

## Why Can't We All Just Get Along? An Orthodox Rabbi's Perspective on Pluralism

Shmuel Goldin

**Abstract:** A transcript of a lecture delivered at the Jewish Theological Seminary of America by a prominent Orthodox rabbi, who maintains that divisions within the Jewish community can be addressed through creative approaches. Dialogue should be established between the denominations based upon (1) recognition and respect of each other's boundaries, (2) identification of and management of differences, (3) willingness to engage in self-analysis and critique, and (4) making decisions and taking actions within each denomination with an eye toward benefiting Judaism and the Jewish people.

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# Why Can't We All Just Get Along?

## An Orthodox Rabbi's Perspective on Pluralism\*

Shmuel Goldin

I am most pleased and honored to be here today, and grateful to the Jewish Theological Seminary of America for affording me the opportunity to speak with you from the heart about issues that are certainly of concern to us all. I would like to begin by reframing our discussion.

The word 'pluralism' is a little too ambiguous and antiseptic for my tastes. What we are really asking about today is family dynamics. What is the state of affairs within our global Jewish family? How do we get along with each other? How do we deal with each other and each other's beliefs and, what affect does the quality of our relationships have upon our nation as a whole?

Because we are dealing with family dynamics I thought we would begin with some shared textual study of a Torah portion that chronicles a scene of family relationships early in Jewish history. It's a tragic scene, appropriate for our attention in the shadow of the holiday of *Pesach* because it describes the sale of Joseph, the event that eventually leads to our descent into Egypt. Consider the text of Genesis Chapter 37 verses 18–36 as we attempt to answer one simple question. Who sold Joseph into slavery?

I know what some of you might be thinking. Who sold Joseph into slavery? We learned that in fourth grade. Simple: his brothers. Yet I would share with you an observation that I often share with my congregants and with my students at Yeshiva University. It is most

unfortunate that we learn biblical text in fourth grade and never return to it critically as adults. The fact is that the text is often extremely and unexpectedly complex as this narrative will show us. The complex messages, in this case, speak to us directly.

In Chapter 37, verses 18–20, the event does begin as we well remember it from fourth grade. Joseph has been sent by his father to look for his brothers:

*Vayiru oto marachok... Vayomru ish el achiv, "Hinei ba'al ha-chalomot ha-lazeh ba."*

(They see him from afar... And they say one to another, "Behold this dreamer is coming.")

In verses 20–21 the brothers plot to kill Joseph but instead accede to Reuven's suggestion that he be thrown into a pit. Upon throwing Joseph into the pit, however, the brothers spy an approaching caravan, and in verse 26, Judah turns to the brothers and says:

*Mah betza im naharog et ahinu v'kisinu et damo?*

(What benefit will there be if we kill him or allow him to die? Let us sell him to these Ishmaelites.)

Then, all of a sudden something startling happens: A caravan of Midianite merchants appears, seemingly out of nowhere, and "they" reach down and "they" pull Joseph from the pit (verse 28). "They" sell Joseph to the Ishmaelites for 20 pieces of silver.

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Who sold Joseph into slavery? The question is not clearly answered in the text and therefore a variety of different interpretations are offered by the commentaries. Rashi, in his classical commentary, says that the phrase, “They reached down and they pulled Joseph from the pit,” refers to the brothers. The brothers were the ones who pulled Joseph out and they sold him to the Ishmaelites, who again sold him to the Midianites. Rashi chronicles a series of sales. The Rashbam, Rashi’s grandson and *pashtan par excellence* who always sticks to the simple explanation of the text, says, “No, it was not the brothers who pulled Joseph out. It was the Midianites....Read the text!”

Who sold Joseph? I don’t know. But that brings us to the real question—why at this particular moment in Jewish history is the Torah text suddenly not clear? Why is the normally painstakingly detailed Torah text deliberately ambiguous concerning the sale of Joseph? I would contend that the answer is simple. The Torah is teaching us through omission that it really doesn’t matter. It simply does not matter who actually reached down to pull Joseph from that pit. Perhaps the brothers did not personally hand him over. But, you know what? They are as culpable as if they did. The brothers sold Joseph either because they reached down and sold him or because they created the environment in which the sale could take place. The culpability of the brothers remains intact. Through ambiguity, the Torah teaches us a lesson of overarching significance: If you are indifferent to your brothers’ pain, you are responsible for causing that pain.

Ladies and gentlemen, you and I and others like us, members of the affiliated Jewish community in America, are presiding over a tragedy of monumental proportions. Outside of our walls, in fact, even within our communities, Jews are disappearing from Judaism in droves through intermarriage, assimilation and indifference. Yet, how do we, within the affiliated Jewish community, choose to respond to that ongoing tragedy? We respond by compounding the tragedy, by fragmenting ourselves into denominations moving further and further apart with each passing day. We expend our energies on issues that

divide us and that are of little or no concern to the vast wasteland of American Jewry disappearing into the mist. So preoccupied are we with our particular concerns that we are content to continue down paths that could lead to our total and irrevocable fragmentation, while everyone else disappears.

The question before us is not simply whether we can learn to talk to each other—There is much more at stake. The real question is. “What role will we play, or not play, in shaping the story of the Jewish people at this critical juncture?” If we can’t get along, then we cannot make the kind of difference that we should.

I suppose that we could all react to this challenge in usual fashion, by blaming each other and saying, “Well, it’s really the fault of the Orthodox or the Conservative or the Reform.” After all, it’s always the ‘other’s’ fault. But the Torah teaches us otherwise, that, *like the brothers, we are all at fault*. If we allow this to go on, if we continue to move apart and do not find ways to act together, we will all be held culpable for the unfolding, potentially tragic fate of the American Jewish community. Clearly, we need to rethink our relationships.

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I suppose the easiest solution—the utopian solution—to the problem would be to move into that post denominational era which people like to speak about. That should be easy. After all, you could all become Orthodox and everything would be fine. Alternatively, I suppose I could become Reform and we would all be happy. But that’s not going to happen, and barring those eventualities the relationships we need to build will require a great deal of thought and a great deal of understanding across the board.

We must reshape our relationships in a fashion that allows us to live together and work together for our nation’s

good. I'm not talking about platitudes, but an honest eyes-open ongoing effort. I'd like to suggest that there are four steps that are absolutely essential to the creation of this new relationship. These four steps will allow us to move past the platitudes and stop claiming that we really are one, while we act as if we're not. These four steps will allow us to create a new workable reality.

**Step #1:** *We must learn to recognize and respect each other's boundaries. If we can do that, we will stop asking each other for things we simply cannot give.*

To explain this step I return to the word that I avoided at the onset: 'pluralism'. What does it mean? If pluralism means that I, as an Orthodox Jew, have to agree that everyone is right, then by definition the enterprise is a non-starter. There is nothing to talk about. There are certain beliefs and principles fundamental to my religious system. I interpret the phrase, "*Torah min ha-shamayim*" (Torah from the heavens), in a particular way. I believe in the divine sanctity of every single word of the Torah text. I interpret the phrase, "*Torah sheba'al peh*" (the oral law), and the halakhic process in the way that I learned in yeshiva and that interpretation is critical to the way that I understand the unfolding of Jewish law. If you do not agree with those foundations or if you interpret them differently, then from my perspective, you can't be right because if you're right than I'm wrong. It doesn't work for all of us to be right. Moral relativism robs society of any kind of ethical standard. Religious relativism robs us of the ability to believe in anything at all.

Please understand: I am not simply staking out my own turf here. I expect no less from you. If you are a Conservative Jew committed to Conservative theology, then that means you believe in certain things that I don't. If you're a Reform Jew, and you are committed to Reform theology, then that means that you believe in certain things that I do not and from your perspective I am not right.

If this is the case, if pluralism doesn't mean that we are all right, is there a possibility for a pluralistic model? I believe

the answer is, 'Yes.' We just have to define what the word means. 'Pluralism' from my perspective does not mean that we're all right; it means that we all *have a right*. *Behirah hafshit*, free will, is the essential pillar upon which Jewish belief is built. I can disagree vehemently with your choice, but I cannot disagree with your right to choose. Religious coercion is antithetical to Jewish thought and counterproductive as a strategy. It simply does not work.

If we can come to understand that each of us has our own belief system and a right to that system, and that each of us will have boundaries created by those systems that we will be unwilling to cross, then I believe we can create a religious world where we will be able to value without validating. Please hear carefully, for this is a construct central to my presentation. I repeat, we can and must learn to value without validating. We must learn to value each other as Jews and value each other's contributions to the fabric of Jewish life without feeling that by doing so we are validating each other's belief systems and thereby compromising our own.

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This may sound easy, but it's not. This approach does not create an easy world. As long as our boundaries are intact there are going to be points of conflict, and even more, there are going to be points of deep personal pain. Consider the following scenario: I have a dear friend, who is a Reform rabbi. I have come to respect and admire him as a person and as a Jew. We spend time talking and learning together. However, when it comes to the point when I am going to be *mesader qiddushin*, when I am going to officiate at a wedding, I will not accept him as an *ayd*, a formal witness to the wedding ceremony. It's not a personal issue; it has to do with the fact that I, as an Orthodox rabbi officiating at that wedding, believe that the witnesses are the most important people at the

wedding aside from the *hatan* (groom) and the *kallah* (bride). These witnesses are more important than the rabbi, for they halakhically validate the proceedings. Further, my halakhic parameters mandate that one can only serve in this pivotal role of witness if he buys into the halakhic process. Therefore, someone who is not *shomer shabbat*, for example—and this Reform rabbi may not be, based upon my understanding of *shmirat shabbat*—cannot serve as a witness at a wedding.

I know that it's going to take a tremendous amount of understanding on my friend's part to be able to comprehend and accept this decision, to not allow it to hurt our personal relationship and to realize that we have reached a boundary over which I cannot cross. I don't know if I would have that understanding in his place, but that's what I'm asking of him.

At the opposite end of the spectrum, to reach this point of valuing without validating my own Orthodox community is going to have to make major changes. It is going to have to learn not to be afraid of the non-Orthodox and to stop seeing the Conservative and Reform movements as a threat to its own existence. Sometimes in my own frustration I feel that the Orthodox community is living in the past. Decades ago sociologists were predicting the demise of Orthodoxy in America. The Orthodox community was told that we were not going to last and that we were soon going to be a mere memory, while the Conservative and Reform would inherit the mantle of leadership and existence in America. Because those were the predictions, we within the Orthodox community hunkered down behind the barricades. We said, "We've got to defend our turf; we can't do anything that might appear as legitimizing anyone else. We can't in any way legitimize the Conservative movement. We can't legitimize the Reform movement because otherwise we're going to lose." Well, things have changed. The Orthodox community is strong. It's not perfect—take my word for it—but it is thriving and self-perpetuating. The Conservative and Reform movements are no longer a threat to our

existence. Yet, we are still acting as if we are afraid of you. As far as I'm concerned, we within the Orthodox community have to reach the point where not only are we not afraid, but where we are confident enough in ourselves to admit that we have something to learn from you. Most importantly we must learn that this admission does not entail legitimization of all your religious views. Just as I believe you have much to learn from us. If we can become confident enough to say this without feeling that we are threatening our own existence, we will have moved much closer to the position of valuing without validating.

We are past the point where I, as an Orthodox rabbi, should be afraid of appearing at the Jewish Theological Seminary or appearing on a panel with heterodox rabbis simply because others will say that by doing so I am legitimizing what I should not legitimize. I don't see it that way. We are all who we are, and we do not need, nor should we ask for, each other's legitimization. We can agree to disagree and learn to move on. In this way we will be able to come to a point where we value each other without validating each other's beliefs and without compromising our own. We will be able to accept each other's boundaries without crossing our own.

**Step #2: *We must identify and deal with our differences.*** Again, it sounds simple, but I want you to understand that it is a difficult and important step, because the truth is that the slogans do not work. "We are one," sounds lovely. "That which unites us is greater than which divides us," is a wonderful slogan and it's probably true. But as long as our minds are focused on that which divides us, our 'oneness' doesn't matter—and our minds *are* focused on those dividing issues. Issues do exist and we have to deal with them directly and openly from the outset. Three things must occur if we are to be successful: identification, solution and selective disengagement.

First, we must clearly identify the issues between us rationally and calmly, without personalization and dehumanization. Unfortunately, we don't often do that. Instead we slip immediately into the attack mode. I

cannot tell you how many times I have heard from the non-Orthodox community: ‘The Orthodox don’t see us as Jews’. I know that this message is periodically preached from the pulpits. It’s not true. You are as Jewish as I am.

However, there are areas of Jewish identity that are problematic between us—for example, conversion and specifically the definition of an important aspect of the conversion process, *qabalat ol mitzvot*, the acceptance of *mitzvot*. How do I define this acceptance? How do you define it? This issue is complex and must be dealt with. Another is patrilineal descent. It is a problem not just for the Orthodox community, even though we are the ones who are painted as uncompromising. Patrilineal descent is a problem for the Conservative community as well, a problem that strikes the very core of Jewish identity and who is a Jew.

It’s very easy to paint the Orthodox community as uncompromising, unwilling to bend; but when we begin to understand each other, I hope you will come to realize that we see it a bit differently from our perspective. We in the Orthodox community see ourselves as keeping the rules intact over the years. Suddenly, others are changing the rules on us, and then demanding that we agree to these changes in the rules. Religious coercion works both ways. We feel that we shouldn’t be coerced into accepting something that we cannot accept. Knee-jerk attacks are easy, but damaging. It is much harder, yet so necessary to understand each other’s point of view.

I don’t want you to think that I’m not being balanced in my approach. While I clearly believe that the non-Orthodox community must stop its attacks against the Orthodox, my Orthodox community has a lot of *teshuvah* to do concerning the demonization that we practice, as well. One would have thought that we would have learned after the tragic assassination of Yitzchak Rabin what verbal attacks can lead to, both here and in Israel. We must calmly and coherently identify the issues between us without descending into acrimony.

Second, after defining the issues between us, we must then identify those issues that can be addressed. We have to sort them out, asking, ‘What are the problems that we can really begin to solve?’ They are many. For example, we can address the issue of dialogue and discourse. We can find the proper forums in which Orthodox, Conservative and Reform leaders can meet and discuss issues—and these forums that can be structured to answer everyone’s concerns. We can address the problem of funding the different streams of Judaism and not get caught up as to whether the money I give to UJA will go to x, y or z. We can begin to understand that each of the streams within the Jewish community can do good. Who knows? Perhaps my Orthodox community will even come to the radical conclusion that it is better for a Jewish child to gain some Jewish learning than no Jewish learning at all.

*We are past the point where I, as an Orthodox rabbi, should to be afraid of appearing at the Jewish Theological Seminary or appearing on a panel with heterodox rabbis.*

We can even begin to solve some of the nettlesome issues that bog us down, such as who’s going to *daven* at the *Kotel*, in what fashion and when. I firmly believe that with understanding on all sides and a little creativity, that problem could be solved. This is not to suggest that the problem is not complex. I’ll share with you a conversation that was an eye opener for me. It occurred during one of those interdenominational meeting which *Shvil Hazahav* initiated. The agenda included the issue of *tefillah* at the *Kotel*. During the discussion someone turned to me and said, ‘To whom does the *Kotel* belong? It belongs to all Jews throughout the world.’ I responded in line with my usual thinking that the Diaspora Jews are only limited partners when it comes to policy in Israel: ‘No, the *Kotel* belongs to the Israelis who fought to free it. They should be the ones to decide and deal with the issue of which prayer services are allowed at the *Kotel*. It’s their *Kotel*—to which the individual responded: ‘If that’s the case, then

the *haredim* certainly should not have a say, because they didn't fight the wars.' Suddenly, I was caught off guard by new layers of complexity I had never thought of. Although not simple, this and other issues can be solved with a little creativity and shared good-will. We simply have to be aggressive in identifying the issues that can and should be tackled now.

Finally—and this might sound strange in light of everything else I have said—we must disengage from our preoccupation on a popular level with those issues which will not be readily solved today. If every time we get together to talk, we insist on discussing problems which defy immediate solution, we will end up banging our heads (and each others' heads) against the wall and we will not move on. As in any relationship, there are issues that we should agree to avoid for a little while because we are not going to solve them today. With time and the building of trust and mutual understanding, these issues can later be revisited more productively. Meanwhile, behind the scenes, scholars, rabbis and academicians can quietly and actively work to lay the groundwork for such future discussion. Nothing should be ignored, yet not everything has to be addressed in the marketplace right now.

For example, conversion is an issue that needs time, thought, scholarship and leadership, so we should urge our leaders to work on it behind the scenes. When we get together in public meetings, forums and discussions, perhaps we should not talk about it all the time. By practicing selective disengagement we will give ourselves the space necessary to find common ground in other areas of concern. We will also buy the time necessary for sober thought and analysis without the rancor created by constant open debate and argument.

**Step #3:** *Each of us within our own denominations must stop dismissing and externalizing the criticisms that are thrust upon us by others, and we have to be willing to engage in very clear, often painful self-analysis and critique.* There is a *mitzvah* in the Torah known as, "*Hokhayah tokheah et amitekhab.*" (You are obligated to rebuke your

friend.) If you see someone doing something wrong, your responsibility for that individual is so great that you must rebuke him. However, already in the time of the *mishna*, the rabbis were very clear about the difficulty of this task. The *breita* quoted in the *gemara Erkin* (16b) reads as follows:

Rabbi Tarfon said: "I wonder whether there is anyone in our generation who really knows how to receive rebuke."

If someone says to another, "Take out the splinter from your teeth," the other responds, "Take out the beam between your eyes."

Rabbi Elazar Ben Azariah turned to Rabbi Tarfon and said, "I wonder if there is anyone in our generation who knows how to properly rebuke."

If they didn't know how to do it, we certainly don't. We're not very good at giving or receiving criticism. Yet just because we're not good at the art of rebuke does not mean that the criticisms are invalid. As they say, "Just because you're paranoid doesn't mean they're not out to get you." We can't assume that criticisms are invalid because they're coming from outside our particular movement. Too often we escape looking at ourselves by criticizing each other and then by expending all our remaining energy shielding ourselves against the attacks against us.

Each one of us in each of our groups must be willing to take a clear and careful look at the things that need to change within our movements. We must be willing to ask the difficult questions in order to move forward ourselves and help us recognize the way others perceive us. If we can understand ourselves honestly, we will be able to understand each other better. This goes across the board. The fact is that there are serious internal issues that we each need to deal with.

My own Orthodox community, for example, would well be served by asking itself some very difficult questions. We are so concerned with the perpetuation of Judaism that I sometimes wonder whether to stop and consider

the quality of the Judaism that we are perpetuating and whether it's really Judaism. To cite a few concerns: How do we feel about the non-Jew? How do we deal with those Jews outside of our walls? What about our sense of triumphalism—a sense that I find too often within the Orthodox community: “Rabbi, what are you *hokkin’* us a *chaynik* about everyone else? We’re fine. Our shuls are filled. Our kids are here. Why do we need to worry about anyone outside our own walls?” That’s not Judaism. Judaism means you have to care about the world.

I traveled last year during the height of the bombing of Serbia, with a group of volunteers from my congregation and elsewhere to Kosovar refugee camps. We were moved to do so by a member of my community who is the child of Holocaust survivors, and who said to me one day, “Rabbi, how can we stand and watch without doing something?” The experience was incredibly moving, worthwhile and productive. We joined with Israelis who were doing monumental work in those camps. However, the questions that came from my own synagogue were profound and disturbing. “Rabbi, why do we have to worry about other people, don’t we have enough to do here?” “Rabbi, why don’t we worry about Jewish issues?”—to which I responded, “You know what? This is a Jewish issue.” How can we talk about righteous gentiles if we are not willing to be ‘righteous Jews’? How can we ask the world to assume a degree of responsibility for us if we are not going assume that same degree of responsibility for others? How can we be an, ‘*or la-goyim*’, a light unto the nations, if we remain unmoved by the tears of a child?

The Orthodox community also has to ask itself whether it is dealing with issues well enough, from *agunah* and woman’s religious role to the interface between Zionism and democracy. Finally, the Orthodox community, particularly the Modern Orthodox community, has to take a good look at the children we’re raising. Are they living the values that we really feel are appropriate within the context of Jewish thought? These are the kinds of questions that we need to ask ourselves.

There are questions that you need to ask yourselves. Here I hesitate, for I’m not much of an expert. You could probably do a better job. My questions for the Conservative community would humbly include: What is the definition of Conservative Judaism today, and is your laity aware of that definition? Are there Conservative Jews (knowledgeable of and committed to Conservative theology) or just Conservative rabbis? What are your boundaries? What’s in and what’s out? What standards does a community have to exhibit to be part of the Conservative movement? What’s the impact of some of the decisions you have made?

*There are issues that we should agree to avoid for a little while because we are not going to solve them today.*

I remember a number of years ago when a Conservative rabbi moved into Englewood from Maryland. He said to me, “You know, Shmuel, I’m jealous of you because you have community around your *shul*. You’ve got people who live around the synagogue. I have a synagogue in Englewood and everybody’s living in Closter and Demarest and Alpine.” It was then that I realized that the decision of the Conservative movement to allow driving to the synagogue on shabbat, a decision originally intended to strengthen the synagogue community by making attendance possible for all, has had another far-reaching, deleterious effect. In many cases, the physical ‘synagogue neighborhood’ has been largely, if not totally destroyed. Why pay top dollar to live near the synagogue if you can drive from farther away? What is the impact of decisions like these, and do those decisions have to be reviewed and re-analyzed? Are you holding on inter-generationally? Are you producing other Conservative Jews?

Don’t worry. I have a list of questions for the Reform movement as well. What are the limits of your theology? What defines your philosophy as Jewish and what are the basic parameters of that definition? By drawing larger circles of acceptance in terms of intermarriage, patrilineal

descent and now gay unions, are you being more inclusive as you had hoped, or are you encouraging more people to move to the perimeter? What is the impact of decisions you have made, not only on your world, but on the Jewish world as a whole? Again, are you holding on inter-generationally? Not only are you producing more Reform Jews, but are you producing Jews? These are the kinds of questions that I humbly suggest each movement needs to ask itself. We should not dismiss these questions simply because they are often raised by others. When we begin to challenge ourselves, we will begin to understand what others see in us as well.

**Step #4:** *The decisions and actions that we make within each denomination must be made with an eye towards benefiting Judaism and the Jewish people—not towards furthering our own agenda.*

Many of you may recall from a number of years ago, the famous case of Baby M. Debate raged as to whether a particular baby should be given to the custody of her host mother or to the adoptive parents. I decided to give a *shiur* on the question to my community and during my research discovered something fascinating about Jewish law. I found that while American law was preoccupied with the issue of parental rights, Jewish law considered one thing: what is best for the child? Parental rights were not the issue. What was the best for Baby M would have been the sole determinant of a decision under Jewish law.

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Judaism is our baby and none of us has ownership over it. We need to make sure that the decisions we make are best for Judaism, even though they may not necessarily always be best for the agenda of our own movement. Here I would just issue a couple of challenges to get the juices flowing, to inspire some thought, or perhaps, comment. I understand that the Reform movement finds the acceptance

of patrilineal descent to be within its theological boundaries. But does that make such acceptance a *mitzvah*? Was it necessary to enact such legislation? And what effect did that legislation have upon the Jewish nation as a whole? In reality, that movement took the core issue of Jewish identity and created a wedge within the Jewish people that leads to irreconcilable division at the most basic level.

What about an issue that certainly will strike closer to home at the Seminary? What should our approach be to religious pluralism in Israel? I will be the first to admit, within my own community and beyond, the abject failure of Israel's Orthodox leadership to impact in any positive way upon the secular Israeli community at large. That's putting it mildly. Not only have we not impacted, we seem to have done everything possible to push them away. It sickens and saddens me. One of my heroes in Israel is *Ha-Rav* Yehuda Amital, *Rosh Yeshivah* at *Yeshivat Har Etzion*. He has said on numerous occasions, "If I were a secular Israeli, I would hate the Orthodox." Yet I wonder, "Is the solution to export the denominational fragmentation that exists here to Israel? Is that the right way to deal with the problem?" I don't think so. Should we not instead sit down and put our heads together to say, "Okay, rather than creating Orthodox, Conservative and Reform movements in Israel, what can we do together to create something new that does not fragment us there the way we are fragmented here? What can we do together to help Israel get back on the track religiously?" This would take a tremendous amount of creative thinking. You would have to do steps 1, 2, and 3 right away so we could talk to each other. Yet what is the alternative? Do we want to export the differences of conversion that we have here there? Do we want to export patrilineal descent to Israel? I raise the questions with full cognizance that we must also consider the potential impact upon the American Jewish community if the Conservative and Reform movements are not officially represented in Israel. Let's really think carefully.

What about other areas where we have made decisions and that require rethinking? Regarding *gittin* (the

break-up of marriages, G-d forbid), for example: Are we best served in the Jewish community to have different *batei dinim* from the different denominations issuing *gittin*? The results are that now we not only have a problem with conversions, but we have a problem with acceptance of marriages and non-marriages? Aren't we best served by trying to talk to each other and figure out a way to create a universal procedure for the dissolution of marriages?

These are difficult issues. We cannot succeed if we attack them by each denomination saying, "I'm going to stake out my place, and I have to have my way and my theology must be clearly represented in every facet of every decision." If we look at our agendas rather than at the total picture, then we will be doing our world a terrible disservice. Every decision we make, Orthodox, Conservative and Reform, must be made for the benefit of Judaism as a whole and we have to find a way to make those decisions.

Every day I receive the daily fax report from the Israeli consulate. I was struck recently by two news items that followed one another. One paragraph said that the Reform movement (I am not quoting exactly) is urging the acceptance in Israeli hospitals and elsewhere of non-traditional *brit milah*, non-traditional circumcision ceremonies. In this way, all Jews will have a choice. If they don't want to have traditional circumcision ceremonies, they can have non-traditional ones. Then, the next paragraph said that the divisions between the religious and non-religious are growing greater each day. You look at these paragraphs, one right after the other and say, "My

goodness, what are we doing?" Are we making the decisions that need to be made for our benefit as a whole, or are we being particularistic in our concerns?

In summary, these are what I consider to be four difficult essential steps to the creation of a relationship that can cross-denominational lines. Step #1: Learn more about each other and to respect each other's boundaries. Step #2: Define and deal with differences between us coherently and clearly. Step #3: Engage in self-evaluation in our own denominations. Step #4: Find ways to make decisions together that benefit the Jewish community at large.

The Torah has a way of communicating messages to us, things beneath the surface that are profound beyond measure. We began with a scene of terrible sibling hatred that led to our exile and our eventual enslavement in Egypt. In stark contrast, our redemption begins with the brotherly embrace of Aaron and Moses, the first brothers to fully embrace since the time of Cain and Abel. That embrace could not have been easy for either Moses or Aaron. To Moses it meant he was going to have to relinquish certain aspects of his leadership to his brother. To Aaron, it meant that his younger brother was going to take the lead. It could not have been an easy embrace, and yet it was that act which formed the partnership that led the Jewish people to redemption. Maybe it is time that we begin to form our embrace so that together we can lead the Jewish people through difficult times.