

PARSHAT KI TISA  
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I do not always agree with the editorials written by Joseph Aaron in the *Chicago Jewish News*, but the one that appeared last Friday was right on the button. Joe wrote: “It’s probably what I hate most about the Jewish world today. Jews telling other Jews what to do. Jews thinking they know better than other Jews and so have the right to do whatever to those other Jews. Whatever happened to live and let live? Whatever happened to loving all Jews as our brothers and sisters? Whatever happened to respecting differences? Whatever happened to the bond that connects all Jews? Today, it’s only about divisions, on focusing only on what separates us.”

Unfortunately, though we profess Jewish unity as campaign slogans, as a symbolic understanding of our concept of peoplehood, more and more there are divisions among us that create suspicion and sometimes even enmity. These divisions threaten to tear us apart and create fissures in the Jewish people across the globe. Anyone actively involved in Jewish life today knows that it is a major problem and the solutions are not so simple.

Dr. Daniel Gordis has written eloquently about the divisions that he finds in Israel after moving there and becoming an Israeli citizen. In his recent column entitled *From Limmud to Lapid*, he writes that the phenomenon of Limmud, which is a multi-denominational volunteer-led, educational experience, has always enamored him. It gives him and others an opportunity to encounter Jews of all types, some religious, some not, some devoted to Israel, others very critical of Israeli policies, some fundamentalist and others who are on a spiritual quest.

Gordis wishes he could find the same phenomenon in the State of Israel, where more often than not he writes, “we manage not to meet people who construct meaningful Jewish lives differently than we do, where policy is made top-down and not bottom-up, where authority is derived from politics and not from knowledge, creativity and the passion of one’s convictions.” In the Jewish state the state of the Jews is one of division rather than of unity. In a society where one can tell from the color and type of kippah you wear, which newspaper you read, and which political party you vote for, the lack of a kippah says something about you as well. The divisions are rife along political and religious lines and threaten the fabric of civil society.

I returned only a week ago from a visit to the State of Israel when I attended the meetings of the Jewish Agency for Israel and the World Zionist Organization. Boundary issues are major points of discussion in Israel and in the Diaspora – there are many discussions about “who is in and who is out.” Here the issue of criticism of Israel is a major issue dividing communities. Some of my rabbinic colleagues tell me that they can’t talk about Israel from the pulpit anymore because they will either be assailed by the right wing or castigated by the left wing. We are not even sure what is legitimate criticism of Israel. It is clear, at least to me, that anyone who professes support of the BDS – Boycott, Divestment and Sanctions - Campaign has moved beyond the boundaries of legitimate criticism of Israel. However, there are criticisms of Israeli policy on any number of matters from the social to the political sphere, from the military to the

financial arena, from the religious to the personal status agenda, which are voiced openly in Israel and yet cautiously avoided here in the Diaspora.

In Israel, itself, divisions remain. Part of our discussion one morning at the Jewish Agency meetings was on the status of the Kotel, the Western Wall. This holy place for all Jews is not only a remnant of the Second Temple Period, but a national monument symbolizing the reunification of Jerusalem and its central place in our lives. Whose Kotel is it? Is it a synagogue or a national institution? Does it belong to the religious authorities or to the government? Do the decisions the Rabbi of the Kotel legislate the behavior at this holy site? What about the Kotel Plaza or the area known as Robinson's Arch? The Chairman of the Executive of the Jewish Agency, Natan Sharansky, has been asked by Prime Minister Netanyahu to try to come up with a solution to the issue of The Women of the Wall and the entire Kotel area. We wish him luck. If he is somehow successful, we know no one will be satisfied.

Professor Michael Walzer in a book entitled *Exodus and Revolution* draws many parallels between the Exodus story and modern liberation struggles. Moses, according to Walzer, was the prototypical revolutionary leader and the biblical account of the Israelites' journey to freedom is a seminal political document. The Book of Exodus and Moses' role in the liberation of his people has been studied and cited by political theorists, liberation theologians, and political scientists to support policies, score debating points, or extol the activities of this great liberator.

The crucial text in Exodus, says Walzer, is Chapter 32, found in our Torah portion of this morning, in which Moses calls on the Levites to use their swords against their own people, slaying about 3,000 men. Moses issues the order after coming down Mt. Sinai with the Ten Commandments, only to find the tribes worshipping a golden calf. The text tells us that "Moses stood up in the gate of the camp and said, 'Whoever is for the Lord, come here!' And all the Levites rallied to him." They are instructed to use their swords and go back and forth from gate to gate throughout the camp and slay brother, neighbor and kin, at least the leadership of those involved in the worshipping of the golden calf. Walzer calls this the first revolutionary purge.

Walzer suggests that "over the years, [the text] has more frequently been used by those who want to imitate the Levites at Mount Sinai and coerce and kill their enemies in the revolutionary camp. Such people have greater need of religious and historical justification. And at some point, I suppose, the counterrevolution must be defeated if Egyptian bondage is ever to be left behind." However, Walzer also points out that the counterrevolution cannot be defeated by force alone. Indeed, G-d and the Levites could easily have killed all the people who were involved in the idol worship. But then the Levites would arrive in the promised land virtually alone, and that would not be a fulfillment of the promise. "The promise," he writes, "is for the people, and the people can only move in gradual stages from bondage to freedom."

Walzer warns us that people continue to use this text to combat their enemies, those who do not agree with them. When Moses shouted, "Whoever is for the Lord, come here!" it was at a particular moment in Israelite history, at a time when the people had gone astray and Moses and G-d needed to stress their control. However, if it is viewed as suggesting that only some people understand the word of the Lord, that only some people portray the real truth, then everybody

who does not agree with them is seen as an outsider and is libel if not for murder, then at least for second-rate status.

Divisions ultimately lead to fissures, to enmity, and too often to violence. It is not easy to be united in purpose, but it is essential for our survival as a people.

Gordis in his article suggests that there may be some signs on the Israeli horizon that are promising. With new politicians being elected to Knesset, he sees some of them creating a sense of tolerance in the society. But, the danger signals are there and if we are not careful we will destroy ourselves from within. Yes, there must be boundaries, certain behaviors are not acceptable, certain words should not be uttered in public. Respect for one another and commonality of purpose is essential.

After I completed the four days of meetings, I took a long walk in Jerusalem. I meandered from the Old City to different parts of the New City until I eventually made my way, after about 3 hours, to my apartment in Talpiot Arnona. On the way, I walked the street of Meah Shearim and traversed Ben Yehuda. Within 10 minutes I was transported four centuries. There are huge differences between those two streets and the communities they represent. There is a difference in the clothing worn, in demeanor, even in the language, with one predominantly hearing Yiddish in one area and Hebrew in another. Yet, I was touched by the fact that there was great commonality. The stores were preparing for Purim. People were walking in and out of the stores on both of the streets carrying Purim costumes and masks, purchasing Hamantashen and delicacies to be shared with friends and neighbors. They were preparing for the celebration of the holiday which is common to both communities.

This is what motivates us as a people. Our calendar is the same no matter how we celebrate the festivals. Our history is common whether we acknowledge it or not. And whether we feel it or not, our mutual destiny is one and the same. People in both communities prepared in their own way for Purim, but all of them prepared for that festival.

Elliot Dorff in his book *Love Your Neighbor and Yourself* suggests that “the community is not only important for practical purposes, though; it also has theological import. Israel stood at Sinai as a community, and it is as a group that they made the covenant with G-d. From then on, each Jew, as the Passover ritual powerfully states, is to see himself or herself ‘as if he himself left Egypt’ and stood at Sinai, thereby sharing in G-d’s work of liberation and G-d’s covenant with all other Jews in all generations. Judaism, contrary to Enlightenment ideology, does not see us as isolated individuals with rights; it sees us rather as members of a community, with duties to each other and to G-d.”

This morning we read the story of the worship of the Golden Calf and the tragedy to which it led. I pray we will never get to that. However, that’s not good enough. We must learn to live with one another, to respect one another, to use words if not of endearment, than at least of mutual respect. We must recognize that whether we like it or not we are indeed one people. We may come to it from various points of view, have different understandings of what it means and live somewhat differently than our neighbor. We have always had differences of opinion, just look at any page of the Talmud and you will appreciate this fact. However, Jewish tradition

continues to remind us that as members of one family who have periodic disagreements, as is only normal, we must care for one another, respect one another and devote ourselves to the welfare of one another.

The statements that “all of Israel is responsible is one for the other” and “all Israel are brothers and sisters” are not merely slogans, they are the very watchword by which we must live. Let us take to heart the prayer of our Sephardic brothers and sisters who insert into their version of Birkat Ha-mazon the following words: “May the all merciful One grant peace among us.” Let us be the vanguard of this type of attitude, stressing love and respect for our fellow Jews today and in the future.