A Sephardic Perspective: Addressing Social and Religious Divides within Israeli Society

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Social gaps, between different groups and populations, are a fundamental problem that the State of Israel grapples with today. In many cases these divisions are physical as seen in many Israeli neighborhoods and communities where diverse populations live separately, refusing to integrate and live together. These rifts are evident in many walks of Israeli life, and what is common amongst all of these social gaps is that they cause extreme isolation and social alienation between people living in the same society.
Thus we find a strong divide between religious and non-religious as well as a plethora of identities on the spectrum between ultra orthodox and secular: Nationalist-Ultra Orthodox (Hardal), National Reli gious, Traditionalist, Reform, those who see Judaism as a culture and a small group of those considered strictly secular.

In addition to this, other aspects of identity complicate these social divides. For instance, there are divisions based on ethnicity in Israeli society. Sadly, more than 60 years after the inception of the State of Israel, country of origin is still sociologically meaningful when trying to understand divisions within Israeli society. Two different groups can be distinguished amongst Israelis: those whose roots originate in Europe and the United States and those whose roots are found in Asia and Africa. Even for those who are second and third generations Israelis, individuals who were born in Israel or whose parents were born in Israel, ethnic origin plays a significant role. One might expect religious identity to function as a unifying force for the Jewish people, because this identity might bring Jews of different ethnic backgrounds together, despite diverse countries of origin and denominations. Ironically, the reli gious element in Israeli society is the cause of an extreme conservatism in this realm. We have made great progress regarding these social gaps in civil society, while in religious society, especially in ultra-orthodox circles, the situation is catastrophic; it seems that the more strict you are with regard to reli gious observance, the harsher the ethnic constructs are, to such an extent that there are many phenomena in this community that could be described as racist.

These gaps are also evident and equally serious in Israel's socio-economic and class divides. Every year we are informed of the deepening gap between groups based on their economic background. If traditionally society was divided into three groups: the upper, middle and lower classes, a third of the population in each class, we now see a gradual polarization of society into two groups, the rich and the poor. The middle class is slowly shrinking to approximately one quarter of the population.

There are other areas where these gaps are apparent (for example the distribution of populations in Israel's peripheries and centers) but here we will discuss an important and currently relevant element of the Sephardic tradition throughout the generations which should be instrumental in addressing these social challenges: the ability to be inclusive and the strength of a worldview that rises above classifications and social barriers, resulting in communal unity, a force that is dwindling in modern society.

Three Kinds of Religious Commitment

Initially, it is important to note that in Sephardic communities in the Diaspora there were never divisions between *Haredi*, Secular or Reform Jews; everyone was considered Jewish, some observed many of the mitzvoth and some performed fewer mitzvoth. All of these Jews should be working towards becoming better people and better Jews. In many areas of today's Israel, we can find communities such as these, groups with a typical Sephardic character. These communities can be found in cities and settlements where there are large concentrations of Sephardic populations.

In these communities, you can divide the population up into three groups, according to their commitment to a Jewish lifestyle: a. Those who keep what is written in the *Shulchan Aruch* to the best of their ability; b. those who keep some of the *Mitzvoth*, usually the more experiential aspects of the Jewish faith such as *Shabbat* services at the synagogue, Shabbat dinner with the family or Jewish holidays and lifecycle events, including those specific to the Sephardic Jews such as public celebrations in memory of a saintly rabbis, *Ta'anit Dibur* (abstention from speech), *Yom Shekulo Torah* (A day of Torah Study), *Brit Yitzhak* (Pre- circumcision ceremony in honor of a newborn son) and memorial services etc; and c. those who practice Judaism from afar, those who are satisfied with keeping Kosher and attending synagogue on Yom Kippur.

The common denominator between these groups is that they respectfully interact with ease during communal events and other occasions. The connection between these groups is not artificial because the people themselves do not see each other as belonging to different worlds. Instead, they see themselves as one family, while recognizing the fact that there are those who keep this or that mitzvah with more or less dedication, and they value those who keep more of the *Mitzvoth*. Each of these groups feels connected to God in different ways and no one excludes any community members based on observance level or religious devotion.

The second group is made up of people who feel close to Orthodoxy even though they are not considered full Sabbath observers. Nevertheless, they respect the tradition and feel a strong connection to the rabbinical world and to the figure of the Rabbi, especially those Rabbis who take part in the communal events we described above.
It is interesting to understand how such a large population of people and their families, who do not keep the *Shulchan Aruch*, and who have no intention of doing so, feel so connected to those with a higher level of religious observance. It can be said that the rabbinic world is connected to these communities, and to those who feel a strong obligation towards religious observance. These rabbis also

have a special wisdom that guides those who have blatant 'religious shortcomings' to make sure that no matter how a person keeps the mitzvoth, he or she still has a place within the community, a place where one can feel at home in synagogue and not like a visitor. This *Masorti* or Traditional Jew can even participate in the prayers by reading some of the psalms during the service. He will not hesitate to have a torah *Shiur* held at his house as a way of honoring a sick relative; he will not consider this hypocritical or insincere. He will never hear from the rabbinic circle to which he is obligated "Who are you kidding?", or "Stop being such a hypocrite!", or "Where are your true loyalties?" Absolutely not! In our communities we know many people such as these and we make them feel welcome as they are an integral part of our community.

How do you create this feeling of belonging? First of all, it is important to make sure that the more observant people in the communities do not dominate the synagogue and community events. One group is not better than the other and instead there should be respect for all of those who wake up early and take the time to get to synagogue for *Shacharit.*

For example, there was a man within our community who did not attend synagogue on a regular basis but did know how to pray. He would lay *Tefillin* every morning at home before going to school and we would see him at community events and sometimes on Shabbat. When this man's father's memorial (*Hazkara)* was coming up, he prepared for the reading of the *Haftorah* and the synagogue community was very supportive of this. He read the *Haftorah* beautifully.

The Network and the Ladder

In order to understand how a community is able to function with such diversity it is important to understand how our spiritual world is designed. There are two ways to understand the development of community: the ladder model and the network model.
In a ladder community, it is clear to each member who is "above" him or her, with regard to spiritual efforts and ability to speak his mind within the community. Below the Rabbi, who is the highest reli gious leader of the community (*Mara datra*), are those considered more torah observant (*Torani'im*), those that are scrupulously devout. The person at the bottom of the ladder will have a hard time participating in communal events or expressing his opinions within the group, he will feel like a visitor in his own community as compared to his friends who are higher up on the ladder. The person on the lower levels of the ladder feels that the fact that he is accepted into this community despite his low ranking on the ladder is already a *Hesed*, an act of benevolence on the part of those higher up and he will always feel like a guest. He will never feel truly part of the community.

On the other hand, in the network model, everyone lives together in a close-knit community, connected together in one group. There are some areas of the network that are weaker and some that are stronger but everyone is interconnected within the network. An example of this is when a rabbi plays a central role within this network, and using his esteemed position, he is able to significantly influence community processes. On the other hand, those who are not so important and who have very little connection with those in the network do not feel out of place or lesser than anyone else within the network. They are equal to other members of the community. As we mentioned in the previous example, these individuals are aware of the unique power they have within the community, as compared to other more prominent community members with regard to *Mitzvoth*. This outlook, even if it is not considered a method, is very similar to communities of the Sephardic traditions, and this perspective is advantageous because everyone fits in, and at the same time, communal leadership is preserved. Sometimes we will find a mix of these two models, with the rabbi of the community above the community as a neutral unifying force and the rest of the community an equal part of the network.

Between *Man and God* and *Man and Man*

The world of *Mitzvoth* is divided into two different categories, those between man and God and those between man and his fellow man. In the religious world there is a tendency to define one's level of reli gious observance based on the fulfillment of *Mitzvoth* between God and Man, such as *Shabbat, Kashrut,* family purity, prayer etc. The reason for this is clear: the *Halachic* boundaries are clearer in this realm, and it is easier to define who is 'in' and who is 'out'.

While we do not want to disregard the importance of these boundaries, there is a scenario in which we can emphasize the significance of the *Mitzvoth* between man and man, for example, supporting a friend in need financially, spending quality time helping those in need or performing simple acts of *Hesed* (benevolence). We should encourage, public responsibility for what happens within the community, from helping a neighbor find a job to visiting a sick or elderly person. *Mitzvoth* related to trade such as *Yosher* (honesty in commerce), *Amida b' Diburo* (Keeping your word with regard to business transactions) etc, do just this. These are *Mitzvoth* that can significantly broaden the number of community members who keep *Mitzvoth*.

For example, there is a man in our community who gets up early to pray at dawn at home and then hurries to work, works all day, comes home to help his family get ready for dinner, does homework with his kids, and helps put them to sleep and then he stops by the synagogue for the *Arvit* service and participates in the evening torah lesson where he falls asleep throughout. This man is active in the community *Hesed* committee and helps distribute food to the poor and provides homework help for disadvantaged children in the community. This man does not know a lot of torah and he even goes to work without a *Kippa.*

On what rung of the ladder should we place this man? In some communities he has a good chance of being very low on the ladder because he does not keep enough of the mitzvoth between God and man. Indeed, this Jew still has a long way to go in his spiritual journey (as do we all) but it is essential to recognize the entirety of his actions within the community. When we treat individuals such as this man with respect, it creates a feeling of belonging and can encourage an improvement in mitzvah observance.

There is an interesting example in our community in Southern Israel where teenagers do not come to prayers on a daily basis (instead, they opt to lay *Tefillin* at home). We see them in full attendance during Elul for *Selichot*. How should we react to such a thing? Someone outside of our community could say to them that they are mistaken if they think they can "blackmail" God, if they think that they can make up for a whole year of not attending services by waking up early for *Selichot* around the time of Yom Kippur.
We should view these young men in a different way. We should recognize that during the month of Elul these young men feel a closeness to their Creator, a feeling that is strong in their hearts; this is the feeling that encourages them to come to synagogue and to recite the *Selichot*. These boys do not see this as a contradiction to their behavior throughout the year. There is no doubt that we should try to influence these young men to come to services throughout the year, but we should also value what they do now and be aware that it represents the strong connection they maintain with God.

As we review these examples, we realize that what causes these gaps between different groups in Isra eli society is that we emphasize the differences between us instead of concentrating on the similarities. Using the worldview described in this essay, we can see a future for Israel that is united and not segregated. This is true in religious circles (as we said about valuing all of the Mitzvoth – those

between God and man and those between man and man), this is true in the human realm (sociological definitions becoming irrelevant or inaccurate for example, *Kippa* wearing as a sociological indicator of faith or within those who wear *Kippot*, each *Kippa* indicating allegiance to a specific group) and this is true in the connection between life and serving God – do you achieve the desired behavior by severing ties with the professional world and withdrawing into the world of the *Yeshivot* and *Kollels*, or do you achieve this behavior through unifying a professional life with a life of learning, torah, community and family all guided by a strong belief in God. The idea of *Torat Eretz Israel* sees the torah as something open to physical, material life. Paradoxically, this idea was preserved in Sephardic Jewish communities *outside* of Israel and we are obligated here in Israel to develop the elements of a Jewish society where we serve God in *Eretz Yisrael*.

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