

PARSHAT KI TISA
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Almost two weeks ago in Israel, I was present at the Board of Governor's meetings of the Jewish Agency. As part of our meetings we gathered together for a Global Jewish Forum staffed by the Jewish Agency's educational unit, Makom. The topic was "The Haredim and the Jewish Collective." The Haredim, the Ultra Orthodox in Israel, have created challenges for Israeli society, Jewish identity and civil discourse. We have been alarmed by the news of separate seating on many buses in Haredi neighborhoods, a deliberate attack on an 8-year-old girl in Bet Shemesh by extremists of the community who felt that the religious 8-year-old girl was "immodest" as she walked to her school, and other rather unpleasant occurrences that have recently taken place in Israeli society.

The purpose of the meeting was to understand the Haredi impact on Israeli society and to see how the Jewish Agency can help in areas of civil discourse, religious dialogue and the integration of the Haredim community into modern secular Israeli society.

One of our speakers was Dr. Neri Horowitz, Israel's leading expert on the Haredim in the modern world, who explained the complexities of the situation. He emphasized that the animosity is rooted in the conflict of visions of what Israeli society should represent in the 21st Century. This conflict manifests itself in widespread resentment over government subsidies for Haredi living expenses, the challenges of integrating Haredim into Israel's modern economy, and the fact that most Haredim are not required to serve in Israel's military forces. From the Haredi perspective there is an equally powerful need to remain true to the tradition that remains an indispensable part of the Jewish story. At times, these two conflicting visions have created an enormous amount of conflict and even violence.

For most of us, the Haredi lifestyle is not something with which we are enamored. We want to live our lives in the modern world even as our Jewish religious heritage and identity is important to us. In Israel, military service is an integral part of integration to society and is critical for Israel's defense. The lack of secular education and the isolation of the Haredi community has caused enormous social welfare needs, including abject poverty and difficult family living situations.

Most of us are suspect of those who live that lifestyle. Yet, on an individual basis there is a beauty to family life based on the values of our faith. We may not want to live that lifestyle, but the question for us is do we have the capacity to see it beyond simply the negation of women's rights and the lack of willingness to live in the modern world?

The concept of Ahavat Yisrael, the love of the people of Israel, is a two-way street. We can, and should expect, respect from those who have chosen to live a Haredi lifestyle to those of us who have not. We have not abandoned Jewish tradition. In fact, most of us believe we are simply living up to the ideals of our faith which has adapted

and adopted modern culture wherever it has resided. Whether we have lived in Babylonia or Spain; Germany or Russia; Morocco or New York, our tradition has adopted much of the cultural milieu and adapted it to our needs. Thus, we take the best of American society and culture and, at the same time, do not reject our own heritage. We educate ourselves in the best of the sciences and the arts and adapt them to Jewish cultural needs. We learn from those around us even as we attempt to uphold our own traditions and observances. Yes, that is not always a simple task because it is very easy to assimilate into the broader culture. However, I truly believe this is the Jewish way.

The question for our purposes is can we learn to live with one another and respect one another recognizing that we are all part of one people? In our Torah reading this morning, the children of Israel stray from the proper path as they build a golden calf and worship it. Moses, upon the mountain, is told by G-d that the children have strayed: "Hurry down," G-d says, "for your people, who you brought out of the land of Egypt, have acted basely. They have been quick to turn aside from the way that I enjoined upon them. They have made themselves a molten calf and bowed to it"... The Lord further said to Moses, "I see that this is a stiff-necked people. Now let Me be, that My anger may blaze forth against them, that I may destroy them, and make of you a great nation." G-d tells Moses that he has had it with the children of Israel. They have forgotten the redemption at the Reed Sea and the revelation at Mount Sinai. Because Moses tarried a little bit on the top of the mountain they immediately lost faith both in his leadership and in G-d. G-d wishes to start over again, this time with Moses.

Moses, too, most assuredly, was incensed with the conduct of the people. Yet, he was not willing to give up on them. He could have been the originator of a new Israelite people, but Moses would have none of that. He would not let G-d abandon the people and puts his reputation on the line in order to save them from G-d's wrath. He realizes that Judaism at its core is a religion of the people. If there is no people, there is no Judaism.

We are, indeed, a stiff-necked people, but we have a responsibility to care for one another, no matter if we agree with the conduct of each person in the collective.

This Biblical passage challenges us in many ways. It reminds us that even though there are some of our community who may stray from the proper path, we cannot abandon them. It instructs us that we have a responsibility, one for another. As our texts tell us: "All of Israel are friends and one fellowship." As Rabbi Joseph Baer Soloveichik wrote: "If boiling water is poured on the head of a Moroccan Jew, the prim and proper Jew in Paris and London must scream. And by feeling the pain, he is loyal to the nation."

That is why so many of us stood up and marched on behalf of Soviet Jewry. That is why this Congregation, for almost five years, recited a prayer for the welfare of Gilad Shaliet. That is why almost 13,000 of us came to Washington this past week to stand strong for Israel at the Aipac Policy Conference. We may not all agree on tactics and policies, we most assuredly come from different parts of the community, but we

recognize well that the welfare of the State of Israel is an integral part of our Jewish collective.

Yehuda Meshi-Zahav is the founder and chairman of the ZAKA Rescue and Recovery Organization which has assisted both Israelis and non-Jewish communities around the world recovering from natural disasters and terror attacks. At one time, he was an extremist in the anti-Zionist Neturei Karta. He was arrested no less than 34 times for organizing protests against what he then saw as the evil Zionist regime. Now, still a Haredi Jew, he looks at the world from a different perspective and sees the need not for hate and violence, but for love and common purpose.

In a recent article he wrote: “Authentic Judaism is not about highlighting differences and attacking those who do not share your world view. It is about bringing the world closer to perfection, to creating Tikkun Olam, working together for the sake of the greater good... The only way to fight their hate is to increase our love and understanding. We must continue to work together as human beings, irrelevant of race, color or creed to make this world a better place for generations to come.”

The first Chief Rabbi of Palestine, Rabbi Abraham Isaac Kook, the saintly teacher of both the religious and the secular, taught his generation, and those of us who have followed, an important message. He reminded us that the Second Temple was destroyed because of “Sinat Chinam,” - idle hatred. It is the task of this generation to promote “Ahavat Chinam,” - devoted love. That is the challenge for all of us. From the Haredi world and from those of us who are not, from the secular and the religious, from the right-wing and the left-wing, we must all recognize that we are all one people and the fate of all of us is dependent upon the other. We cannot accept violence against any one of us, but neither can we accept disrespect on any side. The challenges of the Haredi community and the challenges of Israeli society are real, but they are really no different than the challenges all of us have as one people – to create a sense of mutual responsibility, love and respect for one another, and to recognize that we have a common destiny with one another.

At the Aipac Policy Conference the U.S. United Nations Ambassador, Susan Rice, addressed the 400 rabbis and cantors present in a memorable address describing U.S. policy at the United Nations. In perfect Hebrew she stated that her favorite passage in the Bible is: “How good and pleasant it is to sit together as one brotherhood.” As we rose at the end of her speech spontaneously we all began singing those words. It was a moment that truly moved me. And it is this concept that must frame our actions for today.

Moses would not allow G-d to destroy the Israelite people after the grievous sin of the golden calf. We cannot allow any one of us to destroy the other, but instead must build a people, a society and a community based upon mutual respect and “Ahavat Chinam.”