

Sinai Indaba IV (Edited Transcript)

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Today is very special - the Friday before Sinai Indaba, what has become such an important event on our communal Jewish calendar. It begins Saturday night at eight o'clock and runs through Sunday in Johannesburg, and all day Monday in Cape Town; Tuesday, in Port Elizabeth and Durban. We have guest speakers coming in from all over the world. Some arrived earlier this week, some yesterday, and some this morning. Our community is really privileged to host such a high calibre of speakers from across the Jewish world, from different countries and different backgrounds, yet all with one thing in common: they are coming to share their experiences and insights with us, to spread the light of Torah and G-d's wisdom, which is applicable to every aspect of our lives.

Some of you may have seen the programme. There is such a rich array of topics, with something there for everyone. For the full details of the programme, go onto the website www.Sinai-Indaba.co.za. In addition to these incredible speakers, we have talented musicians who will grace us with magnificent, soulful music never heard before. I think you are really going to enjoy it and be uplifted.

Sinai Indaba is an event which unites South African Jewry. Jews from across the spectrum of our community will come together in a spirit of unity, to discover and be inspired by the wisdom of our Torah. This is encapsulated in the three words comprising the Sinai Indaba motto: Unite. Inspire. Discover.

It is more than just an inspiring event. It is a national convention of South African Jewry. Thousands and thousands of Jews in cities across the country will be coming together to rally around our values. As a community, it is so important to have a time where we all come together to rally around the values that we hold dear.

What are these key values?

The value of unity

One key value is unity. Those of you who attended last year saw Jews from across the spectrum in attendance, irrespective of level of religious observance or affiliation. Sinai Indaba is an event which belongs to every single member of the South African Jewish community.

This unity of South African Jewry is famous throughout the world. We are known as a Jewish community which has the greatest degree of unity and inclusivity. Of course, this is not to say that we are perfect; we are human beings like any other community, with our own set of verribles and problems. But by and large we have earned the title of being a community that is cohesive, inclusive and unified.

Sinai Indaba celebrates this unity, and attests to the fact that this unity is connected directly to the Torah. As we have mentioned previously, our Sages describe the state of the Jewish people just before they received the Torah at Mount Sinai, k'ish echad b'lev echad, 'like one person with one heart.' The experience of learning Torah, which is what Sinai Indaba is about, is intertwined with the experience of unity: 'like one person with one heart.' That is one value that we rally around at Sinai Indaba.

The value of the Torah's relevance to every aspect of our lives

Another value that we rally around is the eternal wisdom that G-d has given us. Judaism is not just a 'religion' which focuses solely on the ceremonial or the transcendental. It is an entire worldview and way of living in accordance with G-d's will. It touches on every dimension of human existence, whether in terms of family, marriage and children; building a moral society, the economy, or

how to run the judiciary; Zionism and the State of Israel; our responsibilities to the world; and the concept of faith. All of these are dealt with in the Torah - G-d's wisdom for everything.

This is why the Mishnah says *Hafoch ba vahafoch ba d'chula ba*, 'Turn it over and over because everything is in it.' If one delves into the Torah, one will find everything in it because it's G-d's wisdom. As our Sages say, 'G-d looked into the Torah and created the world.' It is His blueprint for how we are to lead our lives, and it is far broader than what one would ordinarily associate with 'religion.' Sinai Indaba celebrates the breadth of Torah wisdom and how it applies to every aspect of our lives. Every facet of our lives can be uplifted and enriched when we tap into the Torah's wisdom.

Torah - an inheritance for all

There is a verse which sums up the idea behind Sinai Indaba. It is actually the very first verse that a child should be taught. The Gemara (Sukkah 42a) says that the first verse we teach a child when he or she is just learning how to speak is *Torah tziva lanu Moshe morasha kehillat Yaakov*, 'The Torah that was commanded to us by Moshe is an inheritance for the congregation of Jacob' - namely, the Jewish people. This verse is saying that the Torah belongs to all of us, as it is our inheritance. It is the most awesome legacy, which each one of us has received from generations of Jews before us.

The Rambam, based on the Gemara, says that the Jewish people were given three crowns: the crown of kingship, namely, political leadership; the crown of priesthood, namely, the Kohanim who serve in the Temple; and the crown of Torah, which surpasses them all.

The Rambam explains that the crown of Torah differs from the other crowns in that the crown of kingship is only for a select few - those who end up being the political leaders of the nation. The crown of priesthood - to be a Kohain - is also limited to a select few; one is either born a Kohain or not, he cannot 'become' a Kohain. But the crown of Torah belongs to everyone. Anyone who wants to can come and partake of it, and therefore it is the greatest crown of all.

This seems to go against conventional wisdom, which maintains that the more exclusive and selective something is, the greater it is. However, as the Maharal explains, the Gemara teaches us that the Torah's greatness is precisely because it is **not** exclusive. The crown of Torah - its glory, wisdom and inspiration - belongs to everyone and anyone can come and partake of it.

We all have access to this crown. It is not the preserve of a few people in the ivory tower, nor the preserve of the priests or the rabbis. It belongs to each and every single Jew. Perhaps this is why the very first verse that a child is taught is *morasha Kehillat Yaakov*. It is 'an inheritance for the entire congregation of Jacob.'

The idea that anyone can come and partake of the Torah's wisdom is what underpins Sinai Indaba. The message of Sinai Indaba is that the Torah belongs to us all and is what unites us. Therefore it is a message which we promote as much as possible, issuing an open invitation to the entire community to come and partake of the incredible wisdom and inspiration of the Torah.

And so, on the eve of Sinai Indaba 2014, as we prepare to rally around our values, we give thanks to Hashem for blessing us all with this opportunity. It is from these values of unity and the eternity of our Torah that we glean our vitality and inspiration, the strength and the confidence, to go forward. Coming together to celebrate these values and be inspired takes us to the greatest heights possible, as a community and as individuals, in our own personal lives.

I look forward to seeing you at this year's Sinai Indaba.