

LECH LECHA
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In 1986, Rabbi Irving, Yitz, Greenberg wrote a seminal essay entitled, *“Will There Be One Jewish People By The Year 2000?”* The essay created quite a stir in the Jewish community. Greenberg, who was the president of CLAL at that time and a respected modern Orthodox rabbi, raised a number of issues which stimulated much discussion. Looking at the Jewish world, and the issues of intermarriage, the Reform Movement’s embrace of patrilineality and the shift to the right of Orthodox Jewry he predicted: “Within decades, the Jewish people will split apart into two mutually divided, hostile groups who are unable or unwilling to marry each other.” He continued: “In the past anti-Semites built their plans on the expectation and hope that Jews will disappear. We have come to the tragic situation where good and committed Jews are predicating their survival strategies on the disappearance of other Jews.” It is now 25 years later. Have Greenberg’s predictions come true? Can we still call ourselves one Jewish people or are the fissures so great that we have succumbed to his dire predictions?

On Yom Kippur, I mentioned the statement on civility which was issued by the Jewish Council on Public Affairs. Clearly, the organization felt that verbal diatribes and inappropriate actions ensue among Jews. I mentioned the horrible events in Bet Shemesh where Ultra Orthodox Jews did not want modern Orthodox Jews to build a school in their neighborhood, as but one example. Twenty-five years after Greenberg’s essay, we wonder what effect his warning had upon the Jewish community. Are we any better off today than we were in 1986 or do are we still tearing ourselves apart?

In 2000, Samuel Freedman wrote a book entitled *“Jew vs. Jew – The Struggle for the Soul of American Jewry.”* He recounted the story of American Jewry from 1960 to 2000 as he traveled across the country and visited different Jewish communities. He found that there were flashpoints that ranged from conversion standards to the role of women, to the peace process in Israel, to the sexual climate on an Ivy League campus, which tended to pull Jews apart in this country. Israel, he suggested, divided American Jews both on political and religious grounds. And as most Jews lived in lands of freedom they were accepted so thoroughly that the intermarriage rate had risen to such a large extent that the very existence of the Jewish people was being called into question. His book created a stir in academic circles and in Jewish communal life.

It is now 2011, what would Samuel Freedman report on today? How would he see the Jewish community? Are the fissures as great as before or have we recognized that we have more commonalities than differences?

Perhaps the pattern for Jewish history was already set in our Torah portion of this morning. Until the portion of Lech Lecha, the Torah has been concerned with humanity as a whole. The stories of Adam and Eve and their children, the stories of Noach and the flood, and the Tower of Babel inform us about the early life of humanity on this earth. Our Torah portion this morning beginning with Genesis, Chapter 12, is now concerned

about one man, Abram, one woman, Sarai and their descendants who become the Israelite people and, eventually, the precursors of our nation, the Jewish people.

The Torah tells us that Abram and his nephew, Lot, became quite wealthy and had flocks of sheep, herds of cattle and tents. Soon there was quarreling between the herdsmen of Abram's and those of Lot. Consequently, Abram said to Lot: "Let there be no strife between you and me, between my herdsmen and yours, for we are kinsmen. Is not the whole land before you? Let us separate: If you go north, I will go south; and if you go south, I will go north."

And so, Abram and Lot, uncle and nephew, the only members of the Israelite clan now mentioned, separate themselves one from another. Lot journeys eastward and Abram remains in the Land of Canaan. That seems to be our destiny. We simply can't live together with other members of our tribe, with other Jews. The phrase the United Jewish Appeal used for so many years "We Are One," may never have been the case and the story of Abram and Lot only corroborates that fact.

It is only when Lot's life is in danger in the War of the Kings or in the threat of the destruction of the City of Sodom, that Abram and Lot are mentioned together. Abram saves Lot, who has been kidnapped in the war, and hopes to do the same if ten righteous people can be found in Sodom. Perhaps, the tenor of Jewish life was set once and for all. As the song in the Israeli film "*Kazablan*" states: "When there are difficulties and there are travails, then 'Kulanu Yehudim' – we are all Jews."

The story in 2011 really is not that much different. A few weeks ago, I was present at a meeting of the Catholic Jewish Dialogue here in Chicago. The topic for the day was "Can We Participate in Interfaith Prayer." My colleague, an Orthodox rabbi, who presented the Jewish point of view, felt that it was difficult for Jews to participate in interfaith prayer experiences. He had no problems working together with members of other communities on social, cultural and communal issues, however, when it came to prayer he drew a line. Some of our Catholic colleagues were somewhat taken aback.

I mentioned, in our discussion, that they should not be surprised. While there are some who would disagree with him, when Cardinal Joseph Bernadin passed away I was president of the Chicago Board of Rabbis and I had to make the decision, together with my beloved colleague, Rabbi Mordecai Simon, of blessed memory, whether to participate in his funeral service in Holy Name Cathedral. We decided that it was important for us to be present in the Church that day, together with an interfaith assembly of religious leaders, but in no way would we participate in the service. While it may have been a very fine line, we felt that it was most appropriate to bring honor to the memory of Cardinal Bernadin who had introduced himself to us as "your brother Joseph."

I also told our assembled colleagues that in the Jewish community intra-faith prayer is also difficult. We can work together, rabbis of different streams, but we cannot pray together. And even sometimes, even working together is not so easy. The Chief Rabbis of Israel will sit down with visiting religious dignitaries from different religions,

but they won't sit down with Conservative and Reform rabbis. The venom that is sometimes used between one Jew and another, one Jewish organization and another, is sometimes beyond the bounds of any realm of civility. But, I didn't want to go too far. After all, why should I bring up our dirty linen in front of our Catholic colleagues?

That there are divisions among Jews, frankly, is expected. All the way back to Abram and Lot those divisions occurred. The question is how do we treat one another. Can we learn to respect one another; can we appreciate the fact that there are different views of how to approach G-d, how to understand the Jewish people and how to live Jewish lives? Tolerance among Jews is not something that is easily found and the examples of incivility are many.

Last Wednesday, Chief Rabbi Lord Jonathan Sacks was in Chicago, and I went to hear his lecture at Northwestern University. You have heard me mention his name many times from the pulpit as I find the books that he has written to be of great value. His breadth of knowledge in both Jewish and non-Jewish sources is truly remarkable and I wanted to hear him speak in person. He has written greatly about his relationships in the world of interfaith dialogue, but this time was asked about his relationships within the Jewish community.

He stated in response to the question that on a personal and professional level he had wonderful relationships with the other religious streams in England and with their rabbis. However, he said, when it comes to religious issues, he represents the United Synagogue of England, which is Orthodox, and cannot compromise on his principles. He did say, however, that there must be respect for others, even if they do not hold his positions. It is a tall order to follow and there are those who are critical of some of his stances.

This is a concept, at least in theoretical terms that makes sense. Sacks authored a book entitled, *"The Dignity of Difference."* It was a statement on the ethics of globalization and the search for common human values across civilizations and religious denominations. The same principles must hold for dialogue among Jews as well. There must be respect for different opinions and for those who profess them. We dare not demonize individuals for their opinions even if we think they are substantially wrong.

The question is can we learn to live together even as we disagree? One of the jewels of the Chicago community is the Jewish Federation Rabbinic Mission. Rabbis of all denominations, Orthodox, Conservative, Reform and Reconstructionist have been traveling together for approximately 10 years overseas to different communities. This year, in January, we will be traveling to Frankfurt, Berlin and Israel. On this trip there is respect for different colleagues and their patterns of belief and practice. However, when it comes to religious services, there are two services that take place: One, traditional; one, liberal. People have learned to live with one another, to socialize with one another and, by getting to know one another better, to appreciate one another even if we disagree in certain critical areas.

It seems to me that this ‘dignity of difference’ is the manner in which we must proceed. There are great fissures today in the Jewish world and only those who profess anti-Semitism, anti-Zionism, hatred of the Jewish people and its demise bring us together. We must learn to live with one another, to be civil to one another, and to disagree with one another, if necessary, out of a sense of respect for one another.

Perhaps, already with Abram and Lot, the pattern was set. Sometimes we can’t even live together. We do know that when the chips are down we somehow come together to help one another, but at this stage of our history that is not enough. Twenty-five years after Greenberg’s essay, we can say that we did survive past the year 2000. And now the question is will we survive to 2025 and beyond? The long journey of the Jewish people tells us that we will. However, whether we will be able to say: “How good it is for brothers and sisters to live together” stills remains to be seen.

May we follow the teaching of our tradition which states: “All of Israel is one fellowship” and create a destiny for the Jewish people which is bright for us and our descendants.