JEWISH UNITY

by Rabbi Berel Wein

The Torah this week deals with the topic dearest to modern Jewish leadership in the United States - Jewish unity. After having given up on its previous public-relations, slogan-based, sincere-sounding but not sincere-doing, campaign on Jewish continuity begun only a few years ago, the Jewish organizational machinery in this country has now cranked up its efforts to promote the new mantra of Judaism unity. When translated, this means tolerance, which in turn when translated again means pluralism, and which, when finally translated means anything goes, everything is Judaism and anybody is Jewish. All of this is happening in a Jewish world where the public representatives of those sections of the Jewish people, who are determinedly non-observant and militantly non-traditional and who see themselves to be on the cutting edge of every new social fad and cause and who call these causes and fads Judaism, are clearly destroying themselves demographically and Jewishly. And, they are not satisfied to do this only to themselves but are determined to bring down all of the traditions of Jewish life as taught and practiced over the centuries. And all of this is done under the guise of tolerance, forcing their will and agenda on Israel, the people and the state.

The old campaign for Jewish continuity failed because it was based on a falsehood. That falsehood was that one could achieve Jewish family or community continuity without demanding sacrifice or change of life-style. There is no need for weekly and certainly not daily synagogue worship, no need for at least minimal Sabbath observance, for intensive Jewish education, for stronger standards of social, business and sexual morality, in order to guarantee Jewish continuity. The motto of continuity will do it by itself. But that strategy somehow didn't work. So now we are on to the next undemanding, non-binding, easy-sounding slogan that will save the Jewish community from itself - unity. But, my dear friends, this slogan is also based on a falsehood - on an illusion, and will also find itself in the wastebasket with all of the other progressive and modern ideas that have been tried over the last century in America to guarantee Jewish survival.

This falsehood is illustrated in the reconciliation and unity between Joseph and his brothers as recorded in the Torah reading of the week. Joseph is forgiving and in a reconciling mood, but he nevertheless reminds the brothers of how they got themselves into this monumental mess. He states to them: "I am Joseph your brother whom you sold into Egyptian slavery." I didn't just happen to come to Egypt on a visit, nor am I particularly satisfied that my dreams have had to have been realized in this fashion and at such family expense. But the Lord ordained it so and I am able to be a savior now to my father and family. But none of this changes the fact that you and you alone sold me as a slave. Later in the Torah, Joseph will tell his brothers again that "you thought to do me harm,

but the Lord arranged the sale to be good and a blessing." Joseph does not shield his brothers from the statement that "you thought to do me harm." For family unity, to be lasting, it cannot be built on the obfuscation of facts and the ignorance of past family occurrences and the consequences of that behavior.

Let us look at the record of the past that has brought the proud American Jewish community to its knees, in this the hour of its greatest material affluence and most abject Jewish spiritual poverty. If we are honest as to what works in preserving a Jewish community - Torah study, ritual observances, Jewish pride and self-worth - and as to what does not work - feel-good prayers, avant-garde social issues, and sloganeering - Jewish unity may yet be preserved.

Shabat Shalom.
Rabbi Berel Wein

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