A National Beit Midrash

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Imagine how tragic it would be if political and religious strife between groups of Israelis
heated up so much that it led to civil war and the division of the state into North and South Israel.
How dangerous would it be if Israeli leaders would resort to murdering their political rivals or
calling-in foreign armies to intervene into domestic affairs. But all this and more occurred and
reoccurred during the first and second Temple periods with devastating consequences.

As a student and teacher of ancient Jewish history, I feel proud, confident, and optimistic

about the state of the Jewish people today. Yes, we have our share of serious challenges, internal tensions, and external threats. But it could be and has been so much worse! Israel's economic and military power in relation to its neighbors is exponentially greater today than ever before. Its government ensures stable transition of power and guarantees freedom to all its citizens. With the tragic exception of Rabin's assassination, political violence remains minimal.

During Second Temple era, sectarian divisions tore apart the Jewish people, with each faction denying the legitimacy of the other. The Pharisees and Sadducees followed different calendars and so celebrated the holidays on different days. The Sadducees denied the authority of the Pharisaic extra-Scriptural traditions while Samaritans denied the authenticity even of the Prophets and Ketuvim. Each group called upon first the Greeks and then the Romans to intervene on their behalf, which the enemy nations did with enthusiasm, leading only to loss of independence and further destruction and exile.

One of the underappreciated miracles of modern Judaism is that all Jews follow the same calendar. Some will drive to synagogue on the holidays, others will travel away from synagogue on their day off, and yet others will devote themselves piously to the traditional halacha. But the key point is that the day all Jews will choose to observe or not observe will be the same day of Yom Kippur, Sukkot, or Passover.

Every denomination of Jews from Hassidic, Sephardic, Reform, unaffiliated and the rest of the gamut are Rabbinic Jews deeply influenced by both Scripture and the Oral

tradition of the
Talmud and midrash. Whether aggadot are read literally or metaphorically, and whether one
studies Talmud for theory or practice, Hanukah is ubiquitous, and Hillel is everyone's hero.
I see here an opportunity of historic proportions to bring unity, even without uniformity,
among Jews and bridge geographic and ideological divisions. Imagine a worldwide conversation,
focusing on the parasha, on the Talmud, on our classical philosophic treatises, and beloved

aggadot, rich with debate, questions, and answers. Here is where Medinat Yisrael can be a leader
not only as a Start-up nation, not only as the military and moral power that leads the world in
destroying evil, but also as the spiritual and intellectual guide for Jews and non-Jews everywhere
that it was originally destined to be.

Unfortunately, we find tensions growing between Haredi, Hiloni, Dati Leumi and other
sectors along the religious spectrum in Israel. By contrast, denominations in America live with
tolerance side by side and even cooperation on issues of joint concern. A few years ago, the UJA
invited rabbis from various denominations: Reform, Conservative, Orthodox, and a Sephardic
rabbi (me), to meet with Israeli counterparts with a similar range of views. The Israeli contingent
was surprised about how well we got along and wanted to learn how to bring that sense of
mutual respect even while maintaining differences back to Israel.

Even so, there exists currently a sufficiently large and strong majority of Jews in both
Israel and Diaspora who are traditionally minded, looking for greater Jewish literacy, wanting to

incorporate meaningful ritual in their schedules, seeking protection and warmth within close communities, aspiring to greater spiritual heights, and feeling a pull of historical forces toward their ancestral birthright and future. Every individual Jew and every concerned voice has something to contribute and learn from one another.

At a time of greater uncertainty and external threats, this sense of unity among the Jewish people is something in our collective power to build toward in the next decade. Its success does not depend on any foreign government or international opinion but rather our own ability to organize around a vision. A shared conversation around our sacred texts, philosophies, laws and stories in the spirit of a national Beit Midrash will stand as a bulwark against any anti-Jewish voices that seek to harm us physically and spiritually.