Purification and/or Morality

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Most discussions of the recent gathering at Citi Field have focused on the logistics of the event and the topic – the dangers of the Internet. With such a focus, however, we may very well be missing something of great importance. What struck my attention was the name of the organization staging the event: Ichud HaKehillos Letohar HaMachaneh, or the Union of the Communities for the Purity of the Camp.

It is my understanding that though this is far from the first use of the expression "the Purity of the Camp," it has risen to prominence only in recent decades. I think it is a telling term, both for what it says and what it leaves unmentioned. And I would suggest that understanding its use might help us make some sense of contemporary dynamics in the Orthodox world.

What are the goals of purification, and how might the goals be different for an organization dedicated to making the camp upright as compared with one seeking to purify it?

Purification aims to remove impurities, to make something 100 percent unadulterated. It is about perfection. Anything threatening such perfection must be identified and eradicated. As with disease, a small infection left uncontained can sicken the entire body.

The emphasis, in some communities, on purity and purification might help explain why, for example, the Internet is seen as deserving of a stadium-scale event. With the easy availability of pornography and foreign ideas, the Internet is a danger to ensuring purity.

It also, I would suggest, explains a number of other phenomena: the increase in recent years of book bans to ensure ideological purity; the homogenization of Jewish day school education, with parents seeking to place their children in increasingly less diverse environments – ideological bubbles where they will not be exposed to those children, let alone those ideas, not certified as pure; and the narrowing of the diversity of Torah perspectives into one true and exclusive interpretation (by which many people of different perspectives all proclaim that Jewish unity is achieved only when everyone agrees with me).

We can now also explain the efforts over the last decade to make ever more stringent the requirements for conversion, and the attempts to annul retroactively, years later and en masse, previously unsuspicious conversions. This is only possible when there is a fear of admitting impure elements and not rooting out hidden impurities. And some people thus fear that the purity of the camp is under grave threat.

These issues and the generally widening distrust over kashrus and many other matters are all about purity and impurity – and when purity is the highest value, the slightest impurity is the greatest danger.

Yet there is something critical missing here: morality.

A focus on – an obsession with – purity does not require any particular concern with morality. And so now perhaps we can understand why the dangers of the Internet appear to be a greater concern among some people than the dangers of child abuse. Even why reporting abusers to secular authorities can be seen as worse than the abuse itself – the former, involving the impure secular world, threatens purity in a way that abuse, within the community of the pure, does not. It might also be why all sorts of financial crimes seem so common – they do not threaten purity and perhaps are, according to some odd logic, justified by strengthening the purity of the community.

Too often these days it appears that some of us have lost touch with very basic moral values, including respecting the dignity of all of God’s creations. If we ask ourselves whether or not our actions meet a standard of yashrus/uprightness instead of tohar/purity, perhaps we would be more reluctant to undertake some of

these actions.

How did purity become raised to such exalted status anyway, and become applied to the Camp or Community rather than to individuals in their religious improvement?

The weekday Amidah, the central prayer of Jewish worship, includes among all its praise, requests and thankfulness nothing about purity. We pray for tzedek and wisdom and a number of other character traits and blessings, but not for purity.

We often talk about the importance Kiddush Hashem and the horror of Chillul Hashem. When we elevate purity above other values such as yashrus, then we also rank it above avoiding its opposite, and end up justifying chillulei Hashem in the name of purity – after all, it need not matter what the impure think of us, and it becomes irrelevant when impure Jews and non-Jews witness what to most observers appear to be lapses in morality and desecrations of God's name.
Do we really want our children to grow up and be pure souls without being upright souls, to live in a purified camp rather than one recognized the world over for its uprightness? Perhaps it is time to form an organization called Ichud HaKehillos LeYashrus HaMachaneh, the Union of Communities for the Uprightness of the Camp.