

Yeshiva University decided to field a crew team. Unfortunately, they lost race after race. They practiced for hours every day, but never managed to come in any better than dead last.

The *Rosh Yeshiva* finally decided to send Yankel to spy on the Harvard team. So Yankel shlepped off to Cambridge and hid in the bulrushes off the Charles River, from where he carefully watched the Harvard team as they practiced.

Yankel finally returned to Yeshiva. "I have figured out their secret," he announced.

"They have eight guys rowing and only one guy shouting."

I first heard this joke many years ago from my friend Phil, and it has become one of my favorites. It is also somewhat of a commentary on how we, as Jews, go about our business.

One of the themes in this week's *parsha*, *Nitzavim/Vayelech*, is redemption. Many of us may attend *shuls* in which the Prayer for the State of Israel is recited. That prayer quotes a very powerful and moving *pasuk* from this week's *parsha*:

Im yihye nidachacha biktzei hashamayim, misham yikabetzcha Hashem Elokecha umisham yikachecha.

If your exiles are at the edge of the heavens, even from there will Hashem your God gather you and take you.

Additionally, we daily recite the *bracha* in the *shemoneh esrei* asking Hashem to gather our exiles, ending with "*Baruch atta Hashem, mekabetz nidchei amo Yisrael,*" Blessed are you Hashem, who gathers the exiles of Israel.

The *Kli Yakar* (Rabbi Shlomoh Efraim of Luntchitz, Poland/Prague, Bohemia, 16th/17th century) points out that our *parsha* uses two terms to describe our exiles. The first term, "*hefitzcha,*" has the connotation of being shattered or exploded. Imagine if you will a handful of seeds thrown in the wind, or a glass object dropped on a hard tile floor. The second term, "*hidichacha,*" comes from a root which means "pushed away."

The *Kli Yakar* states that the first connotation, that of being "shattered," is a statement of the objective reality of exile and resultant distancing from Hashem. The second connotation, however, is not objective – it represents our feelings of alienation arising from our perception of our relationship with Hashem. We ourselves are the cause of these feelings, and Hashem really has nothing to do with it.

It is interesting that in the *tefillot* mentioned above, we concentrate on the "pushing" aspect of exile rather than the "shattering" one. Perhaps the *Kli Yakar*

can be understood in a slightly different sense which will help us to understand *Chazal's* choice to concentrate on the subjective when composing our tefillot.

As we saw in the joke about the Yeshiva University crew team, and as the phrase “two Jews, three opinions” implies, we Jews seem to thrive on magnifying our differences, often to the point where we engage in “shouting matches” to the detriment of our ability to move the boat forward. In this sense, our differences are the objective reality – as a people, we are shattered geographically, theologically, philosophically, politically, and in many other ways beyond number. We frequently tend to focus on our differences as the be all and end all – as an objective reality which we cannot really change.

Chazal, however, were prescient in their choice to word our *tefillot* in a way that compels us concentrate on our subjective reality. Although we cannot alter objective reality, we certainly do have the power to alter our perceptions. We need to recognize that shattered as we are as a people, the original and continuing cause of the exile has more to do with our subjective perceptions of reality than anything else.

When we engage in shouting matches with each other, we actively “push each other away,” and we thus perpetuate our roles as the ongoing cause of our own exile. We often overlook the much larger area of common ground that we share with each other in our rush to find differences between ourselves and others. Much like the Yeshiva University bochrim in the boat, our perceptions prevent us from seeing that each of us holds an oar and that we all need to row to move the boat somewhere.

At this time of year, I encourage you all to view others within *Klal Yisrael* – different as they may be from you and I in appearance, practice, and thought – as allies, rather than adversaries. In the *zechut* of doing so, may our prayers for a complete redemption this year be answered.

I wish all of you a ketivah va'chatima tova – may you be inscribed and sealed for a year of good.

<i>bracha</i>	Blessing
<i>parsha(t)</i>	Weekly Torah portion
<i>Chazal</i>	Our sages, of blessed memory
<i>klal Yisrael</i>	the community of Israel
<i>pasuk</i>	Verse
<i>rosh yeshiva</i>	Head of the school
<i>shemoneh esrei</i>	Literally, “the 18,” the silent Amidah prayer, actually consisting of 19 blessings
<i>tefillot</i>	Prayers
<i>zechut</i>	Merit