — Tiferet

Yehuda — Malchut

Yosef / Binyamin — Yesod

The other sons of Jacob all align with *sefirot* as well, but it gets a bit more complex. The essential point is that all twelve tribes are different ways of carrying the light of God into the world.

And here lies a subtle but important danger. It is very easy to become so focused on our own particular path — on the specific quality of light we are bringing — that we lose sight of why we are doing it, and of the greater purpose we share. This is how disagreement tips into division. This is why it is so important to step back at times, to lift our eyes from our own work, and to see how our piece fits into the whole.

I saw a short in which Rabbi Jonathan Sacks was asked why Israelis argue so much. He said it is our way of understanding ourselves and our fellow — of fixing limits and boundaries, and also of exploring new territory. So long as we keep our higher purpose in view, we can disagree and argue without descending into name-calling and all that goes with it.

## Where Are We Today? The Ingathering and Its Riches

It is my belief that all twelve tribes are back in Israel. The long exile and its separations are drawing to a close, and we are home — but we did not come home empty-handed.

I worked for a time at Hadassah Hospital in Jerusalem. One Rosh Hashanah, we passed around a card for everyone to sign a New Year's greeting in the language of the country where they had been born. That one small card carried over seventy languages.

We bring with us not only the inbuilt spiritual characteristics of our root tribe — our particular way of carrying the light of God — but also the customs, the melodies, the modes of thought, the food, the humor and the heart-break of the countries our families came from, or fled from. The Yemenite and the Russian, the Moroccan and the American, the Ethiopian and the Argentine — each carries a world within them.

This means that the *achdut* we are called to build today is richer and more complex than anything our ancestors faced. We are not simply twelve tribes reuniting. We are twelve tribes, each one layered with seventy nations' worth of experience, all finding our way back to one another and to our shared home. Because of our fundamental differences in the way we channel the light of God, we disagree about what our home should look like. Some of us believe it should reflect universal values; others feel it should prioritize the distinctly Jewish way of life. Some want to see Jewish law — *halacha* — serve as a greater basis for our public life; others experience this as a threat.

We need to know that these disagreements are not new. They are the natural outcome of the twelve tribes, each carrying its own light. And there is a way to unite even in the face of such seemingly irreconcilable views.

The innermost dimension of the Torah — Kabbalah — teaches us that the extremes of any position are problematic, and that we need to find, and can find, the middle way.

The path to the middle way requires three things:

- first, restraint of my own desire;
- second, an active desire to contribute and to give, even when I am not sure where I am going; and
- third, faith in the ultimate goodness and underlying unity of the soul within us all.

The middle way comes through the grace of the Creator, but it needs our openness and our cooperation.

Why do we so rarely find it? Two reasons: because we do not know it exists, and because our own ego stands in the way.

## **Soul and Ego**

Rabbi Ashlag teaches us that we as created beings are made up of two major elements. The aspect of ourselves we call the soul is the aspect of the Creator within us. The created aspect manifests within each of us as our particular set

of talents, personality and attributes. The soul aspect is what helps us unite. Our created aspect leads us to separate.

Why is this? This is because the created aspect of ourselves — which is really intended to act as a support and to give expression to the desires of the soul — is often used instead to provide self-gratification, without any thought of anyone other than ourselves. This transgresses the spiritual law of affinity of form. There is a spiritual law which states that two elements that act in opposite ways separate from one another. When we act in ways that satisfy only our self-gratification, we separate both from each other and from the Creator, the soul within us.

How can we possibly manifest achdut in those circumstances? So let us look at the main manifestations of our ego nature in our society today.

### **The First Step: Stop the Lashon Hara**

Lashon hara is the most crucial place to start. Let us first define clearly what it really is.

Lashon hara is saying something about another person, or about a section of the community, that is factually true — but conveying it in a way that carries a negative connotation. This is distinct from motzi shem ra — slander — which is saying something factually untrue. Other nations of the world recognize only slander as a moral wrong. We hold ourselves to a far higher standard: even the truth, spoken with negative intent or in a demeaning way, is forbidden.

Our Sages likened lashon hara to bloodshed. If you look honestly at our society today, you will see they were not speaking metaphorically. They meant every word.

Who bears responsibility? Three parties share the guilt: the person who speaks it, the person who listens to it, and the person who passes it on. If no one listened, it would simply stop.

We are all participants in this. It is the number one cause of our communal distress. Journalism has changed — it is no longer about criticizing a policy, but about destroying the person who advocates it. That is appalling.

Lashon hara is just as forbidden when directed at a community or a section of the community as when directed at an individual. We are not obliged — and indeed we are forbidden — to speak negatively about any particular section of the community of Israel.

**Stopping the lashon hara is the first step.**

### **Practical Steps: Changing How We Consume Information**

There are news services that exist precisely for this purpose — to deliver the essential news without the commentary, the attacks, and the constant lashon

hara of the media studios. In Israel, <https://tamzit.org.il/> — News Highlights — is one such service. The news, plain and clear, without the backchat. And as a bonus, it frees up a great deal of time as well.

### **The Hall of Mirrors**

The second thing we need to understand is how modern social media actually works. Google and the other major service providers use algorithms and cookies to ensure that we see more and more of our own views reflected back at us, echoed and amplified, again and again. We are fed what we already believe. We are shown what we already like. Gradually, without necessarily being aware of it, we stop encountering anything that challenges or enlarges us.

I remember visiting the Palace of Versailles on a school trip, and walking through the famous Hall of Mirrors — that long gallery where every wall reflects your own image back at you endlessly. This is precisely what our virtual reality has become. A hall of mirrors. All you see is yourself.

How do we get out of it?

Get out of virtual reality and go and meet your neighbors.

### **Meeting the Neighbors**

Getting out of the virtual hall of mirrors sounds simple. But why is it so difficult in practice?

It is a skill our grandparents had but one we have largely lost. We have become self-enclosed, afraid of intruding on someone else's privacy, unsure of how to simply knock on a door or start a conversation with someone we don't already know. We need to recover our courage.

How do we do it? By remembering who we are. By remembering our fundamental achdut — that when we encounter someone different from us, the difference is in how we see things, in our path and our approach, but not in our essential selves. Beneath the surface, we are meeting another piece of the same soul.

Many of us live in what I would call monochrome neighborhoods. Everyone on the street goes to the same shul — or to the shul we don't go to. We know our own community intimately and the family across town hardly at all. The secular family, the Sephardi family, the newly arrived family from a country we have never visited — they may as well live in a different world.

But if we each cling to the bubble of our adopted "tribe," how do we ever reach Hakhel — the great gathering of all Israel?

### **Why This Is More Crucial Now Than Ever: The Advent of AI**

We have all experienced AI to some extent, but we need to think clearly about

its nature in order to understand both the benefits it offers and the trap it sets.

Let me give you an example: I needed to buy a new computer. I went to the computer shop — I have known the proprietor over many years to be an expensive but honest dealer who understands the field very well and takes responsibility for what he sells. He sold me a computer he said would serve me well for many years. It was more than I really wanted to spend, but I trusted him. Within a short time the computer started to give me serious problems, crashing unexpectedly.

I contacted him.

At the same time I was discussing the precise nature of the crashes with the AI engine I use, to see if it could shed any light on the subject.

The AI began to speak in extremely negative terms about the computer salesman — despite the fact that problems can happen with anything we buy, and it was not necessarily his fault at all.

I reproached the AI and asked it to stop using such emotive and inappropriate language. AI has no loyalty, no history, no relationship. It does not know that this man stood behind his products for twenty years. If it had acted according to its dictates, it could easily have broken a good relationship.

I realized that AI is simply a conglomeration of millions of people's will to receive, formed into an independently thinking unit. Unless we work on ourselves, we will be its slaves, acting blindly according to its dictates. Now more than ever it is crucial for us to step away from the screen and activate our soul — our desire to be compassionate, to connect, to contribute our talents and our God-given personalities to unite rather than divide us.

### **The Sfat Emet: Vayakhel —Uniting Israel**

"And Moses gathered the entire congregation... These are the words that God has commanded to do... Six days you shall work..."

The Torah places this gathering of the people before the account of building the Sanctuary, **because the Sanctuary can only be built through the power of a gathered community.**

This is why the verse says: "I will dwell among them." The Midrash notes pointedly that it does not say "within it" — within the building — but "within them" — within the people.

This union of the community is in fact the inner meaning of Shabbat. And so when Moses conveyed the laws of Shabbat to the people, the very act of teaching them was itself an act of uniting the community .

We can also read the phrase "these are the words that God has commanded" as referring to the act of uniting the community itself — that what God commanded, above all, was that Israel should come together as one.

All of this is ultimately one teaching: when the people of Israel are elevated and united as a whole, the Shechinah — the Divine Presence — comes to rest among them. This is what our Sages meant when they called the Divine Presence, *Knesset Yisrael* — the Gathering of Israel. (Sfat Emet Parashat Vayakhel (תּרל"ז )

### **Nature is Not Just One Phenomenon**

Neither is Torah.

The innermost aspect of Torah is the part of Torah which speaks directly to our soul, because it is the soul of Torah. All can learn it, both secular and religious, and gain unique insights. It is a source of a great deal of pleasure and gives us a way to truly connect with each other and learn from each other on an equal footing. It is a way of exploring ourselves and each other and learning together. "For all its ways are pleasantness and all its paths are peace." (Proverbs 3:17)

There are different expressions of the innermost part of the Torah. The path that I have been following for the last thirty years is that taught by Rabbi Yehudah Leib Ashlag and his son Rabbi Baruch Shalom Ashlag.

It is out of the experience of learning this inner Torah with many diverse people that I have written this booklet and it is to them that I dedicate it. However....

### **We are all Different**

Everyone is different, and your style and your way of making our fundamental unity — our *achdut* — visible is unique, and thus irreplaceable.

I finish this small booklet with a simple plea: please, just begin. In small ways or in larger ways. The possibilities and the creativity of finding your soul's expression in *achdut* are endless.

I would love to hear from you the ways you find to express our unity.

With all my blessings,

Yedidah

## **Resources**

### **News without commentary:**

Tamzit HaChadashot — News Highlights — available online and via WhatsApp: <https://tamzit.org.il>

Essential news, clearly and simply presented, without editorial attack or lashon hara.

### **The Teachings of Rabbi Yehudah Leib Ashlag (Baal HaSulam):**

The middle line and the path toward it is the ultimate key to unity. For those who wish to explore the Kabbalistic foundations of achdut more deeply, the writings of Rabbi Ashlag offer an inexhaustible well.

**Nehora Press** — books and shiurim in English, including A Tapestry for the Soul and other introductions to Kabbalah, compiled by Yedidah Cohen: <https://nehorapress.com>

### **Further reading:**

Giving by Aryeh Segal (Urim Publications)

The Inner Work and Spiritual Principles by Avraham Lowenthal

All available on Amazon. These books are based on the teachings of Rabbi Ashlag as transmitted by Rabbi Avraham Mordecai Gottlieb.

**Rabbi Avraham Mordecai Gottlieb:**

Rabbi Gottlieb is a great contemporary teacher of the work of Rabbi Ashlag.

He reaches out equally to all sections of the community and has many videos available across social media. YouTube: @gotlivkab