
One People?

Thinking about Jewish Unity

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Jewish unity remains a perplexing subject, despite the attention it has received in recent years. Jonathan Sacks here explores some of its fundamental premises. The article is an adaptation of the first Louis Mintz Memorial Lecture delivered at London University's Institute of Education on 13 December 1989.

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In the last two decades much talk has been dedicated to the idea of Jewish unity. Yet tantalisingly, the closer we approach the subject, the further it recedes. The reason is very simple. Each of us — religious, secular, Orthodox, non-Orthodox — wants Jewish unity. But we each want it *on our terms*. That is why the search for unity does not resolve the tensions in the Jewish world. Instead it merely reproduces them.

In fact it does worse. It intensifies them, because the

word unity leads us to believe that there is some resolution in sight and all it needs is goodwill, tolerance and dialogue to achieve it. Manifestly this is not so. If what divided Jews today were mutual misunderstanding, then a willingness to listen to one another would take us much of the way. But what now divides Jews is not misunderstanding. Instead it is a deep, substantive set of conflicts on what it is to be a Jew.

Goodwill alone will not resolve those conflicts, which have by now lasted for almost two centuries. But if we *think* it will, we are bound to be frustrated by our failure to achieve our false expectations. We will naturally come to think that someone somewhere was guilty of *ill* will. That is why the search for unity, even when accompanied by good and sincere intentions on all sides, can actually make things worse.

At all costs, we should not make things worse. In what follows, therefore, I outline four axioms that seem to me to define the problems and parameters of unity. Next, I indicate some paths I believe should *not* be taken, because though they promise much, they deliver little. Finally, I will outline what I believe we can and should do to live together more constructively as Jews.

Jacob's Children

Let us begin with a question. Tradition identifies the Jewish people with one particular individual whose name we bear. We are the children of Israel, the people of Israel, the house of Jacob. We owe our identity to the third of the patriarchs: Jacob/Israel.

Yet this identification is strange. The covenant that brought the people of the promise into being was made, not with Jacob but with Abraham. The covenant that articulated the terms of Jewish existence was made not with Jacob but with Moses. Why then are we the children of Israel and the house of Jacob? What is it about Jacob that singles him out not simply as an exemplary *individual*, but as the father of a people?

The Torah leaves us in no doubt as to the answer to this question. Yet it is an answer with whose implications we still must learn to live.

Ein mikra yotzei miyedei peshuto. However else we read it, the Torah still bears its literal or 'plain' sense. If we read the text of *Ecreishit* at its plain sense we discover that Jacob virtually disowned his three eldest sons: Reuven, Shimon and Levi. Each did something that was either misinterpreted or disapproved by Jacob. The relationship between father and son collapsed and communication failed.

The Torah describes this breakdown in extraordinarily graphic ways. When Shimon and Levi rescue their abducted sister Dina, Jacob complains that their excessive violence has endangered his security. The brothers reply, 'Should he [Shechem] have been allowed to treat our sister like a prostitute?' (Genesis 34:31). Maimonides and Nachmanides disagree as to who was right, the brothers or Jacob. But one thing is clear: the narrative suddenly breaks off in mid-conversation. The brothers have asked a legitimate question. We expect, from Jacob, a reply. None comes. The text moves on to a new chapter and subject, leaving Shimon and Levi's question hovering, unanswered. Jacob has ceased to talk to them. Communication has failed.

In the next chapter, the same thing happens between Jacob and Reuven. Rachel dies. An obscure verse then says that Reuven 'went and lay with Bilhah, his father's concubine' (Genesis 35:22). Rabbinic tradition suggests that Reuven merely re-arranged the beds, placing his father's in the tent of his mother Leah. Whatever happened, the psychology of the episode is clear. Reuven, Leah's firstborn son, feels her plight acutely. Unloved by Jacob while Rachel was alive, she is still ignored by him even now that Rachel has died. Reuven seeks to draw Jacob's attention to her. Jacob, though, as we subsequently discover

(Genesis 49:4) is scandalised by the act and does not respond to its constructive intent. A conversation, however angry, between father and son would have brought to light Reuven's concerns and perhaps effected a reconciliation between father and son or husband and wife. But the conversation does not ensue. The text reads, 'Israel heard about it', and no more. Tradition marked the fraught silence between Jacob and Reuven by signalling a paragraph break in the middle of the verse. It is one of the few designated silences in the Torah.

Heirs to the Covenant

Jacob was more than angry with his three eldest sons. A close reading of the text reveals that from then on he had no significant communication with them. Other than Joseph, the one son to whom he listened is Judah, the next eldest, his fourth son. More than this: the plain meaning of Jacob's final testimony is inescapable. He never forgave them, even at the end. In his last words, he calls Reuven 'as unstable as water: you shall not excel' (49:4). To Shimon and Levi he is more harsh still. 'Let not my person be included in their council, let not my being be counted in their assembly' (49:6).

But it is at this point that the Torah confronts us with a paradox that has defined the terms of Israel's existence ever since.

Unmistakably the Torah implies that Abraham loved his elder son Ishmael. When he was promised a second son, he cried, 'O that Ishmael might live with Your favour' (17:18). When Sarah wanted to send Ishmael away, 'it troubled Abraham greatly, because it involved his son' (21:11). The pathos of these verses is intense. *Abraham loved Ishmael. But Ishmael did not inherit the covenant.*

Explicitly, the Torah says that Isaac loved his elder son Esau (25:28). There are few moments of emotional intensity to match the scene between them when they discover Jacob's deception. *Isaac loved Esau. But Esau did not inherit the covenant.*

Jacob did not love his three eldest sons. That fact is on or near the surface of the text. *Jacob did not love his three eldest sons. But all his sons inherited the covenant.*

Not all of Abraham's children were chosen. Not all of Isaac's children were not chosen. *But all of Jacob's children were chosen. And that is why we are the children of Israel and the house of Jacob.* Jacob may not love Reuven or Shimon or Levi. He may even speak words that seem to disinherit them. But they are not disinherited. From Jacob onward, to be a member of the covenantal family is a matter of birth not of choice. That is what makes us one people.

Every Jew, liked or unliked, righteous or unrighteous, religious or secular, in Israel or the Diaspora is a member of the covenantal family, and that is what makes us 'one nation on earth'. 'Though my father and mother forsake me, God will receive me' (Psalm 27:10). Our contemporaries — even our own parents — may reject us. But 'God does not reject us. 'Whether you behave like children of God or you do not behave like children of God, you are still called children of God', said R. Meir (B. T. *Kiddushin* 36a).

That is what makes Judaism not simply a religion or a community of believers or an élite of the righteous, but the constitution of a people. We are, all of us, despite the tensions between us and the conflicts in our self-definitions, members of one family: the children of Israel and the congregation of Jacob. That is not an ideal, an aspiration or a messianic dream. It is

the bedrock inescapable meaning of the word Jew. That is my first point.

Family Quarrels

But, and this is my second point, turning that fact into empirical reality has never been easy. We have it on the testimony of Josephus, who was an eye-witness, that Jews were so divided in the last days of the Second Temple period that they were more passionate about fighting one another than fighting the Romans. There were political divisions and religious divisions. There were, says Josephus, Pharisees, Sadducees and Essenes. There were those whose Jewish status was in doubt, the Samaritans. There was a group, then a small Jewish sect, that went its own way and became a separate religion: the Christians. Those divisions fatally injured the cohesiveness of Jewish life and led directly to the destruction of the Second Temple, the loss of political autonomy, and an exile that lasted almost two thousand years.

This too was anticipated in the book of *Bereishit*. Jacob's sons could not live peaceably together. They were jealous of Joseph. Not merely jealous. 'They hated him.' Worse: 'They could not speak with him in peace' (37:4). They plotted to kill him. Then Judah made this speech. 'Let us sell him to the Arabs and not harm him with our own hands, for he is our brother, our own flesh and blood' (37:27).

That is a terrifying speech. To acknowledge someone as your brother and yet to leave him to the winds of fate — that is what happens when Jews hate one another. It is never an act without consequences. It was this act that led directly to enslavement in Egypt, the first collective exile and the first crucible of Jewish suffering. The brothers sold Joseph into slavery and eventually as a result the whole Jewish people was sold into slavery.

This is my second point. We are a fractious, fissiparous people. We have a natural tendency to split apart. It happened in the days of Jacob; again in the time of the First Temple; and again in the days of the Second Temple. It has been happening for the last two centuries. *What begins as a quarrel within the family ends as a tragedy for the whole family.* In that confrontation there are no winners, only losers.

In the days of Jacob it led to exile and slavery in Egypt. In the days of the First Temple it led to division of the kingdom and the loss of ten of the twelve tribes. In the days of the Second Temple it led to a catastrophe for which we suffered for eighteen hundred years. If there is one equation that Jewish history spells out again and again it is that the hatred between brothers leads to *galut*. Our alienation from one another leads to spiritual alienation and political alienation. In becoming estranged from one another, we become estranged from God and thence from our destiny.

It is as if Jewish history — or rather, Divine providence — were telling us that we cannot live with one another, we prove ourselves incapable of being masters of our own destiny. It is no coincidence that Jewish unity has become problematic and urgent precisely at a time when the Jewish people has 're-emerged into history' with the founding of the State of Israel. For the most part, so long as Jews are passive — the condition of *galut* — external forces set a limit to our disagreements. It is when Jews are empowered that they have a tendency to fragment and, fragmenting, to lose power. This is what makes handling

the strains and stresses of peoplehood imperative in our time. If we fail now, it will show that we have learned nothing from our history and its tragic lessons. To reiterate: What begins as a quarrel within the family ends as a tragedy for the whole family.

'Begin with the Shame'

My third point: how then *have* we survived as a people? Given our tendency to fragment, how is it that we still remain 'one nation on earth'? The answer, again, is intimidated by the Torah and it remains disturbing.

Consider the phrase *goi echad ba'aretz*, 'one nation on earth' (2 Samuel 7:23). What does the word *goi*, a nation, signify? It was the Vilna Gaon who pointed out that the word *goi* comes from the same Hebrew root as the word *geviah*, 'body'. A *goi* is not simply a collection of individuals, an assemblage of disconnected persons. A *goi* is a corporate entity, a coherent organism: a group of individuals turned into a single being as the limbs cohere into a single body.

This is what R. Shimon bar Yochai meant when he said, *Goi — melamed shehen keguf echad venefesh achat*. 'The word "nation" means that Jews are like one body and a single soul.' *Lokeh echad mehen, kulan margishin*. 'When one of them is injured, all of them feel pain' (*Mekhilta de-Rabbi Shimon bar Yochai* to Exodus 19:6).

But now let us ask: in what context does Judaism invoke the phrase *vayehi sham legoi*: 'there [Israel] became a nation' (Deuteronomy 26:5)? It occurs in one of the Torah's most famous texts, the passage to which we devote much of the Seder service to explaining. 'My father was a wandering Aramean, and he went down into Egypt with a few people and lived there and there became a great nation . . .' Israel became a nation not under circumstances of freedom. It became a nation under conditions of exile, oppression, slavery and suffering.

Now the Mishnah gives an unusual commentary to this passage. Specifying how we should narrate the Haggadah, it says: 'One begins with shame and ends with praise [*matchil bigenut umesayem beshevach*] and expounds "My father was a wandering Aramean . . ." until one has completed the whole passage.' (*M. Pesachim* 10:4).

The Mishnah is here entering a profound theological judgement. It does not say that one must begin with 'exile' or 'suffering' or 'slavery' or any other neutrally descriptive term. In telling the story of the Jewish people on Pesach we are not engaged in history but in a sharp judgement on that history. The story of the Jewish people *begins with shame*.

The shame is contained in the phrase *vayehi sham legoi*, 'there [in Egypt, Israel] became a nation'. Only external tragedy, a crisis from outside, turned Israel into a people. Only when Jacob's children were all slaves did they stop fighting one another. As soon as they were liberated they began fighting again. It took the destruction of the Temple and the later fall of Betar to turn the warring factions of the late Second Temple period into 'one nation'. In our century, only the infinitely echoing tragedy of the Holocaust has turned us once again into a single people.

Why today do we speak of Jewish unity? Because we know that the Final Solution made no distinctions between religious and secular, affirming and assimilated Jews. If Hitler scheduled all Jews for death, can we do less than affirm all Jews for life? Our long overdue present concern for Jewish unity is a direct consequence of the impact on Jewish consciousness of the *Shoah*.

But that is our shame. What keeps us together today as Jews is not something that flows from within. It is instead something that is imposed from without. Only the sense of a common enemy, a collective threat, a shared vulnerability to antisemitism or anti-Zionism, forces us to try to live together. That was our shame then and it is our shame now. 'And he went down into Egypt' — it is only when Jews descend into the valley of the shadow of death that — 'there Israel became a nation'.

It was Sartre who gave this negative characterisation of Jewish kinship. 'The Jews have neither community of interests nor community of beliefs . . . The sole tie that binds them is the hostility and disdain of the societies which surround them.' That fact remains true, more than four decades later. What is critical is the judgement of the Mishnah that this is not praise but shame.

The Constitution of Peoplehood

But, and this is my fourth point, this is not the Torah's vision of how we should proceed. Nor if we are sane can it be ours. We were not a people held together by a desire not to give Pharaoh or Nebuchadnezzar or Haman or Titus or Torquemada a posthumous victory. We will not be held together either by a desire not to give Hitler a posthumous victory. The theology, so dominant today, which sees Jewish peoplehood in terms of our shared consciousness of suffering is what the recently departed and much lamented scholar Salo Baron called 'the lachrymose view of Jewish history'.

'One begins with shame' — that may be where Jewish identity *begins*. It cannot be where it ends. We are summoned to be greater than a people haunted by its own shadow, held together by shared tears and fear of future persecution. There must be more to Jewish identity than Holocaust memorials and anti-defamation leagues.

What that more is, is defined by the Torah. 'I will take you to Me as a people and I will be your God' (Exodus 6:7). This is the crux. We are more than a people who happen to share a faith. We are a people *defined* by a faith.

How so? In the tenth century, R. Saadia Gaon wrote a famous sentence. 'Our people, the children of Israel, is a nation only in virtue of its Torah' (*Emunot veDeot* 3,7). We are a people *constituted* by our religious laws.

Saadia was asking and answering that great question of collective Jewish identity. In what sense do Jews constitute a nation? In his day — even in ours when there is a State of Israel — Jews have none of the normal characteristics of a nation. We do not all live in the same country or come within the same political jurisdiction or share a single culture or speak the same language. We have no one ethnic background in common. We are not all members of the same race. In what sense is there an entity that we can call the Jewish nation, and in what sense are we all members of it?

To this Saadia gave a simple answer: ultimately the only possible answer. 'Our people, the children of Israel, is a nation only in virtue of its Torah.' We are constituted as a people by being partners of the same covenant, subjects of the same system of religious law. We are more than the people of the book. We are a people *brought into being* by a book — the book of the covenant, our written constitution as a nation, in

short by the Torah. The two clauses of our blessing over the Torah — 'who chose us from all other peoples and gave us His Torah' — are logically connected. What makes us singular as a people is the fact that we were given the Torah and thus a distinctive way of life, history, memory and destiny. Without the people of Israel there is no Torah. And without Torah there is no people of Israel. The Torah and Jewish peoplehood are indivisible.

Theology, History and Sociology

I believe this as an axiom of faith. But it is not faith alone that makes it credible. It is testable as a hypothesis of history and sociology. For it was Torah that allowed Jews to survive the Babylonian exile, that led them to rise up in the days of the Maccabees, that kept peoplehood alive after the Roman conquest of Jerusalem. Torah was our homeland during the lonely centuries of exile. That is history.

And today, Steven M. Cohen's statistics show that Jews brought up in religiously observant homes are eight times less likely to intermarry than Jews from unobservant homes. Samuel Heilman's figures show that observant Jews have on average twice as many children as non-observant Jews, and from other data we know that Chassidim have four times as many children as the Jewish average. Chaim Waxman's figures show that observant Jews in the Diaspora are five times as likely to make *aliyah*. The keys to Jewish continuity are in the hands of those who live by Torah. That is contemporary sociology.

Where there is Torah, there is Jewish survival. Where there is no Torah there is Jewish eclipse. To be sure, Jews did not keep Torah in order to survive. They survived in order to keep Torah. But the two are inextricable. Torah and its commandments are, we say, 'our life and the length of our days'. Because Torah is our life, therefore it is the length of our days. Because it gives meaning to our survival, therefore we survive.

A century ago, there were Jews who believed otherwise, understandably so. Theirs was an age of massive and rapid change, and they had few landmarks and guidelines. There were those who believed that the future lay with a highly reformed or a highly secularised Jewishness. There were others who were convinced that it lay in a wholly secular state of Israel. Today in most parts of the diaspora the Reform and secular sections of Jewry are facing an intermarriage rate already above one in three. And for the last decade secular Zionism has had to confront a situation in which more Jews have left Israel than gone to live there.

It is wrong to be judgemental or triumphalist in retrospect. If we see more clearly today, it is because we have the sharp vision of hindsight. But let us have the *wisdom* of hindsight. Even without the leap of faith, it is a monumental error not to see in halakhah the finely tuned, historically tested, instrument of Jewish survival: its end, but also its means. God promised that the people of the Torah would be an enduring people, *and that is what has happened*. Jewish theology, because it is bound to an empirical people and its continuity, is empirically testable by history and sociology. Jewish survival and Jewish unity begin in shame but end in praise. We are formed as a people in exile and suffering. But we are shaped as a people by revelation and destiny. Jewish peoplehood begins in exodus. But it is consummated in Sinai.

That is my fourth point.

On not Mistaking the Problem

Where then are we today? The answer, I believe, is this. We stand at a strange and fateful juncture in Jewish history. We have been, this last half century, through another exile and exodus. But we have not been through another Sinai. The covenant of Jewish peoplehood has been renewed. But the covenant of Torah has not been renewed.

Today, as a result of the *Shoah* and the State of Israel, the overwhelming majority of Jews throughout the world see themselves as part of *goi echad*, a single people, united by a shared history and a collective responsibility. But they do not yet see themselves as the people who stood at Sinai and received the Torah.

On the surface, we have mended the terrible divisions that disfigured Jewish life from the middle of the eighteenth century to the middle of the twentieth. But only on the surface. Beneath the surface those divisions still remain. There are Jews for whom being Jewish is a matter of memory, or nostalgia, or ethnicity, or solidarity with the State of Israel, or a particular kind of culture, or a particular sense of humour, or a particular kind of left-wing politics, or a particular kind of right-wing politics. We have conflicting ideas of *what* is a Jew and conflicting criteria of *who* is a Jew. Our unity is fragile and threatens daily to fall apart. What then shall we do, and what should we not do, to keep together and move closer together?

The first thing we should not do is to mistake the problem. Many Jews believe that the single overarching problem facing Jewry is the division between Orthodoxy and Reform. That is not so. There are deep divisions everywhere in the contemporary Jewish world, and this is only one of them. In Israel there is no official Reform presence, but there are frightening tensions between religious and secular Jews. In Britain the Reform and Liberal movements have themselves failed to unite. In America the Conservative movement is in the throes of internal schism. Throughout the world there are acute tensions between different groups of Orthodox Jews: the yeshivah world, Chassidic communities, and the so-called 'centrists'. The problem is deep and systematic. To take one manifestation as central is to mistake the symptom for the cause.

The Incoherence of Pluralism

The second thing we should not do is to fall into the trap of believing that we can solve the problem by playing games with words. Language is powerful but not magical. *Conflict is still conflict when it is dignified by the name 'pluralism'*, and to believe, as some do, that tragedy can be redefined as triumph by invoking the idea of pluralism is to fall into the primitive superstition that words do not merely name things but also bring them into being. They do not.

Theological, as opposed to political, pluralism presupposes the absence of absolute or normative truth and hence the falsehood of Orthodoxy. Orthodoxy stakes its being on the existence of some truth that transcends the relativities of time. This is the rock on which pluralism founders. Either the Torah is the unmediated word of God or it is not. Either halakhah commands every Jew or it does not. Either God speaks to us through history or He does not. Where truth and falsity are at stake, the idea that both sides of a contradiction are true is itself a contradiction. Pluralism supposes that somehow all the different and conflicting

things Jews today believe can be accommodated within a single Platonic universe. They cannot.

This is an important point and needs to be spelled out. There has been much recent writing by Jewish thinkers on the subject of pluralism. It is a promising concept. It seems to offer a theoretical framework for tolerance and mutual understanding. In fact though, and necessarily, the literature proceeds on the explicit or hidden premise that Orthodoxy is false. It could not be otherwise, for if Orthodoxy is true, pluralism would be false. But if so, pluralism is no more tolerant than Orthodoxy. Each represents a way of viewing the relationship between belief and truth, and each excludes the other. Pluralism is thus no more tolerant than the Orthodoxy it seeks to replace.

The Intolerance of Pluralism

To see this, consider an example drawn not from theology but from political theory. In 1986 Joseph Raz, Professor of Law at Oxford University, published a book entitled *The Morality of Freedom*. It won two major literary awards and was described in the *Times Literary Supplement* as being 'as significant a new statement of liberal principles as anything since Mill's *On Liberty*'.

Toward the end of the book Raz considers the problem of religious and ethnic communities whose culture does not support the liberal values he embraces. He writes: 'Since they insist on bringing up their children in their own ways they are, in the eyes of liberals like myself, harming them.' Is the state therefore justified in using coercion to break up such communities? Those who believe an illiberal culture to be inferior to a liberal one are, argues Raz, 'justified in taking action to assimilate the minority group, at the cost of letting its culture die'. In some cases, he suggests, 'assimilationist policies may well be the only humane course, even if implemented by the force of law'.

Raz is an avowed, even an extreme, pluralist. Yet his remarks suggest that there would be circumstances in which he would support action by the state to dismantle — for example — Chassidic communities and impose on them what they would regard as an unacceptable level of assimilation. Raz is faithful to his own principles. But his work shows with admirable clarity that pluralism has room for only a limited degree of tolerance, and has a cultural imperialism of its own. It is not a way of harmonising conflicting values. Rather, it is a set of values in its own right and is at times acutely hostile to tradition.

To be sure, if someone were to say: what I mean by 'pluralism' is no more than that Jews should 'live and let live', who could disagree? The Talmud says that at Sinai, God suspended the mountain over the Jewish people and said: Accept it or die. But that was the prerogative of God at Sinai. It is not the prerogative of human beings in liberal democracies. There are compelling halakhic reasons, both pragmatic and principled, to resist religious coercion even in the State of Israel, let alone in the Diaspora where it is a practical impossibility. If that is all pluralism means, so be it. But if pluralism means that we should grant equal legitimacy to every interpretation of Judaism, *it is not there to be granted*. Not because of a lack of will, but because it is built on a contradiction and cannot exist.

The Perspective of Patience

The third thing we should not do is to believe that

substantive Jewish unity is imminent, already within our grasp. My teacher, R. Nachum Rabinovitch, once argued against the use, by the Chassidic right and the political left, of the word *achshav*, 'Now.' One group wants '*Mashiach* now', the other 'Peace now'. Both may be available now, but not without a massive change of heart on the part of all concerned. If nothing else, four thousand years of uninterrupted Jewish history must at least teach patience.

In this non-miraculous world there is no *kefitzat haderekh* — no arriving at our destination without going through all the intervening stages. The art of religious leadership is to know where we are going and to move forward if necessary an inch at a time. There is a widespread belief that unity is there to be had, *if only*. When it fails to materialise, one group or another is then blamed for its intransigence. But divisions that have lasted for close to two centuries are not going to be healed overnight. Maimonides says that there are no sudden discontinuities, no overnight transformations, in human history and even Divine providence must work within that limit. For that reason the Torah makes concessions to an imperfect world. We too must have a responsible sense of pace and not risk having nothing ever for the sake of having everything now.

A Fragment of the Shekhinah

What then *shall* we do? First, let us always treat other Jews with respect. There is an extraordinary prayer we say every morning at the beginning of *Shacharit*. 'Not because of our righteousness do we lay our prayers before You . . . What are we? What is our life? . . .' We have no strength, no value, no achievements. Even the greatest must admit that 'most of their deeds are desolate and the days of their life are empty before You'. It is a prayer that verges on despair.

And then comes a momentous *aval*, a transfiguring 'but': '*but* we are Your people, the children of Your covenant.' And if that '*but*' applies to *me* as a Jew, it applies to *you* as a Jew. Even if, God forbid, we believe that another Jew is nothing, that 'most of his deeds are desolate' and that his lifestyle is an affront to everything we hold true, he or she is nonetheless a member of Your people, a child of Your covenant and must be as precious to me as to God.

The Jews today with whom we disagree carry with them our indivisible history, the history of generations of Jews who survived the slings and arrows of outrageous fortune and yet chose to remain Jews. Every Jew today is heir to a succession of tragedies and miracles, deliverances and affirmations unparalleled in human civilisation. And if sometimes we must categorically reject his or her beliefs or deeds, which we must, nonetheless we know that when we stand in the presence of a Jew, any Jew, we stand in the presence of a fragment of the *Shekhinah*. Let us never dishonour that fact.

Decision in the Context of Community

Secondly, we must be prepared to put the interests of *klal Yisrael* — the Jewish people as a whole — over our sectional, institutional self-interests. Politics is the pursuit of victory. Torah is the pursuit of truth. The two are incompatible. To turn Torah into politics is to betray it.

The rabbis ruled that 'one who shames his fellow in

public is as if he shed his blood'. Yet regularly we act with the sole purpose of embarrassing our opponents. The Torah itself rules that *Torah achat yihyeh lakhem*, 'You shall have one law', because the unity of the Torah is the quintessential expression of the unity of the Jewish people. Yet we are faced with a multiplicity of conflicting halakhic, quasi-halakhic and pseudo-halakhic authorities, from which no clear guidance can be discerned. 'Two [simultaneous] voices cannot be heard' ruled the rabbis. How then shall we hear Torah if it no longer speaks with one voice?

This problem goes to the heart of the halakhic enterprise. To be a Jew essentially and constitutively means accepting the constraints and authority of community. That is what halakhah is, and what it is to do a *mitzvah*. It means that I act not as a matter of self-expression, but as part of the community of all Jews stretching back to Sinai and forward to the messianic age. When I as an individual or as leader of an institution speak in disregard of that totality called *klal Yisrael*, I am failing to hear the full responsibility conveyed by the word Jew. We must struggle to educate a generation that will identify with the Jewish people as a whole, and we will have gone a long way toward mending the fragmentation of our religious life.

The Inner Dialogue

Finally to the word I have avoided so far: *dialogue*. I believe in dialogue. But dialogue of a specific kind. Not the public staged confrontations between Jews of different beliefs. Such dialogue never moved two parties an inch closer together. On the contrary, its essential dynamic is to force us all the more thoroughly into our entrenched positions. The dialogue I have in mind is something else: the dialogue each of us must have and continue to have with Torah and the totality of Jewish history. Torah calls us to greatness. Denominational politics calls us only to smallness.

The one activity no politician can engage in is public self-criticism. But that is precisely the activity that will move all of us beyond our present impasse. The secularist must ask: when did I stop hearing the voice of Jewish learning? The non-Orthodox must ask: when did I stop hearing the voice of Divine command? The world of Torah must ask, when and why did Torah cease being the stream of consciousness of every Jew? The Israeli must ask, why *yeridah*? Those of us who live outside Israel must ask, why are we still here?

Those are painful questions. But we *hear* them — in the sense of *shema Yisrael*, a hearing that goes to the heart — only when we ask them *to ourselves* and confront them without evasion or self-deception. That is the dialogue for which few today call, and yet which calls to us nonetheless. The inner dialogue between each Jew and the totality of experience of the Jewish people.

These are small steps forward. But they do lead forward, while much of the contemporary rhetoric of unity leads toward ends that are either practically or logically impossible. We have a long way to go before the shame of discord is turned into the praise of a shared future. We will not complete the task, but we are not free to desist from it. *Maasei avot siman lebanim*. The book of *Bereishit* begins with conflict and ends in reconciliation. We read it because it remains our story and our trial. ■