

For the Unity of the Jewish People – Parashat Vayyigash 5773

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Last week, many of us who care about religious pluralism in Israel thought we had a breakthrough. The prominent Orthodox Rabbi Yuval Cherlow, a founder of Israel's Tzohar Modern Orthodox Foundation, wrote a letter to his students in which he advocated a re-examination of *halakhah* in order to recognize non-Orthodox streams of Judaism. His reasoning was to keep the worldwide Jewish community from splitting apart. The Tendency of Orthodox rabbis in Israel to ignore American forms of Judaism, he said, "is confronting us with a harsh reality that we are committing suicide, endangering the existence of the state of Israel, and moving away from our fundamental role in the world."

Yizhar Hess, director of our Masorti movement in Israel, praised Rabbi Cherlow. "Jewish pluralism is not a necessary evil. It is a life drug. Seventy faces to the Torah – seventy faces of Jewish existence today, and we can only benefit from these many faces."

Of course there was pushback. The Tzohar organization released a statement saying it absolutely opposes recognition of Reform and Conservative Judaism. And those further to the right denounced Rabbi Cherlow in much harsher terms until he backtracked from his statement. But it was an important moment, which highlighted the extent to which this debate is taking place. The future of Judaism and the unity of the Jewish people depends on recognizing that there are different ways that people practice Judaism. This is not only true in America. Israelis want options as well.

Today we read in Parashat Vayyigash the climax of the Joseph story, as Joseph and his brothers and father are reunited. We are familiar with the story from the Andrew Lloyd Webber, which seems to end on a happy note. Imagine the loud music in the background: "And Jacob came to Egypt, no longer feeling old. And Joseph came to greet him in his chariot of gold. ... Of gold ... Of gold!" The servant rises from the ashes and the reunited family drives off into the sunset.

But it is a little more complicated in the Torah, as Jacob's descent to Egypt begins 400 years of servitude. And more than that, we know that the reunion of the brothers is never complete. The Bible sees their relationship as a foreshadowing of the future. When King Solomon died, his kingdom was divided. The 10 tribes of the north formed the Kingdom of Israel, while the southern tribes coalesced into the Kingdom of Judah. The northern kingdom was defeated by the Assyrians around 722 BCE and the southern kingdom, to which we trace our roots, stuck around for another 150 years before being destroyed by the Babylonians.

In this morning's Haftarah, Ezekiel – preaching after the demise of the southern kingdom – imagines a return and reunification. He is instructed to take two sticks – one for the People of Judah

and one for the People of Joseph, and to bring them together so they become like one. “Never again shall they be two nations,” he says, “And never again shall they be divided into two kingdoms.”

But of course Ezekiel’s vision was never realized. The population of the north assimilated, and in the Talmud there is a debate about whether the Ten Lost Tribes might ever return. Rabbi Akiva argues that just as the day progresses and never returns, so have they disappeared never to return. And Rabbi Eliezer argues the opposite: Just as the day gets dark before the light returns, so it is with the Ten Tribes – the world got dark for them, but their future will again be bright.

The very fact that they were having this debate belies the realization that Ezekiel’s prophecy was never fulfilled. The children of Israel split up, and they remained that way – but for a brief historical pause.

So we fast forward almost 2000 years from Rabbi Akiva and Rabbi Eliezer, to the establishment of the modern State of Israel. In the months before May 14, 1948, there was confusion about what the new state should be called. The options included Zion, Judea, or New Judea. But the name Israel, was chosen – at least in part because the founders saw our new state as the fulfillment of a Ezekiel’s unrealized dream, the reunification of the totality of the Jewish people.

How ironic, then, and how painful that the religious status quo in Israel today is the source of so much disunity.

As many of you know, I recently returned from a short mission in Israel with Masorti, the Conservative movement in Israel. It was a great trip, and I thank Bob Kaplan for joining me on it. But if I can reduce it to one takeaway message, it was that the issue of non-Orthodox Judaism, the fight for religious pluralism, is an Israeli issue.

I have spoken many times about the Masorti movement and religious pluralism, but many people still believe that this is an American fetish, that somehow we are trying to import something into Israel that Israelis don’t want or need. The trip shattered that myth. Outside of Meah She’arim, it is hard to find an Israeli anywhere who is not bothered by the religious status quo.

There is a disparity of resources, as the Haredi population is growing but does not participate in the army and in many cases is producing large families that are supported by public funds. And their community is growing. This year just under 50% of Israeli first graders are studying in Haredi schools; about 1/3 of Israeli Jewish babies are born to Haredi families. And they are politically powerful. To cite one statistic: The average class size in secular public schools is 28 pupils. In Haredi schools it is 20. And we know about the challenges posed by ultra-Orthodox control weddings, kashrut, and the entire religious ministry.

Perhaps more important, secular Israelis know that they want some type of Judaism to pass to their children but they have nowhere to turn. The secular school system doesn’t provide it, and the

ultra-Orthodox is like a foreign community. The religious divide is growing wider, which is a threat to the very essence of the Zionist dream.

Perhaps the good news is that Israelis are beginning to notice their options.

The Masorti siddur, *Va'ani Tefilati*, was published by the popular Israeli publisher Yediot and it became a best seller – literally at the top of the charts, because people appreciated the fact that it was modern, Israeli, and authentic. There are 68 Masorti congregations throughout the country, nine of which have been established in just the last two years. Our group helped to dedicate a Torah at the synagogue in Pardes Hannah (which, as someone pointed out, would be known in English as Ann Arbor). An Orthodox synagogue would have received a Torah from the government; but the members of this new *kehillah* were so excited to receive one from a Conservative congregation in Minnesota and to be able to dance with it and read from it and know that it made their congregation complete.

We visited another new congregation in the mostly secular town of Kfar Vradim, which was the first non-Orthodox synagogue to be constructed with government funds. The secular mayor of Kfar Vradim recognized that his constituents wanted a non-Orthodox option. And when push came to shove, he courageously told the Religious Ministry that they would either have to build this new synagogue or he would tell the members of the one Orthodox synagogue in town that next year theirs was going to be a Masorti synagogue; and then it can be Orthodox the following year on a rotating basis.

Our movement barely has the resources to respond to the overwhelming demand by secular Israelis for *bar* and *bat mitzvah* in our synagogues. And we are the ONLY people in Israel who are providing *bar* and *bat mitzvah* for children with special needs. Israelis want non-Orthodox options.

The situation is a challenge to the unity and future of the Jewish people. And politicians in Israel – some more vocal like the Orthodox Rabbi Shai Piron who is number two in Yair Lapid's Yesh Atid (There Is a Future) party and spoke to our group – politicians are beginning to notice and to say publicly that Jewish pluralism matters. As Yizhar Hess has written, Israel is the only democratic country in the world where Jews are not free to practice Judaism as they choose.

Our movement matters and it is making a difference, but it needs our support.

There are flyers outside that detail how you can support the Masorti movement in Israel and how you can help us secure funding from the Jewish Agency by becoming a member of Mercaz. I hope you will take them home and respond. And more than that, we need to raise consciousness about the issue of Jewish pluralism to the level of the community agenda. We need the organized Jewish community – particularly the Federation to know that our interest in supporting our Jewish community includes the desire to build a future for Judaism in Israel. We care about this issue and we want our leaders to care about this issue too.

Let us pray that the reconciliation that began in the time of Joseph, the unification about which Ezekiel dreamed, the promise of the modern State of Israel as a homeland for all Jews and all kinds of Judaism will soon become a reality. Shabbat Shalom.