1. Questions. The Gemara Chagiga דף ג., that we just learned in this week’s daf yomi, expounds on a פסוק in this week’s פרשה and teaches: דרש ראב"ע "את ה' האמרת היום" אמר להם הקב"ה לישראל, אתם עשיתוני חטיבה אחת בעולם דכתיב שמע ישראל ה' אלקינו ה' אחד, ואני אעשה אתכם חטיבה אחת בעולם דכתיב ומי כעמך ישראל גוי אחד בארץ, ואף הוא פתח ודרש "דברי חכמים כדרבנות וכמסמרות נטועים בעלי אסופות נתנו מרועה אחד" למה נמשלו דברי תורה וכו' בעלי אסופות אלו תלמידי חכמים שיושבים אסופות אסופות ועוסקים בתורה הללו מטמאין והללו מטהרין הללו אוסרין והללו מתירין הללו פוסלין והללו מכשירין, שמא יאמר אדם האיך אני לומד תורה מעתה תלמוד לומר כולם נתנו מרועה אחד, א"ל אחד נתנן, פרנס אחד אמרן, מפני אדון כל המעשים ברוך הוא וכו'. One can ask several questions on this דרשה:
2. First, what is the connection between the special relationship between כלל ישראל and הקב"ה and the fact that there is room in תורה for multiple, and even opposing, opinions?
3. Second, what is the חידוש of the דרשה? All it seems to be saying is that the Jewish people enjoy a special relationship with Hashem, but isn’t this obvious from the entire חמשה חומשי תורה? Did we really need ראב"ע to teach us that Hashem loves the Jewish people and the Jewish people, when functioning optimally, love Hashem?
4. What does חטיבה mean? It seems like a strange way of saying that Hashem is one! The ערוך quotes from רב האי גאון that it means ציור אחד בעולם, but what does that mean?
5. Yesod. Rav Yosef Salant, in his באר יוסף, develops an answer with a fascinating analysis of one of the simplest words in the Hebrew language – אחד.
6. The פסוק refers to כלל ישראל as a גוי אחד, but what does this really mean? It can’t possibly just mean that we are one nation – of course we are just one! There are two classical explanations of גוי אחד בארץ:
7. First, it may mean that we are special or “better than”, just as we may have many friends but only one is truly a “best friend”. We may have lots of foods that we enjoy but only one is our very favorite food. Similarly, Hashem has many nations in this world but only one is His very favorite nation. The first thing ראב"ע teaches is that this interpretation is incorrect. There is a clear symmetry between ה' אחד and the גוי אחד. We cannot possibly suggest that ה' אחד means that of all the gods, Hashem is our favorite, because that is out and out אפיקורסות. It follows that גוי אחד doesn’t mean that we are the favorite amongst many nations.
8. A second possibility is that אחד means that we are more unified than all others. Other nations are only united by a geographical coincidence, or occasionally by a common goal or ideal, but rarely feel each other’s pain as if they are all brothers and sisters. There is a certain unity that the Jewish people express, despite our bickering the way siblings unfortunately sometimes do, that is unique to the Jewish people. But ראב"ע teaches that, while our אחדות is unique, it is not the meaning of the phrase גוי אחד. The phrase ה' אחד can’t mean that God has a sense of comradery because there is nobody for Him to be unified with. I often find it humorous how we sometimes brag about our deep sense of אחדות in ישיבה when the אחדות simply means that boys who went to South Shore for elementary school get along with boys who went to HALB, as if we are bridging some enormous gap. It isn’t exactly the same as a Satmar chassid experiencing אחדות with a reform Jew! When the window is very narrow, you can’t really call it אחדות. How can we call it אחדות when it is only one being – the רבונו של עולם.
9. Rav Yosef Salant points out that ראב"ע is suggesting a third approach. The word אחד doesn’t mean the “best” or “unified” but the “only”, just like ה' אחד is the ONLY God, we are the only nation, a גוי אחד, amongst כל משפחות האדמה. Our national experience is different from others because we are the only true nation.
10. The מדרש רבה בראשית פרשת וישלח פ' פג highlights this point by giving a משל of the relationship between כלל ישראל and the other nations by means of a field. The wheat stalk, chaff, and dirt debate who is most important in the field, until the wheat is the last one standing after processing and it becomes obvious that the wheat is the purpose of it all. If we were to have come up with a משל we probably would have chosen a different משל, perhaps a debate between different types of grain or different fruits, where the Jewish people are the choicest amongst them. Chazal, in their wisdom, chose a משל where we are in an entirely different category than the other nations.
11. This explains our lonely existence – nobody else really gets us because they can’t relate to our experience – are we a religion or a nation? We have characteristics of both, but seem to be more than the sum of a religion and nation.
12. Answers.
13. This may explain the connection between this דרשה and the idea that there is room for multiple opinions in תורה. תורה isn’t just a different and better חכמה – it is entirely unique – אלו ואלו doesn’t make sense in math and science, or any data based area of knowledge. If there are two opinions somebody has interpreted the data correctly and somebody has interpreted it incorrectly. Only torah is qualitatively different than other חכמות. It is אחד and can only have been given by ה' אחד to the גוי אחד.
14. When רב האי refers to חטיבה אחת as ציור אחד, he may be referring to this quality.