

# THE CHALLENGE OF SEEKING THE UNITY OF THE JEWISH PEOPLE

BY RICHARD D. HEIDEMAN

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**It is evident that all sides have their qualms and issues with others, so we should constantly remind ourselves that what unites us should be far greater than that which divides us.**



*A reconstruction of the Temple's menorah, created by the Temple Institute in the Old City's Jewish Quarter. (photo credit: Wikimedia Commons)*

The Jerusalem Talmud describes the Jewish people as a body. As with all bodies, different limbs while having different functions and responsibilities, need to be moving in concert and unison for the unit as a whole to operate fully.

The year 2017 has presented various events, statements and actions leading to a clear malfunction and a series of miscommunications among the Jewish people.

Like the Talmudic allusion to the Jewish people of a body, each limb and part experiences the world differently from a multitude of angles.

Issues of prayer, conversion, politics, language and beliefs make it clear not only that Israelis and Jews in the Diaspora have different experiences but that on a number of issues we also see the world quite differently.

The challenge before us is what we can do to ensure a greater understanding within the Jewish community, in Israel, in the US and around the world, to mandate a deeper understanding about that which motivates and arouses those who approach central issues from opposing views and on opposite sides.

The parts of our community are not hearing one another; perhaps we are not even listening to each other. Indeed, the intolerance, lack of respect bordering on mistrust and the lack of willingness to compromise are creating a chasm that must be bridged as we face the future.

As Diaspora Jewish and Zionist leaders, we must understand that every statement, criticism and attack on each other's position only drives us further apart and makes unity more elusive. Moreover, as our disunity becomes more public, it is used by others outside our community as a means to achieve political points, resulting in greater dissent within the community as well as greater dissatisfaction with Israel. Our responsibility as leaders clearly is to encourage greater interaction and understanding of the challenges we face and to redouble our efforts to improve dialogue and create opportunities for discussion, exchange and, yes, candid but respectful debate.

It is evident that all sides have their qualms and issues with others, so we should constantly remind ourselves that what unites us should be far greater than that which divides us.

Jewish practice has traditionally placed a premium on giving and respecting voice as well as on robust discourse. Our history chronicles dissenting and opposing opinions for posterity in order to preserve a permanent record of our agreements as well as our differences and disagreements.

The challenge facing leadership is to respectfully face internal differences in a manner which is respectful and does not encourage or enable others to misuse and misinterpret the message to suit their own purpose.

Perhaps here lies an answer to this great challenge.

For those of us in the Diaspora committed to the Jewish and democratic State of Israel as the nation-state of the Jewish people at the center of our common core beliefs, it is important to confer with each other with greater care so that we understand the varying viewpoints of the differing segments of our community. This means avoiding vitriolic statements and terminology that are often misunderstood and misinterpreted by the press and cited by Israel's enemies as tools to demonize and delegitimize it.

Recent developments implore us to enhance both internal discussion and external dialogue between and among Israeli and American Jewish leaders to better understand the experience, reaction and boundaries of each to the other.

We can become more effective change-makers if we understand the various sides of an issue as it relates to the passionate and central topic of Israel, especially as perceived and experienced from both an Israeli and Diaspora point of view. Perhaps as a community we should seek a uniquely Jewish point of view around which we can coalesce and potentially agree, once given fair hearing and due consideration to the greater good. Perhaps the ultimate question should be: Is it good for the Jewish people? The enemies of Israel, Zionism and the Jewish people abound with hatred and determination to demonize and destroy all of us. Our continuing challenge is to not add credibility to those who deserve no credence, but rather to preserve and advance our commitment to the preservation and protection of the good name of Israel, Zionism and the Jewish people.

I remain personally convinced that with greater dialogue and mutual understanding we can heal the multiple and disjointed rifts in the unity of our broad, passionate and energetic community. This is not a time for disengagement but a time for greater engagement. Diaspora and Israeli leadership must be seen as forces for unity rather than division not only in public but in reality as well.

It seems patently clear that the Jewish people will flourish if we respectfully move in unison with each component offering its own vital contribution to the greater cause from its own set of experiences, views and viewpoints.

Our sages were clear about the challenge; it is up to us to fulfill this important mission.

*The writer is the current president of the American Zionist Movement and past president of B'nai B'rith International, and is senior counsel of the Washington law firm Heideman Nudelman & Kalik, PC. The views he expresses are his own.*