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## LEARNING FROM OUR FAILURES

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**Failure to Establish and Maintain Standards / Failure to Practice Prudence / Failure to Settle in Eretz Israel / Failure of Judaism to Adapt without Splintering / A Basic Underlying Consensus / Some Positive Trends / The Expression of Neo-Sadducean Judaism**

Peoples as well as individuals can learn at least as much, if not more, from failures as from successes. Successes are usually just enjoyed; rarely are they analyzed to see what made them work. Failures, on the other hand, if we are aware of them (and we are not always aware of them), bring us up sharp and lead us to learn what we can do to do better next time. The real test of a successful community or polity is whether or not it has self-correcting mechanisms, not whether it always gets things right the first time out. In order to develop those self-correcting mechanisms, it must learn from its failures.

### **Failure to Establish and Maintain Standards**

For the Jewish people as a polity, there are at least four areas of failure from which we can learn. One is our

failure to establish and maintain standards now that we have both power and pluralism. Like it or not, we have returned to power from powerlessness, and we have pluralism and are living with it. Now we have to face the problems that both bring, including the problems of establishing and maintaining standards of how we utilize power and of how we harness pluralism.

Pluralism by itself is no more of a self-justifying activity than is power. Pluralism is a reality, a necessity for human development in democratic societies. None of us would wish to do without it, just as we do not wish to do without the power that is necessary to achieve control over our own destiny. Morally, however, pluralism is more of an instrument than an end in itself, a means to reach some higher goal.

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### **Failure to Practice Prudence**

Second is our failure to practice prudence in what we do. Our tendency is to be absolutist in our public positions. This may be a habit we acquired when we were powerless and, having no responsibility, could dream undiluted dreams. Our visions could be absolutist visions because we were never called upon to carry them out. But the failure to practice prudence now that we can and must take action within the new world of power and pluralism in which we live moves us to adopt "all or nothing at all" positions which are impossible to achieve in the real world. This affects us in every one of our activities -- in our politics, our religion, and our community activities -- in all too many ways. It is especially dangerous whenever issues of real importance are at stake.

The great success of the Zionist movement in our time has been the degree to which it managed to overcome this absolutist proclivity of Jews in favor of greater pragmatism. That is how we finally got our state. But even though we have been able to be pragmatic, we still have not learned to be prudent. Until we have prudence as well as pragmatism, we are going to be the authors of many of our own problems.

### **Failure to Settle in Eretz Israel**

Our third failure is the failure of the Jewish people to settle in sufficient numbers in Eretz Israel. We would not be concerned about the situation in Israel the way we have to be now were there one or two million more Jews in the land, if 10 or 20 percent of those Jews now living in the diaspora would have chosen to settle in Israel.

Not that we lacked opportunities that challenged us to do so. First we were given the Balfour Declaration which, along with the British conquest of the land, opened a window of opportunity after World War I before the Arabs turned hostile, and we did not come. Then we achieved the establishment of the State and the opening of the doors to all Jews

freely and we did not come. Then we won the Six-Day War and established ourselves in the entire land west of the Jordan, and we still failed to take proper advantage of our opportunities. Now we are going to have to make hard decisions that we would not have to make if we had taken proper advantage of the reestablishment of the Jewish homeland.

### **Failure of Judaism to Adapt without Splintering**

A fourth contemporary area of Jewish failure is that we have failed to adapt our traditional religion without breaking it into denominations. In other words, we were not able to show sufficient flexibility within a basically very flexible religion to create the necessary adaptations that would have kept us from having to break into what at first were branches of Judaism and now seem to be hardening into denominations. There is a congregation in Philadelphia that prides itself on being named and insists on being referred to as "Reform Temple Knesset Israel." At one time its denominational emphasis was an anomaly. Reform, Conservative, and Orthodox Jews considered themselves part of a common Judaism, however different their interpretation. Today we are finding in more and more cases that the movements are defining themselves as denominations. They ask: What is good for our movement? What is the ideology of our movement? Not, what do we add to the common understanding of Judaism? This is the common failure of all Jews no matter what their religious persuasion. Maybe it was inevitable under contemporary conditions, but it is still a failure.

### **A Basic Underlying Consensus**

If one looks closely at Israel since the start of the Arab uprising in December 1987, one sees that in fundamental matters there has been a wall-to-wall closing of ranks. There has been an overwhelming diminution of confrontation, for example, in the religious sphere. Ultra-Orthodox demonstrations on Shabbat and extreme

secularist retaliation provided Israel's hottest area of conflict until early December of that year. We then saw a setting aside of differences for the period of the crisis.

We have even witnessed a similar phenomenon in the attitudes of "hawks" and "doves." For example, when Ted Koppel visited Israel with his Nightline television program, we heard Haim Ramon, a noted "dove," take on and reject the extremist position of the Palestinians, even though he believes that a proper negotiated settlement should include a Palestinian state alongside of Israel. When he spoke, he sounded like any member of the Likud. This is not because he was retreating into an atavistic shell under Arab pressure; he was showing the basic underlying consensus that Israel has in matters of its survival that the Jewish people shares, that we can fall back on when necessary. We have to learn from that reality and not let surface divisions -- expressed at a high decibel level -- delude us about our basic oneness.

Another example of this basic shared consensus could be seen at the last meeting of the annual symposium held on the anniversary of the death of former Chief of Staff David Elazar. Every year his friends and comrades hold a study day at Tel Aviv University devoted to defense and security issues -- a secular but very Jewish adaptation of the religious tradition of studying sacred texts in memory of the deceased. Those who come are the top brass of the army, half of the government, and the retired generals who led Israel's forces to victory in five wars. When the closing speaker, Yitzhak Rabin, failed to arrive on schedule, Mordechai Zippori, director-general of Israel's Social Insurance Administration, a retired senior IDF officer and former cabinet minister, got up and led community singing. All those generals, including five or six former chiefs of staff, and all those senior officials from across the political spectrum all sat and sang the old Zionist songs together for twenty minutes until Rabin appeared. In a different age they might have davened

together; singing together had some of the same character.

To take another example, anybody who closely observes our soldiers in the territories sees them struggling with the moral problems that are inherent in such an indeterminate situation. They know that they must do their duty, but they also have the moral scruples we would expect of Jews and they must somehow reconcile these. One young soldier, a medic in the tank corps, was serving in northern Samaria where he and his comrades were the daily target of stones, bottles, metal bars, and molotov cocktails. Their basic orders were not to respond unless their lives were actually in danger. The Arab response to their self-restraint was not to show similar restraint but to consider it a sign of Jewish weakness and to redouble their efforts.

One day this soldier was hit by a molotov cocktail thrown by one of the Arabs. Fortunately it failed to explode but the bottle cut his leg severely. In the process of this assault by hundreds of Arabs against a relatively small number of Israeli soldiers, the soldiers fired back and one of his buddies shot the Arab who threw the molotov cocktail. The wounded soldier, as a medic bound by his oath to save lives, then proceeded to literally save the life of the fellow who had just thrown the bottle at him. He administered first aid, took him to the closest hospital (a Jewish hospital in Afula), and stayed with him until he was out of danger. Only then did the soldier, this writer's son, go down to have his own leg attended to.

What upset our soldiers was not the job they had to do but feeling that they were being vilified by certain circles in Israel, in the American Jewish community, and by the foreign press at a time when they were struggling hard to do their duty and also to keep their moral standards.

### Some Positive Trends

There are a number of other positive trends which seem to be emerging as we learn from Israel's current crisis. First, it now appears that we are witnessing the

emergence of a reasoned debate with regard to the future of the territories. We are moving away from messianic arguments one way or another. The messianic voice of Gush Emunim does not carry much weight among many people anymore, even among those who believe we should stay in the territories. By the same token, those who believe that giving the Palestinians a state will automatically bring peace also have little credibility. Both arguments -- for unilateral evacuation, on one hand, or annexation, on the other -- are still heard along with various other proposals. However, the debate is now beginning to be conducted in a more reasoned and prudential manner to ask what is most likely to secure the very difficult aims of Israel and the Jewish people.

Reasonable people can differ as to what Israel's best course of action is. The real problem is that we have not been able to get to a reasoned debate. If this change becomes a precedent, encouraging us to have reasoned debates about other issues, including pluralism issues, it will be a very positive thing.

Second, the last few years have seen an upsurge of concern for Israel's Arabs on the part of Israel's Jews who have hitherto neglected them, by and large. The Arab citizens of Israel were an unseen people, not so much discriminated against but unnoticed. Now there is emerging a new recognition of the presence of Israeli Arabs and for dealing with a kind of pluralism that most Jews both in Israel and the diaspora did not want to acknowledge existed.

Third, we have witnessed the establishment of higher standards of constitutional rights and procedures for a nation under siege. The constitutional discussion that has been going on in the country and the Israeli Supreme Court's expansion of its powers of judicial review are also part of this trend.

Between 1967 and 1977 there were thousands of Arabs deported from the territories by the Labor government.

Compare that to the few dozen who have been deported so far during the Arab uprising. Not more than a few dozen were deported in the whole time since 1977 when the Likud took power. Why? Because in the early days then-Defense Minister Moshe Dayan made deportation a clear instrument of government policy and there was no one to stop him. Then Israel's Supreme Court stepped in and ruled that there had to be hearings and this made it impossible to just whisk people across the border. The whole policy was changed by judicial review since it could no longer be conducted in the same way. (In this writer's opinion, deportation is a more humane way of punishing offenders than shooting or incarceration, but that is another question.)

Fourth, there have been similar developments in other fields. The fact is that the national unity government has functioned rather well on most issues, even though on one big issue they cannot see eye to eye at all. The national unity government is really Israel's "Odd Couple," like the Neil Simon play. The two partners are very different but circumstances require them to live together because they have no alternative. Here again we see where Jews have the capability of reaching pragmatic solutions, but the way they function together, with the noise, the confrontations, and the leaks, is disappointing, to say the least.

### **The Expression of Neo-Sadducean Judaism**

One of the lessons we can draw from all this is the realization that we are seeing struggles for expression of what may be termed "neo-Sadducean" Judaism. Classical secular Zionism wanted the re-establishment of a Jewish state to make the Jews like all the other nations. The great step toward Jewish normalcy in our times brought about by the revival of Jewish statehood has not been to make its Jews normal in that sense, but has been to restore the possibilities of a principled and systematic pluralism in Jewish life.

In the days of the First and Second

Commonwealths, when we also had states, there also were different approaches to the fundamental questions of being Jewish. In the Second Commonwealth, the groups reflecting these approaches became known as the Pharisees, the Sadducees, and the Essenes. The Pharisees founded what we know as the halakhic system. They are the fathers of the line of traditional Judaism that is now expressed in Orthodoxy in its various forms and in authentic Conservative Judaism -- those groups that seek to build a Jewish life rooted in the continuity of halakhah (Jewish law).

The Essenes were those who went off into the desert. They saw the larger society as inevitably corrupt and believed it was necessary to build a new society in the desert, including only those capable of true holiness, that is to say, the saving remnant. With one important difference, the Israeli kibbutzim were an Essenic movement. Only because they were in the vanguard of the resettlement of the land did they entertain hopes of building the whole society in their image.

The Sadducees were those whose Jewish benchmarks were the polity and the Temple, in other words, the organized structures of Jewish political and religious life. They were no less "religious" than the other two groups, but understood their religious obligations differently -- less comprehensively or punctiliously and more oriented toward the public dimension of Judaism.

With the destruction of the Second Commonwealth, the Essenes were no longer protected by a Jewish political entity so they were overrun and disappeared. The Sadducees had no state and no temple, and they disappeared. The Pharisees survived because through halakhah they had developed a brilliantly portable Judaism. For 1800 years, Pharisaic Judaism was the only viable Judaism that we had. There were differences of opinion on halakhic development within the Jewish community and within the Jewish people, but basically we were all Pharisees. We accepted and lived within the binding framework of halakhah.

The restoration of the state, the culminating feature of the modernization of Jewish life, has meant that it is possible once again to have Essene and Sadducean expressions of Judaism. We see this new reality echoed not only in the state of Israel, where what has been described as Israel's civil religion is essentially Sadducean, the concern with the protection, economic and social advancement, and moral improvement of the state. Neo-Sadduceanism has spread to the diaspora as well. We see it in the new community leadership which has taken over in the diaspora in the last thirty to forty years.

The issues just discussed, the confrontations in Israel from which we should be learning, reflect the issues of the neo-Sadducean agenda. The way they have to be addressed suggests that we are dealing with a Judaism which is now different, which is one of the reasons why pious moralities do not ring true. They do not confront the gut issues.

Neo-Sadducean Judaism has to confront the gut issues. Confronting those issues raises serious problems, but also brings real benefits. As we have discovered, at least since the Holocaust we have no choice as Jews but to confront those issues. Now that this neo-Sadducean Judaism has emerged as a way to be Jewish, it is up to the neo-Sadducean Jews to start thinking through the questions of power and pluralism that its very existence raises.

One paradox has developed in the wake of the emergence of neo-Sadduceanism. Neo-Sadducean Judaism emerged out of Zionism and reflected the political culture of several generations in which Zionism was the main source of ideological energy for the Jewish people. Too many of the reporters and correspondents who have come to Israel to cover the troubles in the territories have no knowledge of basic Zionist history. Human memories are very short and many who come to Israel fresh and see the lush landscape, think that we drove the poor Arabs out of that lush land. They are simply unaware of the

fact that there was no lush land here until we came. So periodically we must remind ourselves of our foundations in order to remember our successes.

Unfortunately, Zionism today is no longer the principal source of ideological energy for the Jewish people. The dilemma of the future of the territories is a reflection of this. Many of those who are prepared to relinquish them do not do so reluctantly, in the name of prudence and comity with our Arab neighbors, but act as if we have no rights in the land. Even those who see in Zionism the impetus and impulse for ideological energy today come up against other forces which also strike strong chords in the Jewish people. These are the problems of living in a world with a state that is no longer a state-in-the-

making. Zionist ideology alone is not quite capable of dealing with those problems.

It is imperative for the Jewish community to come to grips with the divisive elements, to bring the Jewish people together once again. To do this we must consider the failures that have accompanied our return to power and our embrace of pluralism.

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