



UNITY OF A NATION

In the midst of the Corona pandemic – perhaps because of it – something amazing happened. For the first time in almost 20 years, a national unity government was formed. Yes, there were many complications and machinations along the way, and the final formulation is challenging enough to make almost everyone unhappy. At AIPAC we used to say that if both Left and Right were not happy with us, we had done something right. The same principle holds true here. There is something unique about a coalition that includes both the Charedi and Labor parties and has agreed to both annex the West Bank and hand the ministerial portfolios of housing and economy to the Left.

There were many articles exploring why Benny Ganz, who had numbers on his side, and why Bibi Netanyahu, who had time on his side, agreed to a unity government. Each had both personal and political reasons, and each negotiated fiercely for what was primary in his own mind. However, I believe that at some point both men also realized that unity was necessary for a country engaged in an unprecedented fight against a viral pandemic. These men didn't need to unite because only together could they wisely and thoughtfully design the perfect strategy for containment and exit; but rather because Israeli citizens were simply exhausted – by isolation, by anxiety, by uncertainty – and ending the political struggle with a unified government was a way to positively resolve at least one distressing national issue.

The idea of unity during these challenging times was not only aspirational but also inspirational for many. Israeli citizens came together – as one nation – to help one another. Medical students in the north visited chronically ill patients to ensure they got the psychological and medical support they needed during their extended isolations; whole neighborhoods participated in baking goods for local health care workers; singers and entertainers offered their talents free online to massive Zoom audiences; people who still had jobs gave their government-issued checks to those less fortunate. There was a real sense of all of us being in this together, that only with a unified stance will we continue to remain strong in the face of this invisible enemy.

Unity extended beyond just the Jewish citizens of Israel. The Israeli government and the Palestinian Authority have been cooperating fully throughout this pandemic. The Israelis transferred critical medical supplies to the Palestinians and invited them in to help in East Jerusalem. There were frequently scheduled meetings between the Israelis and the Palestinians not only about health issues but economic concerns, as well, as the Israeli and Palestinian economies are intertwined in significant ways. A joint “war room” was even established.

The one weakness in terms of *achdut* – unity – was the rise in animosity directed at the Charedi population. Yes, the community did not respond quickly enough to social distancing rules, and there were some very bad

Charedi players, but in general, as soon as it was understood, the overwhelming number of Charedim took the health directives very seriously. They were the ones paying the price for their delayed response, with over 75% of the cases in Jerusalem and close to 50% of all cases coming from their own community. With limited access to the internet and media, their slow responses, while frustrating, are understandable. And the reminder message sent by this community to all of us – that we need to worry about our souls as much as our bodies, is not a trivial one.

As we come to the holiday of Shavuot – after multiple layered counting: the omer with its own sadness, and our Corona counts where we also lost too many – we need to remember its critical message of unity. Moshe comes to Bnei Yisrael to offer G-d's Torah and “all the nation answered together.” It was because of this unity that we were given the miracle of the Torah. Thousands of years later we united again after a different miracle – the 1967 war. On the Shavuot of 1967, every demographic was represented as they visited the Kotel: “*kibbutz* members and soldiers rubbing shoulders with Neturei Karta” reported the Jerusalem Post. After our own war against Corona, we need to remember the import of our unity – it may be complicated and difficult, even frustrating – but it is a critical element to strengthening both the nation and the country of Israel.

Dr. Sharon Goldman is a Vice President at Bar-Ilan University, and a former AIPAC Northeast Deputy Regional Director