Divisiveness: Thoughts for Parashat Re'eh

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Angel for Shabbat, Parashat Re’eh

By Rabbi Marc D. Angel

“You are children of the Lord, your God. You shall neither cut yourselves *(lo titgodedu*) nor make any baldness between your eyes for the dead” (Devarim 14:1).

The Torah prohibits idolatrous practices such as gashing oneself as a sign of mourning. The prohibition is *lo titgodedu*, do not cut. The Talmud (Yevamot 13b) expands the prohibition to mean, you shall not cut yourselves into separate groups (*agudot agudot*). The goal is to serve God as a united people.

Maimonides recorded a halakha based on the Talmudic interpretation (Hilkhot Avodat Kokhavim 12:14): **“**This commandment also includes [a prohibition] against there being two courts which follow different customs in a single city, since this can cause great strife. [Because of the similarity in the Hebrew roots,] the prohibition against gashing ourselves [can be interpreted] to mean: Do not separate into different groupings.”

While halakha generally allows for different traditions and courts even in a single city, the ideal is for each tradition and court to be respectful of the others. For example, it is fine to have separate courts for Sephardic and Ashkenazic communities living in the same city. The prohibition would apply if the courts denigrated and delegitimized each other. Respectful co-existence is allowed; disrespectful “cutting” of the others is a violation of the halakha.

Within the Jewish people, we have remarkable diversity of traditions, opinions, and political views. A problem arises when the diversity is not respectful and responsible but descends into vilification and outright hatred. This group believes it has a monopoly on religious truth; that group believes it alone has the correct view on what's best for the State of Israel. Liberals and Conservatives don't merely disagree, they engage in disparaging and even physically attacking each other. When people violate *lo titgodedu*, they are acting in ways akin to idolatry. By cutting each other, they cut God out.

But *lo titgodedu* is a concept that goes beyond the Jewish People; it relates to humanity as a whole. The divisiveness, violence, hatred and warfare that plague our world often stem from the "cutting off" and "cutting down" other people. The biblical teaching of the universal brotherhood/sisterhood of human beings--all created in the image of God--is set aside. Instead of focusing on our universal humanity, the forces of hatred and violence see the world as a battle ground where they can maintain superiority and power.

Martin Buber pointed out the obvious crisis facing humanity today: "That peoples can no longer carry on authentic dialogue with one another is not only the most acute symptom of the pathology of our time, it is also that which most urgently makes a demand of us" (*A Believing Humanism*, p. 202).

Lo Titgodeu is a warning to the Jewish People and to the world. When we "cut" ourselves into self-enclosed and self-righteous groups, we ultimately "cut" ourselves off from our fellow human beings…and from God.