

WHAT THE INTERNET ASIFA MEANT TO ME

An Address to the Nshei of Ahavas Olam Weingarden Torah Center - Detroit, MI

Delivered by Rav Simcha Klein - June, 2012

The Historic Nature of the Asifa

In May, approximately 50,000 *Torah* observant Jews gathered together in New York at the behest of the spiritual leaders of the generation to discuss the digital dangers confronting our community. It was a historic event, as so many segments of *Klal Yisroel* were represented. A public display of unity on this scale has not been seen in generations. This enormous event was also unique in that it wasn't arranged or promoted by any preexisting organization or institution. It was a grass roots effort directed by *gedolim* across the Jewish spectrum. In addition, the infrastructure and resources that are usually needed to make an event of this magnitude successful were not in place in time, yet the response was so great that an additional venue was required for the overflow crowd. It was very clear from the amazing turnout that an enormous amount of concern surrounding the single issue of digital dangers occupies in the hearts and minds of many. People obviously desire clarity and direction regarding the *Torah* community's response to the digital dangers confronting us.

As would be expected, the general media, who really has no inkling of what we stand for as a community nor who our leaders are, did not grasp the sensitive message of the *asifa*. Although some of the more charitable news outlets did suggest that the purpose of the event was to address the inappropriate imagery and immorality easily available on the Internet, that was not the entire essence of the gathering and there was a far more subtle message that permeated and defined the event. It behooves us in the *frum* world, as people who do care about the opinions of our *Torah* leaders and our unique way of life, to attain crystal clear clarity on the subtle message of the *asifa*.

The “Badad” Imperative

Over three thousand years ago the entire Jewish people congregated at the foothills of *Har Sinai*, where *Hashem* defined the essence of *Klal Yisroel* and gave marching orders for all generations to come.

וְהֵייתֶם לִי סֻגְלָה מִכָּל הָעַמִּים – וְאַתֶּם תִּהְיוּ לִי מְמַלְכֵת בְּהַנִּים וְגוֹי קְדוֹשׁ (שְׁמוֹת יט,ה).

“...You will be a treasure for me, from among the peoples... You shall be for me a kingdom of priests and a holy nation.” (*Shemos* 19:5-6)

We are a spiritually unique and treasured nation. We are a nation that possesses elevated moral standards and ethical norms. Our attitudes towards human dignity, compassion, kindness and propriety are of a rarified level. The moral compass of *Klal Yisroel* and our collective innate sense of right and wrong are in a class of their own. We as a nation are destined for a higher calling.

A short time after the experience at *Har Sinai*, *Hashem* exhorted us through *Bilaam HaRasha*:

הֲזֶן עִם לְבָרָדָּר וְשֹׁפֵן וּבְגוּזִים לֹא יִתְחַשֵּׁב (במדבר כג, ט).

“Behold, it is a nation that will dwell in solitude, and not be reckoned among the nations.” (*Bamidbar* 23:9)

Klal Yisroel must always remain “*badad*” - aloof from the nations of the world. In order for us to retain and protect our sacred status as an *am segulah*, it is absolutely necessary for us to exist as an independent entity. Therefore, we cannot intermarry with non-Jews, nor can we mingle or associate with them on an intimate level. *Hashem* was telling us then that without barriers, we as a nation will be rapidly affected and influenced by the lower standards of the nations of the world in every area of spiritual growth and ultimately our specialness and uniqueness will be tarnished.

The *seforim*¹ tell us that it was for this reason that at the end of the era of the second *Bais Hamikdash*, just when *Klal Yisroel* was poised to leave *Eretz Yisroel* for the *diaspora*, *Chazal* instituted the prohibitions forbidding Jews to consume gentile wine and home baked bread. The purpose of these edicts was to protect our uniqueness by creating an invisible fence between the Jews and the nations of the world to whom we were dispersed, fulfilling *Hashem's* eternal injunction for *Klal Yisroel* to remain “*badad*”.

Why were wine and home baked bread chosen?

Chazal in their divinely inspired wisdom chose these particular items since they understood that in *galus* it is impossible to totally separate from the other nations. In order to survive, we do need to interact with them regularly for business and other similar necessary purposes. However, *Chazal* desired to limit our association with them to ensure that the relationship never became intimate and personal, as this would lead to peril. *Chazal* therefore forbade us from partaking in their wine and home baked bread, because those items by nature promote and foster warmth, friendship, and intimacy and that has to be avoided at all costs in keeping with spirit of “*badad*”.

Throughout our long exile it was these prohibitions and others of a similar nature that helped keep Jews from becoming too close and comfortable with non-Jews, ensuring our unique culture and way of life was for the most part preserved². While it is true that in the last two hundred years or so the so-called enlightenment enticed and tore away entire swathes of the Jewish people, there was always a committed core that remained the torch bearers of our way of life that started way back at *Har Sinai*.

The Transplanting of the Torah Community to American Shores

After the destruction of the bastions of *Torah* and the centers of Jewish life in Europe during World War 2, our *Torah* leaders here in America strived mightily to recreate our own unique world and way of life distinct from the culture around us. The challenges facing them were

1. See *Meshech Chachomah* (*Bechukosai* 26:44) at length on this point.

2. Think about it. Have Jews ever hunted for sport? Were arguments amongst us ever settled with a duel? Have we ever glorified violence? The host nations around us were involved in these practices and yet for the most part were not adversely influenced due to our deep commitment to “*badad*”. The same is true regarding our high standards of education for our young, even during periods that the nations around us did not stress education at all. Compassion and philanthropy were always our rallying cry even when these ideas ran contrary to the attitudes of the prevailing culture.

enormous. Perhaps the most difficult challenge of all was the fact that America was the great ethnic melting pot welcoming us with open arms, as opposed to being a persecuted or despised minority in Europe. Therefore, it was extremely difficult to create a viable, vibrant community and culture distinct from the surrounding American culture. Many great people questioned and doubted if it was at all feasible. With enormous heavenly assistance and after great sacrifice and toil on the part of our leaders and dedicated laymen, our *Torah* leaders over the past 70 years have succeeded against all odds in creating a rapidly growing Jewish sub-culture, including a *Torah*-true independent educational system that allows us to continue the unbroken chain from *Har Sinai*.

What makes this generation's success so unique is the fact that we as a community have not cut ourselves off from society. We speak the language of the land, we interact daily with non-Jews, and yet we retain a powerful distinct identity that goes beyond the mere fulfillment of our religious duties. Although it is impossible to avoid all outside influence, we have by and large created an inner-world of convictions, morals, and attitudes not currently present in American culture. All this was achieved in the spirit of "*badad*", maintaining our spiritual uniqueness stemming from *Har Sinai*.

The Profound Difference Between Observing General Society From Afar and From Up Close

I would like to pose the following question. Would any parent amongst us allow their children to sit in at recess at the local public school on a daily basis? They wouldn't interact with anyone, they will just observe and listen to all the conversations and interactions going on between the students for 25 minutes a day and after recess they will return straight to *yeshiva*.

Better yet, would anyone allow their precious child to sit in at a local bar one night a week observing the conduct of the patrons? Any *frum* person will respond to these questions with a vehement "no".

It is very important to analyze the thought process behind that fierce negative response. Why exactly not? It is not like we are not aware of the culture around us. Many of us read various non-Jewish literature and listen to the general media, and there are those who will also allow their children to do so. So why the visceral reaction to this form of contact? Furthermore, don't we trust our children? Isn't the *chinuch* we give them at home and in *yeshiva* strong enough to prevent them from being influenced by those brief encounters?

The answer is pure and simple. There is a world of a difference between observing the prevailing culture from a cold distance via the written word or the media, and observing it up close in real time. Children exposed to daily non-*frum* lifestyles in such close proximity will definitely be influenced by the subtle attitudinal differences³ and the not so subtle decadence inherent in the secular lifestyle. Constant shoulder to shoulder encounters with general society are an inherent breach in our "*badad*" barrier and they must be avoided at all cost. Allowing our children to spend some time in a public school or at a bar is far too close for comfort if we want them to continue in the ways of the *Torah*.

3. Just think about the profound differences in our attitude today towards respect for our elders, non-marital opposite gender relationships, end of life issues, abortion, and definition of marriage.

The Online Culture is a Serious Violation of the “Badad” Imperative

The Internet created an environment where you can peek into the inner workings of the general culture and observe it daily or even hourly in real time. Via the various blogs and social media, a person is directly exposed to the living habits and lifestyles of people we would never associate with in real life. One can witness intimately how the lower elements of society interact, dress, eat, vacation, and entertain themselves. Furthermore, the Internet is dynamic and vibrant, it is as if it is almost alive. It pulsates with a raw energy that attracts and sucks you in. It wields tremendous power to influence, far more than mere books and magazines or even television and movies. The endless barrage of varied audio-visual material and information online has the unique ability to shape the perspectives and attitudes of an individual like no other medium. Allowing a child or teenager online access is most definitely akin to allowing them to sit in at recess in a public school or frequent a bar and perhaps it is even worse⁴. Over the last few years it has become increasingly clear to our spiritual leaders, who have to deal daily with all the havoc resulting from intense Internet exposure, that the Internet has proven to be a direct attack on the invisible fence separating us from the nations of the world. The Torah sub-culture we have succeeded in creating in the modern era is under assault by this medium. A child who goes to *yeshiva* and is also allowed on the Internet unsupervised, is akin to going to *yeshiva* while spending some time daily in public school. Wouldn't this child be greatly confused? Everything that is sacred to us is ridiculed in the larger society. We are *rachmonim bnai rachmonim* and we have higher levels of morality and ethics; how do you expect a child to retain these qualities when he is bombarded with contradictory messages in cyberspace?

This was the essence of the *asifa*. It was a watershed moment in the history of the *Torah* community here in America. Some 50,000 Jews consciously or subconsciously realized with profound clarity that unfettered Internet availability is actually threatening our community's ability to sustain its unique way of life as the *am segulah*! Perhaps even worse, we are doing nothing about it! We therefore gathered in unprecedented unity and numbers to scream with great pain *gevald* and proclaim publicly: enough is enough! We must do something now to protect our precious status as an *am segulah* and *goy kadosh*. All the supreme efforts that the *gedolim* of yesteryear invested in our unique educational system and sub-culture will go for nought if we don't do something immediately to curb the tide.

The Take Away Message of the Asifa

What in fact was the take away message from the *asifa*? While the supreme importance of filtering and other forms of necessary or even mandatory Internet security⁵ were articulated, there was also a deep attitudinal consensus that was presented to us that has many practical implications.

At this stage of societal evolution it is clear that the Internet is not just a useful tool for business, banking, finding bargains, or acquiring airline tickets. It has become a culture, a way of life. One must be connected at any given moment. People's sense of self is actually linked to their presence on the Internet. To be online is to be part of the “crowd”.

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4. As with every rule there are exceptions and perhaps there exists children that will surf the Internet without being influenced negatively. However, there are also children who wouldn't be affected adversely by attending public school, yet still no *frum* parent would take that risk.
 5. Parents, who permit internet in the home with filtering or even monitoring, must never be lulled in to thinking their computers are totally safe, as there are numerous ways around all security devices. Parents must constantly be on guard for signs of inappropriate usage of the home computer. Imagine a delinquent child of a neighbor was a guest at your home overnight, you would not take your eyes off him for a minute to make sure he does not cause any trouble. The same is true with having Internet in the home. We need to view the Internet as alive and capable of damage and if we have it in our home we must be constantly on guard and watch over it like a hawk.

The position taken by our leaders, the line drawn in the sand for the *Torah* community, is to distinguish between Internet as a necessary tool and Internet as a culture and way of life. Internet as a device, under the right conditions, given the realities we live in is okay and perhaps necessary at times. However, to embrace the Internet culture is definitely not okay⁶. According to our leaders, this will lead to continued serious breaches in the “*badad*” factor, thus seriously threatening our essence as an *am segulah*.

Practical Applications

The above mentioned consensus represents a dramatic shift in our relationship to the medium and has important applications. Obviously, there is no way for anybody to enforce this consensus. However, for people who desire to follow the recommendations of our leaders and do the right thing, it is very important to be cognizant of this huge change in attitude towards the Internet and all its subtle ramifications.

1. The primary application of the above distinction is to discontinue or at least limit usage of the Internet as a source of endless entertainment and recreation. Spending time online without a specific purpose should be out of bounds. Even if we are already too attached to the Internet for our recreational needs to adopt this policy, this should at least be the definitive policy for our homes.
2. Social media like Twitter and Facebook are probably the most serious breach of the invisible fence separating us from joining the culture around us and should be avoided. Even for those who need to utilize these mediums, they should be completely out of bounds for their children⁷.
3. Internet availability in the home should be limited⁸ to specific blocks of time sufficient just for the family's online necessities⁹, precluding its use for endless entertainment. Even if one might have a need for Internet availability at all times for email and the like, one should still install time caps on each session.
4. Parents should encourage dialogue with their older children about the Internet and its dangers and pitfalls, and explain to them the family's clear policy that as a *Torah* Jew Internet should be used for necessity only.

In closing, it must be made clear the the *Torah* community will definitely survive one way or another. We have been promised that by *Hashem* Himself, as it says:

בִּי לֹא תִשְׁכַּח מִפִּי זִרְעוֹ (דברים לא, כא) ופירוש רש"י שם וז"ל, "הרי זו הבטחה לישראל שאין תורה משתכחת מזרעם לגמרי" עכ"ל.

“It shall not be forgotten from the mouth of their offspring” (*Devarim* 31:21). *Rashi* explains: “See now, this a promise to Yisrael, that the Torah will not be forgotten by their offspring.”

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6. One can argue if this applies to all adults, however it is unfortunately almost always true regarding our youth who have yet to develop and internalize a mature set of principles and convictions.
 7. Besides the spiritual dangers, there are many other dangers to social media, such as the culture of self absorbency - putting up statuses every few minutes is attention seeking behavior and can also sometimes be dangerously revealing to a huge audience.
 8. This can be done on a router level or via programs such as ENUFF PC or Internet Lock.
 9. Such as homework, purchases, banking, etc.

The only question is which individuals will merit being part of that promised survival. The answer to that question might be dependent on your attitude towards the Internet as detailed above, including your *hishtadlus* in the area of digital security and obviously much heavenly assistance.

Remember, decisions made now regarding digital technology will directly impact your spiritual lives and that of future generations!

May we all merit much *siyata dishimaya* in this area!