

PARSHAT NITZAVIM
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“You stand this day, all of you, before the Lord your G-d – your tribal heads, your elders and your officials, all the men of Israel, your children, your wives, even the stranger within your camp, from woodchopper to water drawer – to enter into the covenant of the Lord your G-d.” With these words Moses begins his final oration to the Israelite people. They have been through a great deal together – from Egyptian bondage to the revelation at Mount Sinai; from the miraculous experience at the Reed Sea to the defeat of their enemies in the desert. Moses speaks to the next generation to tell them that they must learn from the past and gain lessons for the future. He addresses all the Israelites from the most powerful to the weakest, from those of high status to those of low status, everyone is part of the collective. In fact, as Moses states a few verses later: “I make this covenant, with its sanctions, not with you alone, but both with those who are standing here with us this day before the Lord our G-d and with those who are not with us here this day.”

In other words, all Israelites born at that time and yet to be born symbolically stood before Moses at that very moment. Not only are the Israelites included but also future converts according to our tradition, as well. All of them stood at Sinai, all of them stood as Moses addressed them with his final oration, all of them took part in the Covenant.

Taking this metaphor in a very modern application, there is a website for observant Jews entitled *SawYouAtSinai*. The website states that it was started with the goal of helping Jewish singles find their soul mates, their bashert. The Midrashim teach that every Jewish soul stood at Sinai with his or her soul mate, basheret, at the giving of the Torah. Now the challenge is finding the soul mate, the bashert, that you saw at Sinai. Matchmakers, according to the website, want to help each individual find the person whom symbolically they met at Sinai when everyone accepted the Covenant.

What is significant to me at this stage in Jewish history, especially before we begin the year of 5779, is not whether all of us accepted the Covenant at that particular moment, but that all of us stood ready to do so. The Torah and the Midrash make it clear that we were united as one people, ready to assume our obligations and our responsibilities. We were one people willing to say “we will do and we will obey.” As Midrash Tanhuma states: “When do you stand before G-d? When you are all united.” Today, I find that an almost impossible occurrence. I see no circumstance for all of us to be united with one single goal, one purpose in mind. Today, we are divided and the divisions are becoming more apparent.

I am privileged to serve on the Board of the Jewish People Policy Institute, a Jerusalem think tank chaired by Stuart Eizenstat and Dennis Ross. Each year at a working meeting with the Prime Minister and the Israeli cabinet they offer an annual assessment of the state of the Jewish people, Israel-Diaspora relations, and the welfare of the Jewish people worldwide.

This past June, Stuart, Dennis and our director, Avinoam bar Yosef reported that they had a ninety-minute session with the cabinet during which they stressed a number of important points. They spent time talking about Israel-Diaspora relations, as well as the growing partisan divide over Israel among Jews and in the U.S. Congress. They expressed concern that Israel is becoming a partisan political issue in the United States. We well know that with the political polarization today in America it is becoming extremely difficult to maintain bipartisan support for Israel. The report suggested that Israel must work towards that bipartisan support, otherwise Israel policies will come under attack both within the Jewish community and outside it.

They expressed concern about the growing Haredi, ultra-Orthodox, population both in Israel and the United States and the tendency of the current Israeli government to ignore the concerns of the Reform and Conservative streams of Judaism, especially regarding the Kotel and the recognition of conversions. These issues have only worsened over the course of the last number of months and no imminent solution is available.

In a study by JPPI entitled *70 years of Israel-Diaspora Relations: The Next Generation* Shmuel Rosner and John Ruskay found after engaging Jews, in particular, younger Jews throughout the world, that Diaspora and Israeli Jews agree that while all Jews have a stake in the State of Israel Diaspora Jews expect Israel to provide cultural and ideological inspiration for them. They expect Israel to listen to them and show them consideration, especially on issues related to the state's Jewishness. While Israeli Jews are willing to take Diaspora positions into account on matters of religion and state, they are not willing to do so on issues of security and foreign policy. In fact, in a very recent survey initiated by Hiddush, a religious pluralism advocacy organization, directed by Rabbi Uri Regev, it was found that Israelis and Diaspora Jews define religion and state issues differently. For Diaspora Jews it is the Kotel and conversions, for Israelis it is public transportation on Shabbat and government funding of Yeshivas.

They found that "the distancing" discourse is gaining currency in today's prevailing opinion, particularly in the Diaspora, and that Israel and Diaspora Jewry are growing apart. As Yehuda Kurtzer, in a recent article in the *New Republic* magazine wrote, Israelis and Diaspora Jews now see the world from very different vantage points. In short, what used to be seen as an opportunity to bring all Jews together is now in some ways tearing us apart.

In an American Jewish Committee June 2018 survey the results indicated that the gap between American Jews and Israelis regarding President Trump's approach to Israel is profound. While 77% of Israeli Jews approve of how the president is handling U.S.-Israel relations, only 34% of American Jews did. More than two-thirds of Israeli Jews say that is not appropriate for American Jews to attempt to influence Israeli policy on issues of national security and peace negotiations with the Palestinians. A majority of U.S. Jews, 53%, say it is appropriate. The survey reported that the gaps are growing wider each day.

What can be done? There is no doubt that dialogue is essential. Birthright and the MASA year-long study programs are bringing young Diaspora Jews to Israel to interact with Israelis and this may have a positive effect, but more must be done. Israel education is critical. Not only must we invest in Israel advocacy, but Israel education at all levels of elementary school through the college campus years must be both credible and significant. We cannot simply whitewash all of the issues, but we must start from a place of love, moving forward caring for one another and learning about one another, even as we confront some of the differences in our approaches.

As a member of the Jewish Agency's Unity of the Jewish People Committee, I serve on a sub-committee entitled the Ami-Unity Initiative. Our mission is to create opportunities for Israeli Jews to learn more about the Diaspora, our Jewish identity, our religious views, and our many challenges. We are instituting educational curricula in the youth group system, in gap year studies in between high school and the Army, and in many educational endeavors throughout Israel.

Last May, we brought a number of educators from Israel to the States where they visited Chicago and New York to learn about us and dialogue with us. In Chicago I was pleased to put together a meeting of those educators with representatives of the International Rabbinical Assembly, which had its convention here. I invited colleagues from Germany, the Czech Republic, Israel, Canada, the United States, and England to participate so they could learn more about our challenges and our deep abiding love for our fellow Jews in the State of Israel. Even if we disagreed on some issues, I was told on my next visit to Israel that this dialogue was an important part of their learning experience.

I am not sure that we will ever be as united as the Torah and Midrash suggest, and there is grave concern that we are becoming more divided than ever. It is difficult to get Rabbis of different denominations together here in the Diaspora and, of course, in Israel. Dialogue has descended into diatribe. Ad hominem attacks are much more prevalent than serious discussions of issues. We must learn to respect one another even if we disagree. I am hopeful that my work in JPPI and the Jewish Agency is going to open some doors to that dialogue.

On October 14, Dan Feferman, at my invitation, a staff member at JPPI, will visit Beth El. He is currently working on a report entitled *The Reform and Conservative Movements in Israel – Changing the “Synagogue Israelis Don’t Attend” Paradigm*. He will examine with us what is happening in the State of Israel, especially as it pertains to the liberal movements. I have seen a preliminary report. In his study he found that 12% to 13%, 800,000 of Israeli Jews, self-identify as Reform or Conservative in recent surveys. That is the same number as identify as Haredi. The findings challenge the movements to influence Israeli society and politics to become more open to issues of religious pluralism. I encourage you to join us that evening as we discuss the future of the liberal movements in Israel and the possibilities for dialogue between Israelis and the Diaspora.

In July in an on-line journal, *Mosaic*, Natan Sharansky, now the former chairman of the executive of the Jewish Agency, and Gil Troy, a good friend and passionate Zionist, who will be at Beth El on November 13, sponsored by the American Zionist Movement, raised the question: “*Can American and Israeli Jews stay together as one people?*” In the article they lament the gaps between the two major Jewish communities. But they are hopeful they can be brought together.

Their solution is the establishment of a Jewish People’s Council. It would bring together a forum for debating and acting together as one people, even as not all of us share the same geographical boundaries and many of us have our own responsibilities as citizens in our separate geographical homes. They believe that talking with one another would lead to understanding one another. While I don’t know if this is even possible, I am impressed, at least, with the suggestion for if we cannot learn to sit with one another, to dialogue with one another, to respect one another, then there is no hope that we can be one people.

Moses, in the Torah, may have seen an idealized situation. We know this would not be possible today, everyone standing together. However, it is essential that we learn to respect one another and to live with one another. There is no doubt in my mind that the enemies of Israel want to tear us apart and I am frightened that, eventually, we may do their work for them. As we learn from the destruction of the Second Temple, *Sinat Chinam* –idle hatred - destroyed the Temple and exiled the Jewish people.

As we move towards 5779 on the Jewish calendar I pray that we may accept the challenge both in the Diaspora and in Israel to work together for the benefit of us all. Let us join together to create a vibrant State of Israel, a substantial Diaspora, and a bright future for the Jewish people wherever they may reside.