

# Halakhic Unity

*by HaRav Ariel Bar Tzadok*

Poetically speaking, Halakha can be compared to a flowing river of living waters. It bends and curves as it meets the various terrains it encounters. Yet, the waters of the mighty Halakha river all flow from a single source; this is the ocean of Torah from Sinai. Sinai gives the flowing river its might. As long as the Halakha river is connected to its source, its mighty power never ceases or wanes. It continues onward forever moving forward through time and space.



The mighty river of Halakha flows ever strong and even breaks off into smaller streams. These smaller streams are meant to serve only the isolated areas to which they flow. Their might is less than the fullness of the mighty river. Nonetheless, because they are attached they share the same source of Torah from Sinai. These smaller streams that service the individual communities are called Minhagim. Subjective they are in application, not applicable to everyone along the Halakha river, yet in their local area, they are the river. Therefore, our Sages have said, Minhag in Israel is the Torah.

Halakha and Minhag express the flow of the mighty Torah. One is the great river by which we all live; the other is the streams that serve the individual communities. The river feeds all; the streams feed only the few. The stream of one does not flow into the domain of another. Therefore, the individual streams each flow and curve differently according to the terrain of their locale. Minhagim, therefore, differ from place to place.

Although both the river and the streams flow together from the Torah source, they are nonetheless separate and different from one another. It is important that one navigating the mighty Halakha river know the way of the streams and not mistake them for the river itself. For if this were to occur, the captain of the ship, the Rav of the community, would end up sailing down a wrong course, leading his community in a wrong direction that would get them stuck up stream, one not their own, and thus lost and disconnected from their own source, their own stream and their own home. This too, in a way, is a type of exile (galut).

For whatever reasons, either intentionally or not, many who today sail the Halakha river have ended up flowing down streams wherein which they do not belong. Granted, one is

permitted to change one's locale. One can change one's minhagim for oneself and immediate family. However, the captain of the ship that sails down a stream not his own has no right or Halakhic authority to demand of others to make the changes that he himself has. In other words, if a Rav of one community wishes to embrace the minhagim of another, he may do so for his own self and family. However, he violates Halakha when he imposes his newfound minhagim upon his community that has for ages observed in a different way.

The Halakha river flows its course and has many different streams that flow off its center. Every wise and smart captain knows how to sail his ship along the river and to only flow down those streams where he belongs, that can hold his ship and that in which his crew will feel at home. When a captain changes course, he creates chaos upon the river and confusion in his sailors. Therefore, it behooves every sailor to learn the ways of the river, so that if the captain were to decide to traverse a stream not his own, his first mates can remind him of the course that is proper and straight for that specific ship.

Now, let us put metaphors aside and discuss some serious issues about Halakha and minhagim.

Over the last half century, Torah Judaism has been greatly and negatively impacted by two great world crises. The first was the destruction of European Jewry during World War 2. The second crisis was that faced by the remnants of the European Orthodox community that reestablished itself in Eretz Yisrael after the war.

The first force nearly wiped out European Jewry and left the Ashkenazi yeshiva world almost orphaned. They slowly but surely rebuilt in modern day Israel, yet they were always at odds, not only with a hostile secular public but also with the segment of the religious public that embraced Israeli life and abandoned the outdated European ways.

To distance themselves from the secular Israeli public, that itself became more and more radically secular, the European religious community became more and more radical in its own way. They insisted upon adopting the most stringent of observances, many far beyond the requirements of Halakha. In doing so, they felt more religious and further distant from those who, in their eyes, had compromised on their religious values.

Needless to say, this radicalization on both sides of the spectrum did not leave much room for common ground. The Israeli religious, also called the national religious, or in some cases the modern Orthodox, did not follow in this radicalization process, but rather stayed true to Halakha without all the unnecessary stricter interpretations of Halakha. Following the age-old advice of the RaMBaM, they walked the middle path, not being extreme to either side. Whatever, their good intent (or lack of it), the old European religious community, in a fight for its soul, viewed this lack of association with their old ways as a betrayal on part of those who were able to live full Torah lives in compliment with the new Israeli culture. This caused a rift between the Israeli religious and the old European schools that has never been healed to this day.

The European religious community rigidly maintained their identity and with vigor clung to their outmoded dress, language and customs, becoming more rigidly strict and removed from normal daily life. The European community in order to reestablish itself after the Holocaust adopted all kinds of myths to maintain the illusion that they alone were the true expressions of Torah Judaism and that anything different is somehow less and not religious enough. This prejudice has always been focused against the Israeli religious and the Sephardic community.

While the Israeli religious community stood strong against the clear attempts to delegitimize them, the Sephardic community did not fare so well. Drove of their numbers, especially the children of the Rabbis all sought to integrate themselves into the growing predominate Ashkenazi culture. The new Sephardim of Israel were caught in a trap. The dominant secular Ashkenazi public literally ripped the religious heart out of the Sephardi community, forcing the vast majority to follow in their wanton secular ways. For those Sephardim who held strong against the secular onslaught, the only haven of safety was to flee into the dominant Ashkenazi religious community.

Unfortunately, the Sephardim who chose this course were often as unwelcome as they were in the Ashkenazi secular community. The European Ashkenazi had little tolerance for the ways, practices and culture of the foreign Sephardim, looked down upon it with disdain, and tolerated it as little as possible. In order to survive, in this new strange religious world, many Sephardim had no choice but to abandon their centuries old Oriental traditions, dress and language and instead adopt what was for them the foreign dress, language and culture of the Europeans. The Sephardim began to wear black suits and matching fedora hats, to speak Yiddish, to enjoy the Ashkenazi diet and embrace their culture and mentality.

Needless to say, this shift on the part of a portion of the Sephardic community caused a major rift and sent ripples throughout the Sephardic communities worldwide. This assimilation of Sephardim into Ashkenazi culture did not stop in Israel. It spread abroad until it infected every Sephardic community around the world. Now, here we are a half-century later and the majority of Sephardic Rabbis have been trained to live and act like Ashkenazim. These Rabbis of course reproduce students in their own now Sephardinazi image.

Over the decades, segments of the Sephardi community have not accepted this cultural assimilation and have fought to return to their cultural origins, to maintain their ancestral integrity, especially in the arena of Torah observance and Minhagim. Unfortunately, many of these traditional Sephardim has become victims of attack and ridicule within their own communities by the Sephardinazim, in their attempt to make the entire Sephardic world practice and observe Torah in accordance to the newly embraced Ashkenazi model.

Unfortunately, many Rabbis, Ashkenazi and Sephardi alike have become antagonistic towards centuries old Sephardic Halakha and proclaim that all who do not embrace their new Sephardinazi Torah view are less religious, if religious at all, and should not be relied upon in Torah matters. Indeed, some even encourage ostracizing Rabbis and laymen of





the traditional Sephardi schools, who are unwilling to jump upon the Sephardinazi bandwagon.

These divisions and social problems are the cause of much strife and disunity in the Torah communities today. These problems are social and psychological in nature and cannot be addressed by a simple understanding of Halakha, culture or tradition.

All communal problems exist because the problems exist first on the individual level. Therefore, we cannot expect to change society at large until we first change the individual within society. In order to accomplish this, we must address issues of character, morality and respect for others different from ourselves and who observe Halakha different from ourselves although entirely within permissible parameters as outlined in authoritative Torah sources. Unless we change as people, we will never change as a nation.

In order to address this problem, we must first begin with education. So much untrue information has been disseminated that before we can teach what is right, we must first teach what is wrong, and why it is so.

Concerning Halakha, many have been taught that the strictest way is the right way and that anything less is undesirable. Indeed, the impression is given that if one does not accept this then such one is to be looked down upon or otherwise scorned. This is the first wrong that needs to be made right.

Torah students must relearn Halakha, from scratch; learn well its intended meaning and parameters of observance. Gemara study is not enough. One must learn the Poskim, Rishonim, Shulkhan Arukh and Aharonim. In order to become a captain (Rav) along the Halakha river, one must know its flow, and its streams, knowing the difference between the two. Only in this way does one truly know Torah from Sinai. Halakha is the foundation of Torah and life force in the soul of every Jew. One must know what is Torah and what is culture and separate the two.

When Torah is studied and embraced in this proper fashion, any intelligent student will quickly see that while the strictest way of interpretation and practice may be acceptable, it is by no means obligatory, and in many circumstances, it is not even recommended or desirable. With a comprehensive understanding of Halakha, the barriers of prejudice separating those who hold differing views can be penetrated and a newfound respect for differences in proper Torah observance can be established.

Cultural norms of identify of who is and who is not religious must also come to an end. No one is more religious because of their adoption of antiquated and outdated European cultures of dress and language. This is only a prejudice, and all prejudice is forbidden under Torah Law.

One can be as observant of Halakha in jeans and a baseball cap as one can be in a cheap Italian suit and a 40's style fedora. One can be as religious in a large knitted kippah living in Eretz HaKodesh and serving in its army as one can be in Mea Shearim or Benei Brak



wearing his European long coat, beaver fur hat and rejecting both army and State. Hebrew is our holy language, not Yiddish, not Ladino and certainly not English.

Today, in all due respect, we no longer have any real Ashkenazim or Sephardim. These were the names of Germany and Spain and referred to those who came from those places. This was the reality 500 years ago. It has radically changed over the last century. Today Ashkenazim and Sephardim both live in lands that once were exclusive to the other. Both communities today live side by side in new lands and develop new traditions together in their new homelands.

Today, most Jews come from one of two places. They come from either Eretz Yisrael or they come from the U.S. The U.S. is our modern day Bavel and is a major world center of Torah. Israel today is mostly European in culture. This is true of both the religious and secular communities alike. The U.S. is the U.S. with its own unique American culture and ways of doing things very much unlike Israel. Today Sephardim and Ashkenazim have all become mixed together. This does not have to be a bad thing; on the contrary, it can be something good, a sign of the times, of forward movement to the unity of all Jews prior to the coming of Mashiah.

We can take advantage of our newfound integration and use it to unite instead of separate. All we need to do is educate ourselves and learn how to respect others different from ourselves and to put aside the evil seed of prejudice and cultural arrogance, that "my way is so obviously better than yours."

Let us return to our holy Torah, to embrace the path of Halakha in truth, not with proclamations and demands for the most strict, (or for the most lenient), but rather, like RaMBaM said, to walk the middle path. Let us learn how to apply Halakha as it was meant to be, not to use it as a club to strike the culturally different or as a sword to smite and cause divisions.

The Gemara teaches us that since the destruction of the Beit HaMikdash, HaShem has no place on Earth to call His own other than the parameters (arba amot) of Halakha. One who wishes to find HaShem will find Him here. Only here will we find the unity of our Jewish nation. Only here, in Torah, will we find the unity of Klal Yisrael and Kudsha Brikh Hu.