

"THE THINGS THAT UNITE US"

The theme suggested to us by the readings of this week is that of the unity of the Jewish people. Our Sidra speaks of the reconciliation of Joseph and his brothers. Our Haftorah, from the prophet Ezekiel, speaks of the future reunion of the two halves of the Jewish people.

I confess that the theme of Jewish unity is not always particularly exciting; old cliches seem to cluster about this subject like iron filings around the pole of a magnet. Like mother, love, and country, it commands universal assent, but few people feel they want to do much about it.

And yet, the problem is urgent. If we think clearly, not sentimentally, we will see that there are highly complex issues involved, that it is not simple at all, that we must learn to distinguish a number of subtle nuances. There is a desperate need for lucid, perhaps new, formulations. Of course, it cannot be expected that a sermon on the subject be definitive, yet the theme deserves treatment not only from the lectern but also from the pulpit. The congregation deserves a suggestion of guidelines, even if not all questions will be answered; even, indeed, if answers are not available for many questions.

The problem today is both old and new. It is old because ever since the brothers looked askance at Joseph, Jews have

been disunited. And it is new, because for the first time since the destruction of the Temple in the year 70, Jews who are completely loyal to the totality of the Jewish tradition -- Orthodox Jews -- are in the minority within the Jewish community. I address myself, therefore, especially to the questions of the relation here in the United States between Orthodox and non-Orthodox Jews.

Let me begin by mentioning two approaches which I reject. The first of these is the idea of complete separation, the demand that Orthodoxy go its own way, ignoring the majority of the Jewish community, except for an occasional ad hoc cooperative venture. Modern separationism has its roots in the Frankfurt school of German Jewish Orthodoxy. This was the school led so brilliantly by Rabbi Samson Raphael Hirsch, one of the most distinguished religious thinkers of modern times. Hirsch contributed mightily to Jewish thought. His concept of Torah im derekh erez, the blending of Torah knowledge and Western culture, is a sublime contribution to Judaism, and largely fashions the style and philosophy of our own existence today. But along with this ideal, there came a policy which argued for separation from the duly constituted Jewish community of that time -- the "austrits" idea, that of leaving the kehillah. Now, whatever may have been the justification for "austrits" a century ago, it is clear, I believe, that it is simply not relevant and not practicable and not wise for the United States

in the middle of the twentieth century. This policy has been firmly rejected by the Union of Orthodox Jewish Congregations of America, of which our congregation is one of the leading constituents; yet it remains the opinion of a number of Orthodox leaders and groups.

In fairness to them, let it be said that their position is highly idealistic. They suffer anguish, as do we, at the collapse of the religious standards of the majority. They do not foresee a future for them. In this, they may not be altogether wrong -- unfortunately. Thus, for instance, one of the leading theoreticians of the Socialist parties of Israel, Eliezer Livneh, himself not heretofore identified as an Orthodox Jew, surveys the American scene and concludes that only Jews who are intensely loyal to the tradition can ever hope to survive; he foresees the disintegration of the rest of the community in alarming proportions in the very near future. Reports this past week coming to the same conclusion have issued from one non-Orthodox Rabbi and a distinguished American Jewish sociologist. Hence, the argument of the separationist is that survival of Judaism requires separation from the Jewish community, so that the viable section shall not be pulled down together with those who are vanishing.

However, I disagree with this thesis for two reasons. First, Orthodoxy needs the non-Orthodox Jewish community. Our major Jewish institutions could not exist without the cooperation

of various non-Orthodox individuals. Without them, we could not support the State of Israel by ourselves -- not even the Yeshivot in the State of Israel by themselves! We could not, with our own resources, provide for the resettlement of Jewish refugees throughout the world. Second, and even more important, they need us! Precisely because they are threatened with extinction, because their future is so gloomy, dare we not abandon them cold-bloodedly. If we feel so anxious and struggle so valiantly to save three million Russian Jews from spiritual perdition, certainly we ought to be twice as anxious and work twice as hard to secure the religious destiny of six million American Jews!

There is a second approach that I submit is utterly unacceptable. For want of a better term, let us call it "indifferentism." It is the idea that all interpretations of Judaism, Orthodox and non-Orthodox, are equally valid. It is the attitude that is often expressed in that flippant phrase, "three branches." This assumes that the tree of Judaism has three equal branches, and one ought not to distinguish between them insofar as objective claims on truth are concerned. Orthodoxy, according to the view of indifferentism, is just another way of being Jewish depending on your upbringing and your taste. Hence, there is no problem of unity, because taste and family background ought never to stand in the way of national and ethnic unity.

As a genuine Orthodox Jew I must repudiate such a view

with all vigor. This is the kind of tolerance that is all too easy, and it issues from a lack of conviction, from an apathy to the issues under discussion, from a feeling that it really makes no difference what one's commitment is. It is easy enough for a person who does not take his religion seriously to be willing to accommodate all kinds of religious convictions. Were my Orthodoxy based upon sentimentalism, I might agree. Were I kosher because I like Jewish food or wanted my parents to eat in my home, I would go along. Were I the sort of person who attends an Orthodox service because I like the melodies, the sort of person who makes Kiddush because it is an esthetic and pretty ritual -- I might accept this thesis. But that is not Orthodoxy; in fact, that is not religion at all! That is nothing more than a kind of sacred charades. No self-respecting young man should ever aspire to become a rabbi under such conditions, because then he would become nothing more than a group leader conducting a religious "Simple Simon" game! To be Orthodox means to possess great convictions, to have a claim on truth, even while not disputing the right of others to assert their claims; it means a commitment to spiritual excellence. Orthodoxy is based upon a powerful belief -- worth dying for, and even worth living for -- in the integrity of Torah u-mitzvot, in the obligatory nature of Halakhah, in the revelation from Sinai and its particular meaning for us. It considers a breach of faith in these principles and practices as kefirah, as a denial of God Himself and all that is sacred to Judaism.

Unity within the Jewish community cannot -- nay, dare not -- be purchased at the price of abandoning this faith; just as the good will of the non-Jewish community dare not be acquired at the cost of surrendering our most sacred Jewish convictions. That is why an Orthodox Jew will appreciate the responsibilities of a non-Orthodox Jewish leader, be he the president of a secularist organization or the Rabbi of a non-Orthodox temple, grant him recognition as a communal leader in the Jewish community, as a spiritual leader of his congregation, as a person who has contributed notably to the Jewish community at large. But an Orthodox Jew cannot recognize the validity of the semikhah, the historic Rabbinic status as a Rav, of a non-Orthodox Rabbi. Courtesy and respect, even appreciation and deference, cannot disguise the fact that no Orthodox Jew can accord this special historic title of Rav -- which implies, as the semikhah states, "Yoreh Yoreh," that he teach Torah and be an expositor of Judaism and a decisor of Jewish law -- to one who has rejected the foundations of this Law and has repudiated its uncompromising obligatory nature in the context of everyday life. Quite in opposition to indifferentism, the Orthodox Jew cannot accept as valid the credentials as a Rav of the non-Orthodox Rabbi, and is forbidden to use a non-Orthodox temple for services. Hence, we must reject both extremes: those who say that unity is impossible, and those who see no problem at all.

What then? I recommend that we recognize their legitimacy,

but not their validity. Legitimacy is a sociological category -- they exist, they are here as active members of Jewish society, and this reality must be accepted, affirmed and acted upon. Validity is a spiritual and intellectual judgment on the rightness of their claim. Hence, we must withhold our assent to the validity of non-Orthodox varieties of Judaism. But we do accept their legitimacy. They cannot be ignored. They are here, alive, and very active. In addition, they possess many virtues: they desire to survive as Jews, many of them have a profound love of Judaism as they understand it, they have sacrificed much for the State of Israel, they are charitable -- as has been the nature of Jews throughout history -- and their children can, may, and sometimes do, return to a life of Torah.

Hence, we must proceed by accommodating two great and historic commitments: one to the integrity of Torah, and the other to the integrity of Israel. Without these two commitments -- indeed, love -- we cannot fulfill our own destiny of the love of God. Hence, we must seek out the things that unite us, we must emphasize the elements that bind us, we must highlight the mutual relations that make us one people, brothers to each other.

In the great moment of confrontation between Joseph and his brothers as told in today's Sidra, Joseph revealed himself not once but twice to his brothers: the first time he failed, the second time he succeeded. The first time, he called out to them: Ani Yosef,

"I am Joseph!" Yet, surprisingly, it failed to spark the reconciliation for which he hoped. Instead, it had the reverse effect: nivhalu mi-panav, they were terrified, panic-stricken, and they recoiled from him. Therefore, he spoke to them again and said, geshu-na eilai, come close to me: Ani Yosef ahikhem, "I am Joseph, your brother!" Note that this time he does not say merely ani Yosef, "I am Joseph," but ani Yosef ahikhem, "I am Joseph your brother." It is only when he identifies himself as their brother, ^{when} ~~that~~ he affirms the bonds of brotherhood that have remained intact over all these years despite the various vicissitudes, that he effects a change in them. It is only when he says, "I am Joseph your brother" -- even though he reminds them that asher mekhartem oti mitzraimah, that they sold him into the slavery of Egypt, that they sinned against him and betrayed him -- that they return to their brother, weep, and embrace him. As long as there is an awareness of brotherhood, then all sins can be forgiven, all that has passed can be assigned to the past and brothers can enter into the future with a happier, more peaceful aspiration for reconciliation.

So must be our attitude: one of brotherliness, even if we reject many of the ideas and ideals of our fellow non-Orthodox Jews. I would recommend as the best and most concise statement of this position the words of Dr. Samuel Belkin, President of Yeshiva University, in a recent address:

"In the things in which we differ we can have no unity, nor should it be expected of us...particularly of Jews of Orthodox

orientation. In the things which we fully agree upon, and in which all of us are deeply concerned, we are the most united people in the world" -- such as working for Russian Jewry, for the State of Israel, and against anti-Semitism. Dr. Belkin continues:

We do not hate any Jew in our hearts. We love our neighbors regardless of whether they are Jews or non-Jews. But love without a commitment, without a responsibility, without demands, becomes a meaningless and empty phrase. You cannot love your country without your willingness to fight for its security and share in its defense. As an Orthodox Jew I have no hatred for any Jew whether he is observant or non-observant. I have the deepest affection for my fellow co-religionists. But when necessary, we shall at all times rebuke, demand, reprove, and above all, plead for a maximum Jewish education, for a greater Jewish consciousness, for better Talmud Torahs, for more Day Schools and Yeshivas, for more Torah learning, and greater Torah practice. But never in the spirit of hatred, vengeance or grudges, but in the spirit of genuine love and affection.

I might add that this holds true for every area of endeavor: we must join with other Jews in all matters where, without injury to our principles or practice, and without any form of consent to indifferentism, we can help stem the tide of assimilation, whether it be by fighting against Sunday laws, for better shechitah legislation, or in advancing the cause of the Hebrew or the Yiddish language.

Unity, then, means not to lose your identity, not to compromise your sacred ideals. I commend to your careful attention the words of the prophet Ezekiel in today's Haftorah. When God bade him perform the symbolic act of the unity of the two major parts of the Jewish people, the Kingdom of Israel, represented by Joseph, in the north and the Kingdom of Judah in the south, He tells him to take two sticks, upon one to inscribe the name of Judah and upon the other the name of Joseph, and to bring them together, to join them, so that ve'hayu la-ahadim be'yadekha, "They shall be as one in your hand." Note carefully that the expression is that they shall be ahadim, literally ones, not ehad, one. The two parts must be taken together; but they do not form an integral unity such that the previous individuality of each of them is eradicated. Unity means cooperation, not identity; ahadim not ehad. Neither the Galillean Jew in the northern kingdom nor the Negev dweller from the southern kingdom was expected to surrender his individuality, his specific style of life, his way of doing things or of speaking. He was to cooperate with his neighbor, not to submerge his identity until it disappears. This is our task too: ve'hayu la-ahadim be'yadekha, we must try to be ones with our fellow Jews, not ehad, not a new entity, ecumenical in its approach, which will cause each of us to forget our principles. Of course, we all hope and pray for that time at the end of days when all Israel will return to our God in Heaven, observing the Torah completely;

then, indeed, all of us shall be ehad. Until then, we must be satisfied with ahadim.

How can we achieve this oneness that yet preserves our individuality? The answer, as the prophet was told, is that he must hold both parts together be'yadekha, "in thy hand." This means that unity must be sought through practical cooperation rather than spiritual compromise. It means that in every endeavor we must try to cooperate, practically, institutionally, organizationally, so that our mutual ends, the things on which we agree, are attained.

Let us not look askance and treat lightly this idea of practical cooperation only. It is a great ideal. The same prophet, Ezekiel, in chapter 10, has a great vision, an angelic one. He sees the cherubim in a vision given to an angel. And then we read, va-yera li-keruvim tavnit yad adam taht kanfehem, there was seen in the cherubim the figure of the hand of a man under the wings. What is this human hand doing, so out of place, in the vision of angels? Our Rabbis (Lev. R., End 6) asserted that this yad adam is a symbol of gemillat hasadim, of charitableness and kindness of one Jew to another. The hand is a symbol of charity, when one man is able to open his hand to his fellow man in need; it is the symbol of hospitality, of greeting, it is a symbol of help and a willingness to participate in the plight of another human being. In this vision of Ezekiel, the angel Gabriel

has as his function the kitrug that issues from dinnim, the accusation that issues from a sense of justice against the people of Israel, the charge that we have sinned and have failed spiritually. What Ezekiel means, therefore, is that this accusation is blunted and dismissed when Jews demonstrate that they still extend a hand one to another, that they welcome each other and help each other and love each other.

There is much that can be said against Jewish people -- Orthodox or non-Orthodox. We are flawed in many ways. But as long as we practice gemillat hasadim, as long as we hold before our eyes the vision of tavnit yad adam, the helping hand, as long as one Jew is always willing to clasp the hand of his fellow Jew, we shall survive and remain in the good graces of Almighty God. For the time being, our unity must be one of ve'hayu la-ahadim be' yadekha, of two separate identities working together. But the time will yet come when all Israel will return to God and to Torah. At that time, we will cry out Shema Yisrael, ha-Shem Elohenu ha-Shem ehad, "Hear O Israel, the Lord is our God, the Lord is One," and He will answer to us, Mi k'amekha Yisrael goy ehad ba-aretz, "Who is like unto thee O Israel, one nation upon the earth."