

PARSHAT NASO  
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On June 12, 2014, three Israeli teenagers, Naftali Frankel, Gilad Shaer, and Eyal Yifrah, were hitch-hiking from Alon Shvut in Gush Etzion to their homes. The three teens were kidnapped. For eleven days all of Israel searched for these three young men. Unfortunately, as we all know, they were not found alive. They were killed almost immediately after their capture. The kidnapping and murder of the three boys triggered a turbulent summer in Israel. The Palestinian teenager Mohammed Abu Khdeir was murdered in an apparent revenge killing and a slew of Palestinian rocket attacks on the civilian population in Israel prompted the government to launch Operation Protective Edge, which started as an air campaign but transitioned to a ground operation with the goal of destroying Hamas's network of terror tunnels running under the Gaza-Israel border. In all, the war lasted 50 days. On September 23, the IDF found the two suspects who were involved in the kidnapping and killed them in a shoot-out.

During the time of the search for the three missing teenagers labeled Operation Brother's Keeper, the concern of the Jewish people throughout the world, and most especially in Israel, was centered upon the three families and their boys. But, it was not simply their boys being sought, it was "our boys" who were being sought. We identified with these families and throughout the ordeal Naftali, Gilad and Eyal became all Jewish teenagers, as support rallies were held throughout the Jewish world.

I was in Israel during the time of the search, the finding of their bodies and the funerals. There was a remarkable feeling of unity and, eventually, a great deal of sorrow felt throughout the country. The funerals for the three boys, which were held together, were attended by tens of thousands and was shown live on Israeli television.

Racheli Frenkel, who often spoke on behalf of the three families, stated: "In the Diaspora, people say they can't remember a time when Jews came together across denominations. I am convinced it wasn't an illusion. Hasidic Jews, Orthodox, and seculars all came together, and we were one family."

Yoni Sherizen, Program and Development Director at Gesher, an organization dedicated to breaching rifts in Israeli society, has stated: "The story of Eyal, Naftali and Gilad gripped our people like few others and brought out the best of us in the face of tragedy. Today, we are challenged to take hold of that unique solidarity and make it the boys' legacy – to strengthen the bonds between our people and break down barriers that are created by our differences." The Frenkel, Shaer and Yifrah families have teamed with Gesher, as well as the City of Jerusalem, to establish a "Jewish Unity Day" and to present the Jewish Unity Prize. The day chosen occurs during the coming week on June 3. Those receiving the prizes will include Israel and Diaspora individuals, organizations and social initiatives which will be recognized for enhancing Jewish bonds and communal understanding. The day itself is supposed to embrace Jewish unity events, including study opportunities and social activities.

As we know, not always do we feel like one people. During the time of the kidnapping and search for the three Israeli teenagers, and then during the Operation Protective Edge, there was an enormous amount of unity among our people. Whether we were in Israel or the Diaspora, we empathized with Israelis who were forced to run to bomb shelters, with the soldiers who were asked to defend their country, and with all those on the firing line. I was in Israel during The Operation and there was a great sense of common purpose as Israelis understood that they were under attack. However, once the operation was over we reverted to our common practices. It became politics as usual in Israel, with deep divisions and incriminations. In the Diaspora, the short-lived unity became a temporary respite from continual division and separation of one part of the Jewish community from another. The sense of unity that we felt during the time with Israel under siege was quickly dissipated and the solidarity that we had for a short period of time was no longer present.

How do we achieve that unity? Though our sources inform us that “all of Israel are friends and comrades,” we know that is not usually the case. We laugh when we hear the phrase “two Jews, three opinions,” but we know that is the case. We seem to concentrate on our differences rather than that which unites us. We are identified by our denominations, ethnic origins, geographical locations, cultural tendencies, and search for differences. Yet, deep down we know that there is so much more that unites us than will ever divide us. Whether it is the common text of the Torah, our history, our calendar, our language, or our land, there is much more that makes us a family than will ever separate us. Only when we are endangered by anti-Semitism, persecution, or war, do we come together as one people. How sad and unfortunate that is for when we do come together we learn that no force, whether military or political, can defeat us.

The seeds of this division are all around us. Orthodox, Conservative and Reform Rabbis can only sit together when they invited to a meeting sponsored by local or national Jewish organizations. Prayer experiences are out of the question. Rarely do these Rabbis get an opportunity to really get to know one another and share common concerns. Across the communities, even among the lay people, divisions exist.

The State of Israel, which is supposed to bring Jews together, has served lately as a point of division. There are many rabbis across the United States who feel unable to discuss Israel from the pulpit as members of their community will find them either too far to the right or too far to the left on Israeli political decisions. The politics of Israel have crossed the seas to Diaspora communities who are often unable to surmount the differences and work together on behalf of the State and its citizens, unless there is an imminent threat. Tomorrow, the annual Salute to Israel parade is being held in New York City. Rather than bringing all Jews together on behalf of the State of Israel there have been deep divisions in the community as to who can and who cannot march. Who is considered to be a supporter of Israel, and who is outside the tent? So many examples of this type of behavior can be recited. How sad. How unfortunate.

I am privileged to serve as a Board member of the Jewish People Policy Institute, JPPI, which is a Jerusalem-based think tank chaired by Ambassadors Stuart Eizenstadt and Dennis Ross. Its purpose is to outline strategic thinking for the Jewish people in Israel and the Diaspora. A week ago, we gathered in the New York area for a brainstorming conference. People were

present from Israel and the United States to examine the Jewish world and its issues. These sessions were in preparation for a Board meeting which will take place towards the end of June in Jerusalem.

The exact topic of the conference was entitled “Pluralism and Jewish Solidarity in Polarizing Times.” Two papers were written on the subjects of “Jewish Values and the Use of Force in Armed Conflict – Perspectives from World Jewry” and “The Geopolitical Challenges Facing Israel’s New Government.” There have been a number of issues that have surfaced in Israel and in the Diaspora over the past year. They are influenced, the Institute suggests, in different ways by parallel political schisms taking place in American and Israeli society. In certain areas Israeli and Diaspora Jews may be heading in different directions. While the political system in Israel and the Jewish communal system in the Diaspora are supposed to facilitate frameworks that could contain a variety of opinions through a sense of mutual respect and a sense of unity, this seems to be breaking down.

JPPI held a number of seminars throughout the world, including one here in Chicago at which I was present, asking questions concerning our relationship to the State of Israel and its policies both during and after the Gaza war. We have seen Israel become a partisan issue in American politics over the last few months even though our hopes have always been that it would remain bi-partisan. We recognized that many times Israeli and Diaspora Jews are talking past one another rather than to one another. Dialogue has become difficult. Different realities have created different views of the world.

Whether the divisions are here in this country or between Israel and the Diaspora, they are real and complex. The religious nature of Israeli society and the power of the ultra-Orthodox has turned off many in the Diaspora and the support for Israel has been diminished because of it. For some, concerns with Israeli policy has made the Israel issue a complex one and it is evident on college campuses, in synagogues, and in communal arenas.

It seems to me that we need to find ways to bring our people together, rather than finding ourselves standing in very different corners. It is sad that what usually does bring us together are those difficult moment such as the kidnapping of three Israeli teenagers and their murder, missiles falling on Israeli population centers, Islamic terrorism in France and Copenhagen, anti-Semitic graffiti on college campuses. I continue to believe that much more unifies us than will ever divide us. We are one people with one heart. We have a common history, and whether we like it or not, we have a common future. We must find those ways where we can learn to talk with one another, respect one another, and care for one another.

In our Torah portion of this morning, we have a long reading detailing the Chieftains’ gifts to the Tabernacle as it was prepared to be inaugurated. Twelve individuals, one representing each of the tribes, brought gifts to the Tabernacle and presented them before the altar. If you follow the reading closely, only the names change. In other words, every gift was exactly the same whether it was the first day or the twelfth day. Rabbi Harold Kushner comments: “To each tribe, G-d dedicated one day, and on that day there was no gift like its gift. The sincerity of each offering was in no way diminished by the fact that another Chieftain had

brought an identical offering one day earlier. For that reason, the Torah describes each offering in detail.”

The Israelite people were unified and for those twelve days made sure that each person was respected and each tribe received its due. It made no difference whether you were the first Chieftain or the last Chieftain. Everyone was treated equally and every gift had its value. The Midrash states that on the day that the Tabernacle was dedicated, something happened that never had happened before. The presence of G-d descended from Heaven and took up residence in this world. When the Jewish people are united, everything is possible.

This week, we will remember “our boys” as the Jewish Unity Prize is awarded and Jewish Unity Day is celebrated in Jerusalem and throughout the world. Yes, we will continue to disagree, yes, there will be differences among us, yes, it will be difficult to bring us all together. However, we need to understand that while each of our voices is individual, they must produce a unified whole.

Let us imagine the metaphor of the symphony orchestra. Each musician playing his or her instrument is important to the entire enterprise. If each of them play in their own rhythm or pitch the sound comes out as a cacophony of noise. However, with the help of the conductor they can produce beautiful music even as each individual plays his or her own musical instrument. This is the picture we need to strive for with regard to the Jewish people. We may each have our own sound, our own voice, our own opinion. However, the sounds produced must come out as one distinct melody.

Let us learn to live with one another, respect one another, care for one another, and work on behalf of one another. As one family there is no barrier that we cannot cross, no challenge that we cannot surmount, no problem that is too difficult. As one people, we can make a bright future for each and every one of us.