

## RABBI'S MESSAGE

### ALL WE NEED IS VAV:

*How One Vital letter can help us with diversity and heal Beyond Divides*

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I recently attended a conference of clergy in which the keynote speaker used this title for his 90-minute teaching. The speaker was Rabbi Amichai Lau-Lavie, recognized as one of the strongest voices in Judaism today. Rabbi Amichai was born in Israel, and is the 39<sup>th</sup> generation of rabbis in his family, with an uncle recently serving as Chief Rabbi of Israel. He came to the U.S. as a young man and developed innovative ways to teach Torah and lead community, founding STORAHtelling – dramatic ways to deeply learn Jewish text – and Lab/Shul, an experimental synagogue in New York. A 2016 graduate of the Jewish Theological Seminary, he is officially a Conservative rabbi, but broke away from the Conservative movement because he agrees to officiate weddings of Jewish people to non-Jewish people. His philosophy mirrors my own on that subject, saying, "A couple comes to me—the woman is Jewish and the man isn't. They want to get married, but he doesn't want to convert. They want to be part of our community, to raise their children as Jews. If I tell them 'no,' we've lost them and their children, and that's it."

Vav, sixth letter of the Hebrew alphabet, is a simple letter, a straight, vertical line. The V sound is formed by lips and teeth collaborating with a vibrating tone that is flexible in length; it can be spoken quickly or dragged out. When a dot is on top of the letter, it becomes a vowel – the O sound. When the dot drops to the middle of the Vav, the vowel is OO. Both the O and the OO can also make short or long sounds, depending on how they are voiced. The letter looks stiff, but is very versatile.

When the vav stands alone in front of a word, it simply means "and."

Rabbi Amichai's lecture focused on the geographical, political and philosophical divide of the northern and southern areas in Israel. Israel enjoyed unity during the reigns of King David and King Solomon, and then one nation became two, Israel and Judea. The "and" that could connect, became a separation. The rabbi's lesson got me thinking about the importance of that little "and" in Torah AND in our lives.

When we recite Shema in our worship service, it comes from Deuteronomy 6:4. The next paragraph, 6:5-9, starts with V'ahavta. In our prayer book it says in our prayer book, "You shall love..." – but if it were translated literally, it would say, **AND** you shall love." The "and" connects the paragraph about love with the statement about one God for all. That connection makes all the difference. Throughout the Torah, countless paragraphs begin with "Vayomer Adonai" or "Vayidaber Adonai" – "And God spoke" or "AND God said." All of our teachings are connected to each other, as different as they may be. Likewise, all Jews – and I daresay, all humans – are connected to each other.

What divides us? We have our labels and our loyalties. We can hold fast to the notion that someone who lives, works, dresses, worships, loves or thinks differently is **WRONG**. That there is only one right answer to every situation. That we have a monopoly on truth, and one who

disagrees with us is evil. While prejudice against Jews has led to persecution, prejudice within our people, judgments about the right or wrong way to be Jewish, disrupts our unity.

SHEMA YISRAEL, ADONAI ELOHEINU, ADONAI ECHAD

LISTEN, ISRAEL! GOD – OUR GOD – IS ONE!

V’AHAVTA ET ADONAI ELOHECHA...

**AND** YOU SHALL LOVE YOUR GOD...

We show our love for God most appreciatively when we love God’s most precious creations: God’s children. Shema reminds us to listen, and hence, to connect. Listening (shema) leads to love (v’ahavta). The AND brings it all together.

Let US be together, as ONE.

L’shalom,

***Rabbi Dan Gordon***