



### UNITED IN DIVERSITY

**I**N ISRAEL AND WORLD WIDE THE JEWISH PEOPLE IS FACING AN IMMENSE CHALLENGE. Yet we are not alone. G-d is with us, and He has given us our beautiful and sacred Torah as a constant source of wisdom. It is natural and right for us to turn to it for guidance, whether in times of joy or when we are feeling anxious.

But where should we look? The Torah is vast: the Written Torah and also the Oral Torah, contained in hundreds or even thousands of volumes. However, every week there is the specific Torah portion, read in synagogues round the world. Our Sages suggest that this should be our starting point in drawing daily guidance for life from the Torah. What advice does this week's Sedra<sup>1</sup> provide as to how to think about our current situation?

The opening words of the Sedra are very striking: "You are standing firm today, all of you, before G-d: your leaders, the heads of your tribes, your elders, your officers, every Jewish man, your children, your women, the proselyte in your camp, the hewers of wood and drawers of water".

These words imply three basic concepts: strength, ie: standing firm; diversity; unity. Translated into a simple message the Sedra is telling us that despite our great diversity we should all be unified together, and then we will be able to stand firm and nothing will be able to dislodge us.

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The Sages of the Midrash comment with a classic image: if there is a bundle of sticks tied firmly together, no-one can break it. If the sticks are loose, a child can break them one by one<sup>2</sup>.

One obvious question is: if we are indeed so diverse, which today is patently obvious, how can we actually achieve any semblance of unity? How can we be anything other than separate sticks, each going our own frail way?

Here we come back to the Torah itself. It is the Torah which grants us our identity as Jews. It is also the Torah which provides the underlying basis for unity in diversity.

Each person is different, indeed - each person is unique. Yet all these very different people are inextricably linked by the Torah teachings which bond them together - even if many people are as yet not fully aware of those teachings and perhaps do not follow them properly.

Every step forward in observance of the Torah and its laws helps join us further together with the entire Jewish people who are governed by those laws - whether or not they actually keep them all this moment. In addition, our duty as Jews is to help others be aware of our Jewish heritage and learn to enjoy expressing it in their own lives. This will further bond all of us together.

Conversely, an underlying sense of unity will help us understand the Torah in that way which indeed bonds us together as an entire people, rather than seeing it as dividing us into 'secular' and 'religious'.

We are indeed diverse: but we can be unified. And then we will be strong, in a way which will bring peace and fulfilment to all humanity.

1. Deuteronomy 29:9-31:30. 2. Midrash Tanchuma, Nitzavim, end of sec. 1. See also the Lubavitcher Rebbe's *Likkutei Sichot* vol.2 pp.641-44.

Torah teachings are holy - please treat this page with care

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SEDRA NITZAVIM – VAYELECH

**DIFFERENT BUT ONE**

Eli reached deep into his pocket and pulled out the shopping list. It was Thursday, and Eli's mother needed him to pick up a few things for Shabbat. *Let's see, Eli thought. I'll have to go to the bakery for challah, and the grocery for fruit, and the wine-seller for grape juice.* Eli quickly planned his route and then set out with his shopping-basket.

The door jingled as Eli entered the bakery, and the smell of freshly baked bread wafted out. Moshe the baker was behind the counter and greeted him with a smile. Eli picked out two large warm challahs and tucked them under his arm. The paper bag crinkled and the delicious smell followed Eli outside the store and down the street. "Shabbat shalom!" the baker called after him.

*I wonder what it's like to be a baker, Eli thought. It must be fun kneading dough and braiding the loaves, and taking the warm challahs out of the oven, and helping people make a tasty meal for Shabbat.*

Down the street was Gilah the grocer. He loved her store and all the colourful fruit that was piled up outside. Many people were picking out fruits and vegetables for Shabbat. Eli selected some crunchy apples and ripe green grapes and Gilah weighed them on her scale. "Shabbat shalom, Eli!" she called as he left the grocery.

*I wonder what it's like to be a grocer, Eli thought. It must be fun making all those piles of fruit and vegetables, and using the scale, and helping people make a tasty meal for Shabbat.*

Next was the wine-seller, Simon. Eli looked at the rows and rows of bottles that were lining the walls. Deep purple, red and white wine and grape juice glinted through the glass bottles. "Just grape juice today, Simon," Eli said. Simon wrapped the grape juice bottle in a sparkling silver bag and handed it to Eli. "Shabbat shalom!" Simon said to Eli as he put the bag in his shopping basket.

*I wonder what it's like to be a wine-seller, Eli thought. It must be fun to know about the different kinds of grapes that made the different wines. It must be fun to put the bottles on the shelves and watch the light glinting off the glass. It must be fun to help people make a tasty meal for Shabbat.*

Then Eli had a strange thought: *I wonder what would happen if all the store owners switched places for one day. Would the grocer make piles of challahs? Eli imagined a tower of challah toppling onto his head. Would the wine-seller put the fruit onto high shelves? Eli imagined climbing a ladder to get to his plums. Would the baker try to bake the grapes to make the wine?*

"Simon?" Eli turned around at the entrance of the wine store. "You're very different from Moshe the baker, or Gilah the green-grocer, or any other store owner, aren't you?"

"Yes, Eli, but we're also not so different. We all help people make a tasty meal for Shabbat."

"Like in this Sedra!" Eli exclaimed. "There were heads of tribes, elders, police officers, children, women, converts, woodcutters and water-drawers, but they were all standing before G-d, unified, even though they each had a different job."

"Yes," said Simon. "They are all unified by the Torah and its laws, even though each one is different".

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