

When were we last together?

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"You stand this day, all of you, before the Lord your God; the heads of your tribes, your elders, and your officers, all the men of Israel, your little ones, your wives, and the sojourner who is in your camp, the hewers of wood and the drawers of water..." (Deut. 29:10.)

When were we last together? Really together? The leaders and the ordinary people, the security forces and the manual workers, the men, women and children, all together in the presence of the Lord? Unfortunately it is usually our enemies who lump us all together - whether in their prejudices or, literally, into camps and goods wagons. Whereas we ourselves glory in our individuality and pluralism. Each of us wishes to be individual - just like everyone else! And let us be honest, even in the bad times there were ghetto police and Kapos, there were collaborators and profiteers and unworldly idealists. There were those who sought to resist, and those who saw no point. Real unity was hard to achieve.

It is hard to bring a society together, truly together. Each thinks as an individual and has their own individual interests. A Mob is different, but a mob can only exist for a short duration, and is not under any control - at least, not really. It can be influenced, but not controlled. So what holds such a group together, and what sort of group would it be?

Nationalism is a relatively modern idea, but it worked for many decades. The idea is that a line is drawn around a geographical area and it is colored in on the map and given a Name and a square of colored cloth. You are then proud to belong to the British, or French, or German, or Italian, or whatever Nation. It doesn't matter that you are in grinding poverty, working long shifts with no security and no medical care and no pensions, maybe even with no vote; it doesn't matter that the aristocracy or government can send you off to a senseless war and have you mown down as just another replaceable pawn - you are PROUD to be British (or whatever) and you will fight to the death for the right to be so. You might even cross dangerous oceans and mountains to claim some obscure bit of ice or jungle in the name of your country - to the bemusement of the local tribesmen or penguins. Because then this new bit of territory belongs to 'your' country and it can be coloured in on the map to show that, and you can export your language and machines and social structures.

A basic part of Marxism/Leninism was an awareness that you can draw the lines differently. You can use Social Class rather than Geography to define a group. The idea is that a working man in one country has more in common with the working men in another country, than he does with the middle classes or the aristocracy in his own. Not surprisingly Nationalists find this idea worrying, not surprisingly the anthem becomes the "Internationale" - and the slogan becomes "Workers of the World, Unite!"

Of course a major flaw in this concept is that members of the working class are, on the whole, poorly educated, and the attempt to remove national boundaries (even by force) does not so easily remove differences of language and culture. The usual result is, sadly, a corruption of the revolution and the creation of a new tyranny, trying to force people into uniform roles and uniform souls. Whilst the effort to unite workers in a specific industry at a regional or national level into a Trades Union has often succeeded, at least for a while - miners, steelworkers, boilermakers - all that is achieved is a sense of group solidarity and identity at a fairly local level. At

an international level, it is unlikely that a British steelworker would willingly fight for the right of an American or Chinese steelworker to take his own job.

There are other models. International Capitalism works on the basis that national borders are irrelevant if trading across them will bring a profit. It is represented these days not by Jewish bankers but by multinational corporations so complex and diffuse that - apart from certain 'Empires' owned by media magnates or shipping owners and the like - no-one really knows who owns anything anymore. All is divided into percentages held by investment funds, pension funds, holding corporations and the like, and lies at the mercy of currency and stock dealers. We know who might be the former or current CEO of an entity like BP, or American Airlines, but not to whom it 'belongs'. Nevertheless, in some countries one owes one's loyalties to the Corporation, to the firm, even at the expense of one's own family life.

Another way of expressing unity is through an Ideology or a Religion. Christians speak of 'Christendom', Moslems of the 'Umma' - and Jews of 'those other Jews over there.' There are pious Protestants who feel a greater affinity to other members of their world Church than they do to other citizens of their own country, but who happen to have a different faith or none.

And we? Jews are split, not just the traditional Ashkenazim and Sephardim but I think we need to add the Eydut Mizrach and the 'Anglo-Saxim' and of course Israelis - one could define these groups very superficially until eighty years ago in terms of whether they preferred to communicate in Yiddish, in Ladino, in Arabic, in English or in Ivrit. Now we have Israelis and Non-Israelis and Yordim (ex- or partial-Israelis); within Israel there are Sabras and long-standing immigrants and new immigrants (and non-Jewish immigrants). There are of course divisions between 'these Orthodox' and 'those Orthodox' (not to mention 'the other Orthodox', whom no-one mentions) and then the Masorti and the Reform and the Liberal and the Reconstructionist and the Humanist and the Secular Jews.... We have Zionists and Non-Zionists and Anti-Zionists and Post-Zionists and 'Maybe-One-Day-Zionists' and 'Only If I Have To Be' Zionists. There have always been rich Jews and poor Jews, Jews with some (often limited) worldly power and those utterly powerless. There have been clever ones and stupid ones, dreamers and schemers, analysts and - well, analysts.....

What holds us all together? What is this strange, remarkable Glue that makes us react when, somewhere, "Oy, man schloggt Jidden"? What makes '*kol Yisrael areivim ze lazeh*' - that we all feel somehow responsible for each other? Is it really the Sworn Covenant, between God and God's people, valid through all forthcoming generations, as mentioned in the very next verses, whereby 'God will establish you as His people, and you will take Him as your God'?

Frankly, I don't know. I know only that there is Something there - something independent of race or class or nationality or culture or geography or language or even of faith; some feeling of a joint destiny, a destiny one may try to writhe away from but which keeps one in thrall nonetheless. Something which non-Jews often sense, more than we do ourselves. But Something.

Let's do our best, our very best, to hang on to it!

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Rabbi Dr. Walter Rothschild

Landesrabbiner for Schleswig-Holstein, Germany;
Rabbi of Or Chadasch, Vienna, Austria.