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Why Jewish Division is Good

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ר' מנחם זאב בן פנחס ז"ל
Emil W. Heman
who loved and supported Torah learning.

Bamidbar

Why Jewish Division is Good

Two Jews – three opinions. But if they are Ashkenazim and Sephardim, for example, then it's a totally different culture. For example, Ashkenazim do not eat rice on Passover, but Sephardim do.

But that's not the only difference. There are differences between Ashkenazim and Sephardim in virtually everything. For example, the nusach, the format of our prayers, is different between Ashkenazim and Sephardim—and even though we both pray three times a day and say the same prayers, there are still differences in the order or even text of the prayers.

Even in something as fundamental as Kaddish are there differences in nusach—and not just between Ashkenazim and Sephardim, but within Ashkenazim themselves. For example, whenever a non-Chabad guest visits a Chabad synagogue and has to recite Kaddish, he gets mixed up because the nusach used by Chabad adds four more words that are not found in the standard Ashkenazic nusach: "V'yatzmach porkanei v'kareiv m'sheekhay." Ashkenazic Jews don't recognize those words and get mixed up.

As for the Sephardim, not only do they have those words, but they have even more words in their Kaddish than the Chabad Kaddish.

When it comes to reading the Torah, the same Torah portion is read in every synagogue in the world each week. But the Trope, the cantillation notes that dictate how the text is to be chanted, are completely different between the Ashkenazim and Sephardim. And within the Sephardim themselves, not everyone keeps the same customs. The Taimanim, for example, the famous Jews from Yemen, have customs that are different than the rest of the Middle Eastern Jewish community. For example, they have, or at least until very recently used to have, the custom of men marrying more than one wife—a custom that was stopped over 1,000 years ago in Europe and has not been kept by any other Jewish community, Ashkenazic or Sephardic, ever since.

And it's also true when it comes to pronouncing words in Hebrew. For example, the blessing "Borei Pri Ha'Gafen" recited in the Kiddush prayer over wine uses the soft "g." But the Taimanim, unique among the Jewish world community, pronounce it as "Jafen," with a "j" sound.

And while we're talking about Kiddush, let's point out that even the Kiddush prayer has differences of custom. There are Jewish communities that have the custom of standing while saying Kiddush on Friday night, while others who specifically say it while sitting. There are those who have the custom of singing the "Shalom Aleichem" before the Kiddush, while others make sure not to sing it at all.

Here's another difference in custom. Here at our Chabad center, we follow the custom of holding the Torah up in the air *after* the reading of the Torah. But there are communities that do this custom also *before* the reading of the Torah.

Not only that, but when I wish people "Good Shabbos!" each week here, there are sometimes people who politely ask the rabbi whether he's really supposed to be saying "Shabbat Shalom!"

But it gets even better. In Israel, you'll find a billion synagogues on every street. Why? Because one is a Syrian Sephardi synagogue and another is a Moroccan or Egyptian Sephardic synagogue. And then you have the Ashkenazic synagogues—and within those, you have the Chasidic and non-Chasidic, and within the Chasidic there are dozens if not hundreds of synagogues simply because there are dozens if not hundreds of small Chasidic communities, each with its own unique signature nusach and set of customs.

And in the Sephardi camp you have just as many subcategories. A Chabad colleague once met a Persian Jew who said he came from the Iranian city of Mashhad. The Persian was surprised that the Chabadnik had heard of Mashhad, and asked him how he knew about it. The Chabad rabbi told him that he had grown up in Israel, where not too far from his house there was one synagogue for Jews from Mashhad, another for Jews from Tripoli, another for Romanian Jews, one for Jews from Germany, and another for Jews from Soviet Georgia—and so he had learned geography growing up.

So we can ask: Why are there all these different customs? Wouldn't it have been better if the entire Jewish community all kept the exact same customs and prayed in the same nusach? Why must the Ashkenazim pray with the Ashkenazic pronunciation and the Sephardim with the Sephardic pronunciation? Isn't it time to give up on all these little details for the sake of peace and unity?

But the most interesting thing, my friends, is that in Judaism, not only do we not try to erase these separations and differences in custom, but on the contrary—the Torah actually encourages them.

The Talmud (Tractate Pesachim 50b) tells us about Jews who lived in the Lebanese cities of Tzur, the modern-day Sour (or Tyre, in old English), and Tzidon, the modern-day city of Saida,

Now, the distance between Tzur and Tzidon is not particularly far. So the Talmud tells us about a certain family in Tzur that had the custom of not traveling to Tzidon on Friday, the eve of Shabbos, so that the traveling would not interfere with their Shabbos preparations.

However, the problem was that Friday was market day in Tzidon—the day on which all the merchants, or anyone who had anything to sell or buy, for that matter, would converge on the marketplace; not being in Tzidon on Friday was thus a big sacrifice. So the Talmud tells us that the family members approached the great Sage Rabbi Yochanan and asked him to allow them to travel to Tzidon on Friday. They argued that their ancestors had been rich and had been able to stock up on everything they needed without needing the market day—but they, the descendants, could not afford this luxury.

But Rabbi Yochanan said to them: “Your ancestors already accepted this custom upon themselves, as the verse states, ‘Listen, my son, to the rebuke of your father, and do not abandon the teaching of your mother.’ ”

And this became a foundation stone in Judaism—that everyone must adhere to the customs of his or her ancestors.

Now, this seemingly does cause fights and disputes. Why indeed not unite everyone together? Let everyone give up a few customs, and lo and behold! Peace upon Israel!

Some will argue that this great range of customs is a result of our exile and Diaspora. When the Jewish Nation was exiled from its land to every corner of the earth, there were no telephones and certainly no Internet, and so differences of custom and community were formed within the Jewish Nation.

But the truth is that these differences existed even before the onset of exile—which finally brings us to this week’s Torah portion.

In this week’s Parshah, Bamidbar, we read how G-d commands Moshe to count the Jews—to conduct a census. But the interesting thing is that the Torah counts each of the Twelve Tribes separately. The Torah tells us precisely how many men there were in the Tribe of Reuven—64,500—and so on with each tribe separately.

Additionally, the Torah sharpens the lines separating the Tribes, setting physical borders for each. When the Jewish Nation would camp in the desert, each Tribe had a delineated campground in which it was required to stay.

For example, the Tribe of Yehudah, Judah, would camp to the east, with the Tribes of Yisachar and Zevulun right next to them. To the west would camp the Tribes of Ephraim, Menasheh and Binyamin—and each had to recognize its place and not mix with other Tribes.

On top of that, each Tribe had its own unique flag; the commentators on the Torah tell us what the colors and images of each flag were. For example, the flag of the Tribe of Yehudah had a lion on it, because Yehudah was compared by his father Yaakov to a lion. The flag of Yisachar had a sun and moon on it, because the tribesmen of Yisachar were experts in astronomy. The flag of Zevulun had a ship on it, because the Zevulunites were merchants—and so on and so forth with each Tribe.

But how about one single flag for the entire Jewish Nation that would literally unite all the people under one banner? There is no such thing in the Torah.

Not only that, but when the Jewish Nation entered the Holy Land, the Land was divided into 12 territories, one for each Tribe.

But this division began not in the desert, but at the beginning of the Exodus from Egypt. On the verse in the Torah portion of Beshalach (14:21), “and the water split,” commentator Targum Yonasan says: “The water split into 12 paths in order to accept the Twelve Tribes of Jacob”—even at the Splitting of the Sea, each Tribe had its own path, its own synagogue, its own customs. Even then each Jew was already seeking out his own congregation.

Now seemingly, this is not understood at all. Here you have a nation leaving Egypt, a country under which they all suffered equally. The Pharaoh had not differentiated between a Jew from, say, the Tribe of Dan and the Tribe of Asher. To him, they were all “Hebrews”—he repressed and tortured all of them equally. In effect, their suffering united them—and here, at the very moment of freedom, at the best opportunity to maximize that great feeling of unity and obliterate divisions, the Torah goes and divides them up into Tribes.

But perhaps we can say, my friends, that this is the secret of survival of the Jewish Nation.

If everyone were to keep the same exact customs, no one would feel that they relate to them. There’s no individuality here. It belongs to everyone. And so people wouldn’t feel responsible for them. Because when the customs belong to everyone, they belong to no one.

On the other hand, when a Jew has customs that are exclusive to his community, and he knows that these are what make him unique, then he guards them passionately. He takes pains to teach his kids to remember that these customs are kept only in his family. Yes, everyone celebrates Passover—but their family has a unique custom. And since he knows that no one else has this custom, then he can’t depend on the teacher to teach his kids this custom, because the teacher will have never heard of this custom. Therefore, he will make every effort to drill this custom into his kids so as to guarantee that his family tradition is not lost over the years.

Indeed, the Jewish Nation paid a heavy price for its division into Tribes. There were many wars among them throughout our history. But it is specifically this division that has protected the survival of the Jewish Nation throughout all the years.

True, nobody today knows which Tribe he or she belongs to. But our tribalism was never lost. The idea that the Jewish Nation is divided into different groups exists even today—the different communities you'll find in Israel and everywhere else are essentially a continuation of the division by Tribe that we had in the Era of the Tanach.

My friends: Let us take a lesson from this historical fact, and commit ourselves to protecting and transmitting our every custom and tradition.

Let us remember that it is up to us to transmit our traditions to our children just like our fathers and mothers transmitted them to us—so that they may in turn transmit them to their children.

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