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BUILDING CONGREGATIONAL UNITY

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We knew a synagogue newsletter editor who believed it was essential at one point in the life of her congregation to plead for unity and civility by the members. She called on them for a “unifying” of their congregation, expressing her concern for their common future if their divisions persisted.

She wrote thoughtfully and courageously about “the inability of many members . . . to direct their discomfort or their dissatisfaction in a productive, direct, and healthy manner.” And she ended constructively with a call to “solidify and unify,” to “heal all wounds . . . , be direct with each other, considerate of each other, respect each other and, in all ways to live by G-d’s words.”

What can we learn from our wisdom tradition about healing intra-congregational conflict?

In Exodus 35:1 we read that, “Moses assembled all the congregation of the children of Israel. . . .” Rabbi Moses Sofer (1762-1839) teaches us that, “Moses assembled the people before giving them the commandments concerning the offerings of the Mishkan [i.e., the Tabernacle], to indicate to them that the unity of all the congregation of Israel is a necessary precondition for the building of the Tabernacle. The Shekhinah [i.e., the presence of God on earth] is not able to dwell where there is disunity and [destructive] controversy.” (Torat Am, Shemot)

Thus, as one of our modern commentators tells us, “The construction of the Tabernacle is to be an enterprise of all Israelites.” (N.M. Sarna)

But why, exactly, should the “unity of all the congregation of Israel” be a precondition for the

survival and success of a synagogue and maintaining the presence of God among the people?

It is said that, “Ordinarily, if a man takes a bundle of sticks, he is unable to break them. But if they are taken out of the bundle and broken one at a time, even a small child can do this. And so it is that Israel cannot be redeemed unless they are all bound together.” (Yalkut Shimoni, Nitzavim)

It’s not necessary to dwell on the outcomes of *disunity*—in our family, congregation, workplace, community, or nation—since they are virtually all unlike the Torah’s image of God.

What, then, are the building blocks of congregational unity?

First, congregational unity cannot emerge in the absence of relationships among a significant segment of the membership. The nature of such relationships differs, of course, depending on the setting. But non-relational unity is an oxymoron. And when cliques, exclusive groups, or fifth columns dominate the life of an organization, community, or institution, unity by definition has been sacrificed to the interests of factions and individuals.

The hallmark of this relationship-building activity is *gemilut chasadim* (גמילות חסדים—loving-kindness)—face-to-face contact by many members of the congregation that deepens their relationships, and through which they come to know one another as neighbors, becoming familiar with and then sympathetic to each other’s pressures and hopes.

Second, unity requires a competent and trustworthy process of conflict resolution. When we come to know each other, we inevitably find that although we have much in common, we also have diverging experiences and interests. The bellwether of unity on virtually every level of society has been a juridical system in which conflicts reflecting differences of experience and interest may be resolved without violence or other destructive behavior. In congregational life it is no different.

All organizational life reveals a cycle of cooperation, competition, conflict, and—hopefully—negotiation, which leads to new forms of cooperation. It is the stage of negotiation, in effect the juridical process of resolving tensions stemming from different experiences and interests, that makes possible the unifying of purposes among disparate, conflicting individuals and groups in an organization.

For the cycle of conflict resolution to work fully, that is, to evolve through negotiations to a new form of unified cooperation, two things are necessary. There must be on the part of members a willingness to talk about their experiences and interests—first informally, then formally, openly clarifying their wants and their justifications for them. And leaders must be willing to listen and explore informally, and then formally to weigh and adjudicate competing interests according to a *higher vision*, a vision that is widely shared, guided by more than their own preferences and prejudices.

Proverbs (29:18) forewarns that, “Without a common vision, we shall perish.” The lesson is that a common community vision portends the end of “*division*,” which literally denotes a boundary or partition that serves to divide or keep separate.

What are the basic elements of a common vision?

They include a shared picture of the future, reflecting widely owned objectives that will help achieve that future, methods that will make possible the accomplishment of those objectives, and a division of labor that assigns tasks fairly.

How do we derive a vision for our congregational community? Is it enough if everyone adds their own personal preferences and prejudices—based on whatever particular or peculiar experiences they’ve had in life—and the majority rules?

That could, of course, produce some interesting, even innovative results—but not necessarily a vision for *Jewish* congregational community based on the accumulated wisdom of our people. Our

vision, obviously, must reflect Torah, the touchstone of our peoplehood.

Thus the hallmark of this conflict resolution process is *kriat Torah* (reading of Torah)—linking congregational Torah learning to the pressures and hopes of the congregation’s members and their contemplation of action together to address them—which brings us to final requirement for building congregational unity.

The purpose of Torah study is not abstract intellectual stimulation or even text mastery per se. The purpose of *kriat Torah* is *po’eil tzedek l’shem shemayim*, doing righteousness and justice for the sake of heaven. It must enable us to respond in the service of God and Am Yisrael (the Jewish people) to the challenges we face.

A congregation that is a *kahal poalei tzedek*—a community of doers of righteousness and justice, doing *mitzvot* together in the synagogue and larger community, to uplift their own lives and the lives of others—is engaged in activity of such great moment that it has little or no inclination to engage in petty bickering and self-serving manipulation.

So we conclude that without *gemilut chasadim*, which enables us to know the pressures and hopes in one another’s lives, those conditions remain, for all practical purposes unknown to us as a community. Without *kriat Torah*, the source of a common vision that reaches beyond our autonomous ambitions, we find it impossible to achieve consensus on common communal purposes. And without a commitment to be a *kahal poalei tzedek*, we inevitably forsake the divine purposes that can unify us in action as a community.

What happens when a synagogue fails to pay attention to these three building blocks of congregational unity?

When the congregation encounters a significant challenge or crisis, it finds itself immobilized, unable to reach consensus and take effective action. Leaders call formal meetings, convening the existing factions within the organization. They discover that, despite hours of debate and even decision-making, they are unable to move ahead as a unified body, fully exploiting the combined spirit and resources of the membership.

Upon reflection it becomes clear to them that they can’t agree on a common vision, objectives, methods to achieve them, and a division of labor. This shouldn’t be a surprise. Under the circumstances, why would they expect to achieve such progress without having invested themselves in our three Torah building blocks?

- *Gemilut chasadim*,
- *Kriat Torah*, and
- *Po'eil tzedek*.

How can we begin to heal divisions and build congregational unity?

Our newsletter editor suggested the first and most important step of all:

As our tradition teaches us, we must give one another the benefit of the doubt—*always showing kindness and respect to one another*—no matter how drastically different our experiences and interests.

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