

Rabbi Chaim Navon



A Day of Historical Perspective

French Prime Minister Charles de Gaulle once wondered aloud to his aides: “How can you run a country that produces 246 different types of cheese?” Israelis are rather restrained in the realm of cheese, but how can one run a country that produces so many kinds of arguments?

Many Israelis say there has never been so much hatred between us. They are wrong, but I wonder why a lot of people feel that way. In the not-too-distant past, we went through an intifada, major terrorist attacks, the assassination of a prime minister, the expulsion of Jews from their homes... so, *Baruch Hashem*, the situation is much better today. What is it about the current reality that makes it seem as if the quarrels and arguments have actually intensified tenfold?

I think there are several explanations for this, and one of them is surprising: we really do argue more about certain things, precisely because we have become closer.

Freud called it the “narcissism of small differences.” The closer and more alike people are, the greater the small differences between them appear. Think of the arguments that sometimes come up between family members around the Seder table. The antagonists are celebrating the same Seder together, with the same foods, around the same table – and that is precisely why they are fighting.

“Religious” and “secular” have become closer. Religious educators complain that many students no longer define themselves as truly religious, but “on the religious spectrum.” If I want my students to be *ovdei Hashem* with all their hearts, this is a worrying phenomenon. But this is a widespread trend, not only expressed among the religious.

Many seculars are no longer really secular, and they too are joining the religious spectrum. If the popular Israeli singer Omer Adam refuses to perform on Shabbat and says a *shehakol* blessing during a live

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Is this good or bad? It may be part of a dangerous trend of blurring identities, and it would have been appropriate to criticize it sharply if not for one fact: there is a religious spectrum in Israel, but there is no national spectrum in Israel. Many Israelis vaguely define themselves on the religious-secular axis, but very few vaguely define themselves on the Jewish-Arab axis. A number of intellectuals have tried to advance this idea, as if a vague definition of Arab-Jews is possible in Israel. Public response in both nations is close to zero.

This is not self-evident. After all, this is exactly the problem Diaspora Jews face: increasing ambiguity on the Jewish-Gentile spectrum. The fact that in Israel there is no such national spectrum gives the

religious sequence new significance: it not only dims definitions, but also sharpens definitions. It blurs the definition of “religious,” but sharpens the definition of “Jew.” As the common denominator of the Jews in Israel expands, it becomes more apparent that we are all Jews.

Paradoxically, this convergence to a traditional-Jewish common denominator may intensify arguments. Years ago, there were two clear camps in Israel: the religious right and the secular left. Shimon Peres called them: “Jews and Israelis.” The struggle was over whether my camp would defeat your camp. Today, there are no longer two camps, but a spectrum. This may make the struggle more bitter because it focuses on the identity and character of the common denominator. The struggle is no longer us-or-them, but who will determine what we are. Each side feels that if the other camp wins, not only will it lead the country, but my children will start thinking and living like it. And so precisely as we come closer, the arguments become more bitter.

This is understandable, but not justified. When viewing another’s face from close up, even the most beautiful faces in the world seem crushed and scarred. We lack perspective. Tisha B’Av is a day of historical perspective, a day in which we look at our lives not through the here and now but through the lens of eternity. And we learn that arguments between brothers are tolerable, as long as they do not erase our fundamental brotherly love.

Brotherly love is not *chinam*, free. It is neither cheap nor easy. So why not give it up? Because of what Mark Twain would answer, when asked in his old age how he was: “Excellent, given the alternative.”

Rabbi Chaim Navon is a renowned author and educator.