

Tradition Today: Are we really one?

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Our sages created a wonderful midrash concerning the last moments of Jacob's life when he called his children to his bedside as he lay dying. They based this upon the story in Genesis 49 and connected it with the verse in Deuteronomy 6:4 "Hear O Israel, the Lord is our God, the Lord is one," building upon the fact that Israel is also Jacob's name.

Having reproved each one individually, Jacob called them all together and said to them, "Do you have any doubts concerning Him who spoke and the world came into being?" They replied, "Hear, O Israel, our father! Just as you have no doubts concerning Him who spoke and the world came into being, so do we have no doubts. Rather the Lord is our God, the Lord is one." Jacob gave thanks and praise to God that unworthy ones had not issued from him. (Sifre Deuteronomy 31).

This story reflects the concern of parents that their children should share those values most precious to them, the concern of Jewish parents that their children should remain true to Judaism. But on a different level it also expresses the concern of the people Israel, symbolized by Jacob-Israel, that its children should see themselves united as one entity, bound together by common ideals.

Unity is a matter of concern for the Jewish people - *am Yisrael* - today perhaps as never before. We have undergone such a transformation that we must seriously ask if we are still one people. What binds us together? Certainly we can no longer expect that all Jews would subscribe to the belief in one God that is the core of Jewish belief. In Israel we have many Jews who have no religious belief whatsoever, agnostics and atheists. That is the case in the Diaspora as well. In addition, even many who do believe in God do not subscribe to the regimen of observances that Jewish law prescribes.

Religious Jewry itself is divided into different camps and streams, and all too often one group does not recognize the Jewishness of the other. In Israel we are divided into "religious" and "secular," with a large haredi camp that has its own interpretation of Judaism. Nor have we overcome the Ashkenazi-Sephardi division, to which is now added the discrimination against Ethiopian Jews.

Then there is the Israel-Diaspora divide, which seems to be growing greater year by year, especially between Israel and America, the largest and most influential of the Diaspora communities. The support for Israel, the unity that was once taken for granted, is more and more

questioned as younger generations arise. And the truth is that our two communities are very different from one another. American Jews - especially those who are not Orthodox, and that is the vast majority - do not understand the way in which religion and state are connected here and are uncomfortable with religious coercion. They view the role of religion very differently. Nor do they always agree with Israeli policies regarding peace. Whereas Israel was once thought of as the unifying factor in world Jewry, it is now often a source of further divisiveness.

If religion does not unite us, if common practice does not unite us, if Israel and Zionism do not unite us, how are we one people? What answer can we give to Father Israel when he asks us that question? Perhaps the first thing that we have to do is to recognize the fact that we are now living in a new age as far as our people Israel is concerned. We can no longer count on our cohesiveness as a people. We are going to have to come to terms with pluralism in religious belief and practice and in so much else. Our unity must include our diversity.

What binds us together into one people is our common past, our common heritage, our common history and our sense of responsibility for one another, despite our differences. But as members of *am Yisrael* we also share values. One does not have to be religious to take pride in and to value to concepts of righteousness, justice, mercy, charity, honesty and the value of human life that Judaism has taught throughout the ages. We do stand for something in the world - human decency.

To cultivate this sense of unity in diversity it is important to develop educational programs for Jews everywhere that will teach our history and our heritage, so that we will have common ground for discourse, even if we interpret things differently. We will also have to develop methods for keeping us aware of Jewish life in different places, and ways to help one another. Above all we must find a way to respect one another and our differences. Obviously not all Jews will be able or willing to do this, but let those who go their own way be a minority and not the majority of our people - *klal Yisrael*.

Judaism is a religion. It is also a culture or a civilization. The State of Israel is a nation. But the Jewish people is exactly that - a people. A people shares a history and a destiny. Its members care for one another. It is a family writ large. Members of a family do not always agree on everything, but they care for one another. When they cease to care, they cease to be a family. Hopefully we have not reached that point, but we must take positive steps to assure our unity and not take it for granted.

The writer is the head of the Rabbinical Court of the Masorti Movement and the author of several books, the most recent being Entering Torah.