

Am Echad im Lev Echad v'Ruach Chadasha:

One People With One Heart, and a New Spirit

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Perhaps you've heard this story before over the years. A yeshiva decides to start a crew team. But no matter how much they practice, they lose every single race. Eventually they decide to send one boy down to the nearby prep school as a spy, to watch their winning crew team and find out what their secret is. After a day of reconnaissance, the boy comes back. "Listen!" he tells his teammates. "I learned how they do it — they have eight guys rowing, and only one guy screaming!" 😊

It's a classic joke, but one which, when we unpack it a bit, can offer us as a Jewish community some timely insights as we begin this High Holy Day season and this New Year. I'd like to focus on three takeaways from the joke: 1) problem solving amidst crisis, 2) individual or narrow interests vs. those of the larger group, team or community, and 3) balancing leaders and visionaries vs. people gutting it out in the trenches.

First, let's talk about problem solving during tough times. The yeshiva crew team keeps losing and can't make progress or think about anything else until they figure out how to address the crisis at hand of their losing streak. Looking back on the past few years, it's hard to miss the stark reality we've experienced of having to face the challenge of navigating one crisis after another, locally, nationally and globally. Here's a short but weighty list: The tornadoes that struck our community in 2019, the COVID pandemic, violence in our nation's capital and in cities across America, the ice storm of 2021, Israel's war with Gaza in 2021, rising antisemitism and related violence here in the U.S., from Pittsburgh to Colleyville, and around the world; and the war in Ukraine this year.

Putting it bluntly, we've been through a lot, as Jews, as Americans, and as human beings as part of the world community. Here in our Jewish community, we've spent a large portion of our time over these recent years responding to these crises as best we can, whatever each crisis demanded of us. Whether it was helping out our fellow congregants and others locally after the storms, finding ways to keep our community connected and engaged while people isolated at home during the pandemic, ramping up security measures and trainings in the wake of murderous attacks at shuls, supporting Israel during its war with Gaza, or assisting Ukrainian refugees, Jewish and non-Jewish, and helping them relocate to Israel and elsewhere, we've done it. Jumping from crisis to crisis, putting out one fire after

another, means we've been doing exactly what we have needed to be doing in the moment, rising to the task to address even the most difficult of issues as they present themselves. But the unfortunate byproduct of that necessary focus on being reactive is we often haven't had the wherewithal to think proactively about other issues, some of which I'll expand on in a few moments, that are already beginning to challenge us as a Jewish community and will likely loom even larger in the years ahead. Now, especially with COVID moving more to endemic status and something we're going to need to live with, we have to once again find the time, the energy, and the resources to roll up our sleeves and do more problem solving of a proactive nature.

The second key idea that emerges from the joke with which I started my remarks is individual, or narrow, interests, vs. those of the larger group. Eight people screaming out what to do in the crew boat while only one person was rowing suggests—laughably, since it's a joke of course 😊--that those eight people each thought they were in charge of their own destiny and had figured out the best way to cut through the water quickly to their own specifications. In the past I've commented in sermons about the Amazon Prime phenomenon and about our desire to quickly and most conveniently obtain whatever we want. Comedian Ronny Chieng did a hilarious bit on this in one of his Netflix specials and joked that Americans should have “Amazon Prime NOW”—meaning the moment we order

something, someone should knock on the door and put it in our hands, and even “Amazon Prime BEFORE”, where an app determines what we want BEFORE we want it and sends it to us immediately. Slight exaggeration, sure, but we certainly fall into the trap of obsessive and myopic self-interest often enough that his joke hits home. Self-interest may seem like it is innocuous enough because it is our time and our resources at stake, and up to us to determine our wants and/or needs. But an early rabbinic midrash, about another boating incident, points out the limits of such an approach:

Rabbi Shimon bar Yochai taught a parable about a group of people who were on a ship. One of them took a drill and started drilling underneath him. The others said to him: “What are you doing”?! He replied: “What do you care? I’m drilling in my own area”?! They said to him: “But the water will rise and sink the ship for all of us”. (Midrash Vayikra Rabba 4:6)

In the midrash, the individual who chooses to drill blithely assumes that it’s his seat in the boat, so if he wants to drill in it, why should it matter to anyone else, not realizing that his actions in his own small space have ripple effects that have an impact on others, in this case a particularly perilous one at that. In the joke about the crew team, we are reminded of the importance of being part of a team, larger group, or community, and needing to extend beyond a potentially narrow focus and

additionally, or even sometimes instead, focus on what's best for our collective success.

In this vein, I'd like to highlight several opportunities for Jewish communal growth, which we here in Dallas are fortunate to have compared to many other cities and Jewish communities around the country.

First, our area Jewish preschools are booming, our Weitzman Family Religious School here at Shearith has increased from 76 students to 154 students in two years, and more and more adults are looking for connection and meaning than ever before in Jewish Dallas, so we should lean hard into these positive trends and cultivate more robust Jewish learning on all levels, from our youngest toddler to our eldest adult. Being exposed to Jewish texts and teachings, ancient and modern, and interacting with them and processing their relevance to our daily life and times, helps each of us appreciate the richness our tradition has to offer and contributes to our growth as Jews and as human beings.

Second, in many other Jewish communities, the conversation around Israel has turned so toxic that it's become almost taboo. This is thankfully not the case here in Dallas, where we are fortunate to have a very strong Zionist culture and consistently show support for a wide range of pro-Israel organizations such as Israel Bonds, AIPAC, JNF, FIDF, and others. We must leverage the excitement around Israel's upcoming 75th birthday and step up our efforts to invest in the

connection and bond between us as American Jews and Israeli and world Jewry, one that can be nurtured by getting more people of all ages to visit Israel, and by supporting efforts in Israel and partnering with organizations like the Schechter Institute, Kibbutz Hannaton Educational Center, and the Shalom Hartman Institute to advance Jewish pluralism in Israeli society and create a space where our traditional and egalitarian views of Jewish life can be recognized alongside our Reform brothers and sisters to our left, and our Orthodox brothers and sisters to our right.

Third, we are blessed to have here in Dallas a Jewish community that is resource rich, both in terms of philanthropy and volunteer commitment. When it comes to implementing a new idea or initiative, it's rarely a question of whether funds are out there, it's more about having the vision and the will to secure the resources needed. With that as a backdrop, it is imperative that we think strategically as a larger Dallas Jewish community about investing more resources in developing Jewish engagement and leadership amongst all ages, from teens to young professionals, to adult lay leaders of Jewish institutions. I should also add that, given the shortage we are facing of Jewish professionals locally and around the country, encouraging our young adults to pursue careers as rabbis and hazzanim, Jewish educators, Jewish communal servants, and engagement and outreach workers, and figuring out ways to increase the pool of Jewish

professionals here in Dallas, is vital for our community's long-term health and well-being.

Mark Wilf, the new chairman of the board of governors of The Jewish Agency for Israel, echoes these sentiments in a blog he posted for ejewishphilanthropy.com after attending the 125th anniversary celebration of the First Zionist Congress in Basel, Switzerland, last month. He writes: *“At its core, Jewish leadership is about strengthening the Jewish collective, a priority that is arguably as important as ever in today’s global environment for the Jewish people. We can most effectively strengthen the Jewish collective by reaching every Jew, creating both a place for them in the community and a connection with Israel”*.

Along these lines, putting on my hat as president of our Rabbinic Association of Greater Dallas and as a member of the Board of the Jewish Federation of Greater Dallas, I want to encourage each of us to also consider getting involved in some fashion with our Federation's work. If you were to visit JFGD's website after Rosh Hashanah, on the main page of the site you would see the tagline: “Our greatest strength is our ability to act collectively” followed by three key areas of Federation's emphasis: **raising and allocating funds**, supporting more than 85 Jewish organizations and initiatives in Dallas, Israel and around the world; **creating community**; and **building the next generation of Jewish leadership**, inspiring and engaging our Jewish young adults, like it did this

past summer through the Dallas Israel Teen Tour which was reborn incredibly successfully after a many year hiatus, with a special shout-out to Sherry Goldberg for her efforts, bringing a full busload of teens from Shearith and other area shuls to Israel for three weeks. Under the leadership of new President and CEO Igor Alterman, with more and more Jews moving into the DFW Metroplex and the overall prosperity our local Jewish community is experiencing, we are very much heading in the right direction, but need your involvement and financial support to help us take the next steps into our bright future.

The third key idea from the crew team joke is the problem of having eight screamers and one rower. Having lots of well-minded folks sitting on the sidelines shouting out instructions about what we should be doing for the Jewish people to keep moving forward, with not enough people actually rowing the boats towards progress, is not a recipe for success. It's also worth noting that, unlike the successful rowing team with only one coxswain and eight rowers, as a community we would probably benefit from a slightly more balanced division between leaders and visionaries who see and chart out the path for the boat and the way we need to get there, and those who are grounded in the tradition and in the trenches rowing us forward. A Talmudic teaching from Tractate Horayot about a dispute as to who should lead the yeshiva of Pumbedita in Babylonia illustrates this challenge. Rabban Shimon ben Gamliel and the rest of his rabbinic colleagues disagree on

what characteristic is most preferable in a potential yeshiva head—“*Sinai*”, meaning one who is extremely knowledgeable in the laws given to us at Mt. Sinai, or “*Oker harim*”, one who uproots mountains, as it were, by thinking outside the box when it comes to halakhic and communal leadership. The Talmud explains that Rav Yosef was *Sinai*, and Rabbah was *Oker Harim*. The rabbis claim that *Sinai*, in this case Rav Yosef, is preferable, we need the expert in the sources, yet despite this ruling Rav Yosef opts to defer to Rabbah, who proceeds to lead the yeshiva for 22 years before Rav Yosef succeeds him. Given that the practical result went against the ruling, the Talmud asks again, which of the two is preferable, and it concludes, “*teiku*”, meaning the dispute shall stand unresolved until Elijah the Prophet comes back to give the final answer. In our contemporary Jewish community too, we need a balance between visionary, outside the box thinking and leadership, and those who execute the vision and live it out day by day, dependably rowing us forward into our future one oar stroke at a time by “doing Jewish”, committing to Jewish learning, Jewish ritual and ethical acts, love of Israel, and philanthropy. Our long-term viability as a people depends on the vitality of this partnership.

So now I come back to the question: what can we as Jews in the year 2022 learn from a joke about an inept crew team? We need to be able to transcend the reactive crisis mode we’ve been in for the past few years and proactively approach

budding challenges and issues our Jewish community faces locally, nationally, and globally. In so doing we should each seek new pathways to embrace being part of the Jewish collective in its broadest sense, where actions we each take that strengthen the Jewish community and people as a whole come to be seen as in our own best interests as individuals. And we must cultivate and develop more visionary leaders and Jewish professionals while also leaning into the importance of each of us picking up an oar and rowing the boat of Jewish identity, practice, and life forward day after day. When the Talmud teaches us “*Kol Yisrael arevin zeh ba-zeh*”, all Israel is responsible one for another and for the Jewish people, it is not an exaggeration. We each have a vital role to play for the future of Judaism and our people. As Mordechai says to Queen Esther in the Book of Esther when she is debating whether to put her life at risk by approaching King Achashverosh and accusing Haman of plotting against the Jewish people, HER people, “who knows if it’s for this very purpose and moment that you ended up becoming the queen?” We need you, each of you, your voice, your participation in Jewish life, and your broad and bold vision of the potential that lies ahead, should we only possess the drive and the commitment to make it a reality. May this year of 5783 be one of progress towards our seeing ourselves as part of *am echad*, one Jewish people, *im lev echad v’ruach chadasha*, with one unified beating heart and a new and invigorated spirit, just as Ezekiel prophesized some 2600 years ago. AMEN.