

ויסעו מרפידים ויבאו מדבר סיני ויחננו במדבר ויחן שם ישראל נגד ההר. שמות יטב:	They journeyed on from Refidim and they came to the Wilderness of Sinai, and they encamped in the wilderness. There Israel encamped, opposite the mountain. (Exod. 19:2)
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When we study the Bible, we have to pay close attention to the slightest nuances in language. Translators try to capture these, but sometimes, you just need to be able to read it in the original.¹ In the verse above, the subtlety concerns the grammatical number and verb agreement of the Israelites encampment in the wilderness. First it says, **ויחננו-they encamped**, then it says, **ויחן-Israel** (a singular noun) **encamped** (singular verb agreement). The Hebrew use of the singular form of the verb pops out at us because it comes after a series of three verbs in the plural, **ויסעו, ויבאו, ויחננו-they journeyed, they came, they encamped**, followed by a verb in the singular: **ויחן-(Israel, singular) encamped**. Within the verse there is a subtle transition from the plural to the singular. The rabbis noticed this, and it piqued their curiosity. Why does the text shift grammatical number in that way? Their comment on this is profoundly moving:

ויחן שם ישראל נגד ההר. ולהלן [הוא אומר] ויסעו בני ישראל ויחננו בני ישראל בוסעים במחלוקת וחונים במחלוקת וכאן הוא אומר: ויחן שם ישראל חנניה אחת נתן בלבם כדי שצאקבו זה את זה ויקבלו את התורה. מכיל' דר' שמעון בר יוחאי יטב:	And Israel encamped there opposite the mountain. Later on² the text says, And the Children of Israel journeyed and the Children of Israel encamped. They journeyed in a state of argument and encamped in a state of argument, but here it says: Israel, (singular) encamped there. One hanaya was placed in their hearts so that they would love each other and accept the Torah. Mekhilta DeRabbi Shimon Bar Yohai 19:2
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What are they saying? A plural noun-verb combination conveys a sense of *two-Jews-three-opinions* fractiousness. Thus, when the nouns and verbs related to Israel's journeying and encampment are in the plural, the text is underscoring how divided they were. They were constantly arguing, bickering and complaining. But when they go to Mount

Sinai, the noun-verb combination is in the singular. Thus the fractiousness ceased and they became one. A single entity. **One hanaya-חנניה was placed in their hearts**, is a play on the word **ויחן-חנניה-hanaya** is a double-entendre. It means both **encampment³** and **grace** or **kindness**. Thus, they **encamped as one**, and they became kind to each other, because **a single measure of grace was placed in their hearts**. In other words, one would think that having just escaped the Egyptian army, in their state of tumult and chaos, they would have defaulted to their natural disposition of being awful, horrible people. But instead, **אחת נתן בלבם-a single⁴ measure of grace was placed in their hearts**. They became nice. Was this a gift of God, or of their own volition? Possibly both. Regardless, the result of this grace is that it moves them to love each other. And **that** is a very powerful idea. And it is that love, that interdependence, that loyalty, and that sense of shared destiny, that became the pre-condition for them to be able to accept the Torah. A fractious, combative people cannot accept the Torah. Only a united people could. In other words, they temporarily set aside their arguments, bickering, and complaining so that they would be genuinely able to love each other fully; and in that moment of love and unity, their hearts would become open enough to receive the Torah fully and completely. What is the takeaway from this teaching? Revelation is not only about God becoming known to the world. It's about the people becoming known to each other. Revelation is not only a singular moment in the history of the universe during which the boundary between God and humanity dissolves; it is a singular moment in the history of Israel during which the boundaries between individuals dissolve, and the divisions between factions disappear, and the entire people becomes one. Every day, when we recite the Sh'ma, we are attempting to re-enact God speaking to us at Mount Sinai. But this midrash is teaching us is that we also ought to re-enact a moment of love **for each other**, a moment in which **we could become one** as we once were at Mount Sinai. The aspiration for unity is one of the great themes of the Torah and all of Judaism. If we listen to the Torah carefully, and study it with all the tools available to us, we will discover that it is a "divine symphony" made up of multiple and sometimes contradictory voices.⁵ The implicit

¹ Robert Alter writes: *The practice of translation...entails an endless series of compromises, some of them happy, some painful and not quite right because the translator has been unable to find an adequate English equivalent for what is happening - often brilliantly - in the original language.* > *The Hebrew writers reveled in the proliferation of meanings, the cultivation of ambiguities, the playing of one sense of a term against another... The Art of Bible Translation*, Princeton, 2019, ix, 10.

² It's important to note here that the verb in this form **ויחננו** occurs a total of 80 times in the Torah, 4 times from the Exodus to Mount Sinai, and 76 times (!) in the book of Numbers, 42 of which occur in chapter 33, which is part of Parshat Mas'ei, the record of Israel's encampments in the desert. The word rings very loudly in the ear of the listener and therefore, when it is juxtaposed with its form in the singular, it immediately raises a question: why

practically everywhere else is it in the plural and here it is in the singular?
³ In modern Hebrew **חנניה** is a place to park.
⁴ Or a singular, special, unique, momentary, grace was placed in their hearts.
⁵...*The theological and legal debate among the Jewish sects of the Second Temple Period mainly continues the debate that existed between the different biblical schools of the First Temple Period. Through the different biblical sources and schools, we may hear the diverse voices of the divine revelation that started at Sinai. Only by analyzing carefully the different sources in the Bible, and by a meticulous study of what makes each tradition unique, will we be able to finally hear the divine symphony of revelation in all its diversity and unity.* Israel Knohl, *The Divine Symphony: The Bible's Many Voices*, Philadelphia: JPS, 2003, from the Introduction.

message of the Torah and all subsequent rabbinic literature is that if divergent points of view can coexist within single book, and often even on a single page(!), they can coexist within a single people.

In commenting on this verse, Rashi says:

<p>ויסעו שם ישראל כאיש אחד בלב אחד אבל שאר כל התנויות במרעומות ובמחלוקת:</p>	<p><i>Israel encamped there. Like one person with one heart. But all of their other encampments took place with complaining and disagreement.</i></p>
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That phrase **כאיש אחד בלב אחד** - **Like one person with one heart** has entered the Jewish imagination and has become part of contemporary Jewish and Israeli culture. So much so that it pops up in Jewish music and has become a motto, and also, in one case, a name of a charitable organization that provides assistance to Israeli reservists and their families. But if we are being subtle here, we should point out that Rashi **invented** this phrase based on the midrash above as well as the following three fascinating midrashim which all have the same theme: the people became one; **they harmonized themselves into one heart**.



Everywhere it says, they journeyed, and they encamped, it means that they journeyed and encamped with disagreement. But here it says: **Israel encamped there, meaning, they became one heart.** Mekhilta deRabbi Yishmael Vahodesh 1:23

<p>כל מקום שהוא אומר ויסעו ויחגרו במחלוקת וחגרו במחלוקת. אבל כאן הוא אומר: ויסעו שם ישראל השוי כלם לב אחד. מכילתא דרבי ישמעאל, מסכתא דבחדש א' כג</p>	<p><i>Everywhere it says, they journeyed, and they encamped, it means that they journeyed and encamped with disagreement. But here it says: Israel encamped there, meaning, they became one heart.</i> Mekhilta deRabbi Yishmael Vahodesh 1:23</p>
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<p>ויאמרו כל העם יחדו ויאמרו: כל אשר דבר ה' נעשה! נעשה את דברי העם אל ה'. ויאמרו: כל אשר דבר ה' נעשה! מכילתא דרבי ישמעאל, מסכתא דבחדש ב' יח</p>	<p><i>[And all the people answered together, they said: All that God has spoken, we will do. And Moshe reported the words of the people to God.] And all the people answered together: They did not answer with duplicity, nor did they get the answer from each other, rather, they became one heart and said: All that God has spoken, we will do.</i> Mekhilta deRabbi Yishmael Vahodesh 2:18.</p>
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⁶ The root of השויו is שוה which means *equal; similar; to be compared to*. A slightly different meaning is *to equalize*. That's the sense here. Others translate, *they were of one mind, they made up their mind alike*.

<p><i>(Why does the First Commandment refer to God in the second person singular as, ה' אלהיך, your (singular) God?)</i></p>	
<p>רבי אומר: להודיע שבחך של ישראל, שכשעמדו קלן לפני ה' סיני לקבל את התורה, השויו כלם לב אחד, לקבל מלכות אלהים בשמחה. מכילתא דרבי ישמעאל, מסכתא דבחדש ה' ג</p>	<p><i>Rabbi (Yehudah HaNasi) said: to present the praiseworthiness of Israel, for as they all stood before Mount Sinai to receive the Torah, they became one heart to accept the kingship of God together in joy. themselves for one another.</i> Mekhilta deRabbi Yishmael Vahodesh 5:3</p>

Comment and Reflection: When they encamped, accepted the Covenant, and heard the First Commandment, **השויו כלם לב אחד** - **they became one heart**,⁶ suggesting a process of transformation and harmonization. Prior to Sinai (and certainly afterwards), the people did not get along with each other or with Moses. They argued with him constantly and were generally disagreeable. We have to appreciate Rashi's brilliance and inventiveness here. He compresses the theme of these midrashim into one original and slightly different phrase: **כאיש אחד בלב אחד** - **Like one person with one heart**, a phrase that remains popular to this very day. The midrashim are not only speaking to a perception of biblical Israel, but they may also be an attempt of the rabbis to project their experience of sectarianism back into the story of our ancestors at Mount Sinai. Or, they may have been trying to draw a line of continuity from the fractiousness of the generation of the Exodus to the fractiousness of their own day. Sectarianism was rife especially in Jerusalem, where it was **Sects and the City**⁷ (!) all the time. The Pharisees, Sadducees, and Essenes (which many identify as the Dead Sea Sect, whose library was found in the Qumran Caves) each had their own postures. Sectarianism contributed to the destruction of the Second Temple. Rabbinic culture offers a correction to sectarianism. Knowing that it could lead to catastrophe, they sought ways to validate and honor multiple interpretations of the Torah and Jewish law, while also holding firm to a set of interpretive boundaries. Each era of Jewish history has had its vigorous disagreements. There were Maimonideans and anti-Maimonideans; Hasidim and Mitnagdim. Zionism was a revolution in Jewish history and created no small measure of fractiousness. And we have no shortage of divisiveness in our own day. Nevertheless, despite our differences, we are, and will always be, **one people with one heart**. Especially in challenging times. Like the one we are in now. It's day 120. *Shabbat Shalom! Shabbat Shalom! Shabbat Shalom! Shabbat Shalom! Shabbat Shalom! Shabbat Shalom!*

<p>This Parasha Sheet is sponsored by Paula and Aaron Kondioti in honor of the 24th Anniversary of Benjamin Kondioti's Bar Mitzvah. עם ישראל חי! Shabbat Shalom!</p>	
<p>שבת שלום! Am Yisrael Hay!</p>	

Shalom! Shabbat Shalom! Shabbat Shalom! Shabbat Shalom! Shabbat Shalom! Shabbat Shalom!

⁷ See Lee Levine's article on Jewish Sects at myjewishlearning.com/article/jewish-sects/.