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DIVERSITY AND DIVISIVENESS

ABSTRACT

As we think of the impressive tens of thousands that gathered in Tahrir Square in Cairo (a quarter of a million by highest count), we realize the sheer power of numbers. Consider then, the text of this week’s Torah reading:

Moses assembled the entire community of the children of Israel and said to them: “These are the words that God as commanded for you to do.”

Moses succeeded in gathering together, in one place, the entire Nation of Israel – 600,000 men and their families so at least 3 million people – people of different backgrounds, diverse and distinct, yet all together … assembled as one community.

The Talmud tells us that anyone who sees an assembly of 600,000 Jews must make the blessing: “Blessed is the Master of Secrets.” Why? Because it takes a Master of Secrets to know what is in each heart of so many people and to bring them together.

Diversity is a most powerful aspect of life. It is driving engine that provides a constant source of fresh energy. But, unfortunately diversity breeds divisiveness, and divisiveness is a plague. And Jewish divisiveness is, without a doubt, our greatest challenge today.

This sermon examines what we can do about it and how we can change the world as a result – a world that needs us to serve as a model, especially with the current upheaval in the Middle East.

**DIVERSITY AND DIVISIVENESS**

1. **The Great Assembly**

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1. **Diversity vs. Divisiveness**

Diversity is a most powerful aspect of life. It is driving engine that provides a constant source of fresh energy. Every distinct personality makes its unique contribution to the big picture, and we are all enriched in the process. Most of us can barely appreciate the uniqueness of several individuals. It takes a Master of Secrets to appreciate the all-encompassing beauty of 600,000 individuals.

Unfortunately diversity breeds divisiveness, and divisiveness is a plague. And Jewish divisiveness is, without a doubt, our greatest challenge today.

Who hasn’t heard the joke: “Two Jews three opinions.” Or Gold Meir’s response to Harry Truman when he complained that it was hard to be president of 180 million people. She retorted, “You should try being president of 1.8 million presidents.”

Jews are opinionated and Jews are divisive. But just 60 years ago the Nazis were able to unite all Jews by their rabid hate. To them, it made no difference what type of Jew you were. Sephardi or Ashkenazi, Chassid or Misnagid, affiliated or unaffiliated, observant or non-observant – all were just Jews.

1. **Where Do We Stand Today?**

Where do we stand today? Who has it right?

I cannot state, even as a proud Jew, that the Jewish people are all living up to the legacy of Abraham, Isaac and Jacob. We have too many wars going on between us, between one community and the next.

Thank God, Jewish divisiveness rarely takes the shape of violence. Unfortunately, sometimes it does, but it’s not that common. Still, it’s nothing to be proud of and we pray: *Barcheinu Avinu kulanu k’echad* (“Bless us our Father, together as one”).

What is the explanation for this? Psychologists would say that insecure people don’t know how to get along with each other. When you’re insecure, you definitely cannot tolerate others. Why can’t you be right without me being wrong? Why do you have to change my mind? Why can’t we both just see things from different angles?

If you cannot let the other fellow have his say, then it means you are not so secure in your position. So, therefore, as long as there’s someone that’s going to remind you that there could be another position, you don’t feel confident and you resent that fact.

Why does it have to be about winning? This isn’t a corporate competition, like MacDonald’s, Burger King and Wendy’s, or Orthodox, Conservative and Reform, fighting to see who’s going to dominate.

If you are truly a Godly person, then what you care about is not yourself – you care about what the cause demands. It’s not about who wins; it’s about what’s God’s will in the matter.

1. **King Solomon Story**

The classic story tells of two women who came to King Solomon with a baby, each one claiming it to be hers. So King Solomon, in his wisdom, proclaimed, “Cut the baby in half.” One woman agreed. But the second woman immediately said, “Don’t hurt him. Better that she should have him.”

So, of course, King Solomon gave the child to the second woman, because the real mother would never let her child be killed. She would rather give him to her enemy. To the real mother survival of her child is more important than winning the argument. That’s dedication. That’s selflessness.

By-the-way, there is a newer version of this story…

A *shtetl* in Eastern Europe was short on guys. Mothers with marriageable daughters were despairing. Two of the more aggressive ones sent a letter to a matchmaker in the big city who responded that two eligible young men would be on the next train. But when the train pulled into the station, only one young man got off.  Each of the two mothers sought to take possession of him. After a tug of war, they went to the *shtetl rebbe* to resolve the issue. In true Solomon fashion, he said, “I will cut him in half. That way each one of you can have a piece.” The two mothers had the two predictable reactions. One said, “Oh no, don’t do it. Give him to her.” The other said, “Cut him in two.” The rabbi said of the latter, “She is the true mother-in-law.”

1. **Selflessness**

You see the selflessness of great people like Moses, for example, who was ready to sacrifice his own life for his people. When he thought God would not forgive them for the sin of the Golden Calf, he said, “Erase my name from this book,” meaning the Book of Life, the Torah.

His sacrifice meant he understood it was not about him. It’s not about who wins. It’s about what is right. That’s a very rare reaction, but it is a hallmark of a true leader … too bad we have none like him today.

What we have is many disparate groups, each with its own leader, and every group thinks it’s superior. Very few seem to understand that God intentionally created people with diverse opinions. But whenever I say that to my zealous friends, they say to me, “Yeah, but what happens if they’re wrong?”

I answer, “Let’s say they are absolutely wrong, and you are absolutely right. How do you teach your point of view to other people? By ignoring them? By disparaging them? Or by inspiring them with your example?”

1. **It’s Your Family**

Imagine that you are a loving parent, and your children have a little disagreement between them. Do you take a side or do you teach your children to figure out how to work it out between them?

Of course, you take the second option. You see, when there’s real love and you truly care because it’s your child and your family, you act differently in the cause of love and family unity.

So our challenge is to see all other Jews as part of our family.

If every Jew in this world would think like that, divisiveness would disappear. Because no one would disown his own brother for having a different opinion. No one would say, “I’m right, he’s wrong, and I won’t speak to him for the rest of my life until he agrees to do things my way.”

So why do we do this to other Jews?

Simply because we don’t think of them as our brothers until the Nazis come and lump us all together. Today, in prosperity and freedom, we stand divided. What is our message to our children, to ourselves, to the rest of the world, to God? Is persecution the only way to unite us all?!

Can we unite with the same intensity in peace as in war?

1. **Changing the World**

Well, *we must* and for a variety of reasons:

1. First, because we are all one family, we are all the children of Abraham, Isaac and Jacob – it’s time we started acting like it.
2. Second, because if we don’t unite something bad is likely to happen that will do it for us.
3. And third, because we have a responsibility to do so for the sake of the whole world.

Surely, you jest rabbi!

No. What we do affects the whole world. We Jews have always believed that. And it’s a fact that what any one person (Jewish or not) does has a ripple effect. (Witness Tunisia.) And so certainly what we Jews do collectively has major impact.

We Jews are supposed to be a “light unto nations,” but would anyone say we are that today?

1. **Jews vs. Muslims**

Until we Jews show ourselves to be leaders of morality and spirituality and Godliness, the Muslims will never respect us. Because they think that they are superior to us in these areas.

Don’t get me wrong. I’m not suggesting that there isn’t anti-Semitism, and they wouldn’t find some other excuse to hate us, but I am suggesting that if we served as that “light unto nations,” we’d be seeing a different landscape in the Middle East.

But we are not. We are seeing only trouble ahead.

One thing is sure: all this was foretold. The battles have been fought – the land of the Pharaohs was in turmoil before – but we’re here to talk about it. So that should give us some strength. We say at the Passover Seder *Vehi she’amda lanu* – “And it stood with us” – it’s a promise that we will withstand our enemies, who have tried to destroy us in every generation, starting from Egypt and through all the empires.

So we Jews are a good example, not just for Jews but also for the entire world for what it means to be at the edge of the abyss and come through, survive and thrive.

Not like that Communist leader who said, “Yesterday we stood at the edge of the abyss, and today we took a large step forward.”

We’re talking about jumping over the abyss and coming out stronger than ever as a result of the experience.

1. **Change Yourself, Change the World**

But survival cannot be our only goal. We have a big job to do.

If we all go out and buy a box of band-aids, there will not be any paradigm shifts or any true changes. We will just buy a little more time. But that won’t absolve us from the responsibility to do something about the problem – not directly in a political sense, but indirectly in our own lives, in microcosm.

Based on the principle that I stated earlier, when you change a little thing in yourself, in some way it impacts the larger world. So we can do many different things.

1. **Specific Suggestions**

I suggest the following:

First, learn the big picture. There is a big picture here, and there is a light at the end of the tunnel. That light is not like the pessimists tell us, the light of the on-coming train. The light at the end of the tunnel is an actual light. To see the light, to know the big picture, you must learn the Torah.

Second, keep informed about what’s going on, because the situation is likely to get worse before it gets better. Egypt is a big country, and there will be a lot of realignment. Already the unrest has spread to a dozen Middle-Eastern countries. No doubt, there’s more to come. Hopefully, God will be merciful, and it should all end peacefully and with the least bloodshed.

Third – and perhaps most important – is to do something proactive to help heal divisiveness among us Jews. How? For starters, perhaps each of us should make an effort to visit another Jewish community, unlike the one we are accustomed to. Perhaps each of us should invite to our Shabbat table new types of people, people who may be different than we are. Perhaps each of us could organize a monthly discussion group in our home or office, where new ideas are exchanged.

The time has come to create new platforms, engage in innovative dialogues, pioneer fresh interactions that bridge our diverse strengths. The time has come to try to unite as one big (perhaps not always happy) family, but a family nevertheless. A diverse family, a unique family, a family that is a model to other nations of accommodating diversity, or respecting all its members, and of bringing into this material world a spirit that is Divine. Amen.

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1. Exodus 35:1. [↑](#footnote-ref-0)
2. Talmud, *Berachot* 58a. [↑](#footnote-ref-1)