

UNITY WITH CAUTION

by Rabbi Berel Wein

In this week's parsha the Torah points out the danger of confusing unity with conformity. The generation of Terach, the father of Avraham, was ruled by a tyrant, Nimrod. It was the dor haflagah - the generation that ultimately divided itself into many different languages and cultures. That generation, fearful of another disastrous flood that would destroy it, resolved that by unifying all in executing a grand and all-encompassing project - the building of the great tower - it would be able to prevent divine punishment from striking it. Unity of people was necessary to even begin work on such a project.

So the world's peoples spoke only one language and spoke only of one way and one goal. This unity, which at first glance always appears to be so desirable, soon sank into a cold, ruthless and murderous conformity. Big Brother Nimrod controlled everything and everybody and anyone who dared to express a dissenting opinion - such as Avraham - was immediately consigned to the furnace of destruction. Nimrod and the dor haflagah is representative of Hitler's Germany, Stalin's Soviet Union, Kim's North Korea, the mullahs of Iran, Mugabe's Zimbabwe and all of the other dictatorial regimes that plague our planet. The drab conformity of imposed purpose, the stifling of the human spirit and the exploitation of the millions for the fulfillment of a cockeyed impractical ideal always lead to death, destruction and tragedy. The world needs many Avrahams and far fewer Nimrods.

The Jewish people also strive for a sense of unity. Over and over again we read and hear the exhortations for unity that flood our papers and media. But the Jewish people are blessed by its diversity of ideas and spirit. Though there are many in both the secular and religious world of Jewry who would impose conformity upon the rest of their fellow Jews if they could, the Jews are not built that way. Our unity of purpose is tied to Torah, the Land of Israel, helping each other when in need and attempting to be a moral force in the world. But there are different ways to achieve these goals and the vitality of Judaism lies in these different approaches.. And, it is because of these different approaches that its inherent resistance to enforced conformity exists. I do not think that there is a greater diversity in any section of Jewry than the one that exists in the religious, observant sector. Yet, the Jews that compose this core section of Jewry, in spite of political and even ideological issues of significant difference, still retain a certain sense of unity of purpose, behavior and affinity one to another. The Lord broke the conformity of the world into many languages, cultures and approaches to wisdom and service. The Jewish people were formed out of twelve different tribes that many times disagreed with one another on tactics and approaches to life and national success.

The lack of conformity in Jewish life should never be seen in purely negative terms. Our task is to preserve the basic unity of holy purpose amongst a nation of very diverse people, ideas and backgrounds. Not a small order, but one worthy of the children of Avraham.

Shabat Shalom.

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