

Torah Table Talk

Is Jewish Unity an Attainable Dream?

Parshat Vayigash

Genesis 44:18 – 47:27 / Ezekiel 37:15 - 28



*Dedicated by Frances and Buddy Brandt
in memory of their grandson, Oren Jacob Brandt-Rauf.
"He was the perfect child."*

Some time shortly after the destruction of the Jerusalem Temple in 586 BCE, the prophet Ezekiel stood before the exiled community of Jews in Babylonia. In his hands were two sticks: the name Judah was etched on one and on the other the name Joseph. Judah and Joseph, who played an important role in today's Torah portion in the reconciliation of the sons of Jacob, represent the southern and northern Kingdoms of Judah and Israel. The prophet held the two sticks together end to end and explained to the people that these sticks symbolized the future restoration of the Jewish nation as one kingdom with one ruler. God would again be Israel's God and they would again be God's people. Long after the exile of the ten northern tribes and at a time of disillusionment, Ezekiel articulated a vision of hope and renewal to his people. Despite their exile, they would become a single people serving God.

Ezekiel 37:19, 22

Thus said the Lord God: I am going to take the stick of Joseph - which is in the hand of Ephraim - and of the tribes of Israel associated with him, and I will place the stick of Judah upon it and make them one stick; they will be joined in My hand.... I will make them a single nation in the land on the hills of Israel and one king shall be king of them all. Never again shall they be two nations, and never again shall they be divided into two kingdoms.

Derekh Eretz Zuta 9

A house in which there is dissension will be destroyed in the end.

Genesis Rabbah 98:2

"Gather yourselves together . . . assemble yourselves" (Genesis 49:1). Jacob warned them against dissension, bidding them, "Be you all joined in a unified gathering." Thus it says, "And thou, son of man, take thou one stick, and write upon it: For Judah, and for the children of Israel his companions; then, take another stick, and write upon it . . . that they may all come to be joined in thy hand" (Ezekiel 37:16-17). Once Israel is joined in a single cluster, you may prepare yourselves for redemption. What follows directly (after this)? "I will make them one nation in the Land, upon the mountains of Israel" (Ezekiel 37:22).

Zechariah 11:7 – 14

And I will feed the flock of slaughter, you, O poorest of the flock. And I took for myself two rods; the one I called Grace (*Noam*), and the other I called Severity (*Hovlim*); and I fed the flock. Three shepherds also I cut off in one month; and I became impatient with them, and their soul also detested me. Then I said, I will not be your shepherd; that which dies, let it die; and that which is to be cut off, let it be cut off; and let the rest eat the flesh of one another. And I took my rod, Grace, and broke it, that I might break my covenant which I had made with all the peoples. And it was broken on that day; and so the poorest of the flock who paid heed to me knew that it was the word of the Lord. And I said

to them, "If it seems right to you, give me my wages; and if not, forbear. And they weighed for my wages thirty pieces of silver." And the Lord said to me, "Cast it into the treasury, the good price at which I was paid by them." And I took the thirty pieces of silver, and cast them into the treasury in the house of the Lord. Then I broke my other rod, Severity, that I might break the brotherhood between Judah and Israel.

Sifre, Deuteronomy 98 (An early Midrashic work)

"Do not cut yourself." Another reading of this verse is, "Do not break up into clusters." (Deuteronomy 14:1). Do not form many [small] clusters, but all of you stay as one cluster. "Do not break up into clusters." Do not divide in dissent against one another, lest you bring about "baldness" within your number, as Korach did. He divided Israel, making them into many small clusters, and thus brought about a *korhah*, "baldness," in Israel.

Tanhuma Buber, Nitzavim 4

"Ye are standing this day erect all of you" (Deuteronomy 29:9). When are you described as "standing erect"? As on this day when "all of you" are joined together in one cluster. "When His cluster [is one], He will establish it upon the Land" (Amos 9:6). In the nature of things, when a man picks up a cluster of reeds, can he possibly break them at one time? But if picked up one by one, then even a child can break them. Thus you find that Israel cannot be redeemed until they are one cluster, as is said, "In those days the house of Judah shall walk with the House of Israel, and together [in one cluster] they shall come out of the land of the north" (Jeremiah 3:18)

Questions for Discussion

1. Based on the passage quoted above from Ezekiel, how did the prophet view the division of the Israelite nation into two separate kingdoms? Do you think it was a realistic expectation of Ezekiel to hope for the reunification of the two kingdoms after the destruction of the First Temple?
2. Zechariah, probably influenced by his familiarity with Ezekiel, also uses the image of the broken rod in his prophetic vision. How does his vision contrast with that of Ezekiel? If we were to use this same symbolic act as a way of symbolizing unity and dissension in the Jewish world today what would the two sticks have inscribed on them? Why would Zechariah speak about the destruction of Jewish Unity?
3. There has always been dissension in the Jewish world from Sadducees and Pharisees, to Beit Shammai and Hillel, To Hasidic and Ashkenazic Jews. Is dissension necessarily a bad thing? How does dissension serve as a source of creative growth and thinking in the Jewish world? When does dissension become destructive?
4. In what areas of Jewish life do we need more unity and cooperation today? What positive and negative roles does the existence of separate "clusters" play in terms of the growth of Jewish community? Do you feel that the existence of separate movements in North American Jewry is still an important aspect of Jewish life or would we be better off if we could be *agudah achat*, a single cluster?

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and a desire to grow a Jewish soul."*