

KEEPING TORAH AT THE CENTER

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Why does a congregation allow one or more of its members or leaders to undermine the unity and comity of its communal life?

It's a nagging question if one has witnessed or been victimized by the devastation such people can wreak on a congregational community. And our history is replete with examples of congregations that were trashed, devastated by factions and fifth columns, because members and leaders took exception in destructive ways to their synagogue's policies or practices.

What they did was, of course, forbidden by *mitzvot* (commandments) and *halakhah* (rabbinic law), in addition to ordinary notions of fair play and common decency.

So how are we to analyze such behavior?

There are endless and complex explanations of the behavior of congregants who engage in character assassination, malicious gossip, self-serving manipulation, or a host of other inappropriate and destructive behaviors in congregational life. We may learn that their childhood was a nightmare of abuse or abandonment, that they had terrible failures and pressures in adult life, or that they suffer from physical or mental disorders and diseases.

The critical question, however, is not why individuals go off the path of righteousness in ways that are destructive to their congregations and themselves, but why so many of their fellow congregants remain passive and thus vulnerable to them. Why are those who have lost their way permitted to *continue* their destructiveness, especially after so many others see and even personally experience the damage they are causing?

An answer to this question is suggested in Exodus (25:16): "And you shall put into the ark the testimony that I shall give to you."

The ark in its golden splendor, the repository of the Torah, was created from the heartfelt offerings of every Israelite woman and man. (Exodus 35:22) It was, liter-

ally, the treasured possession of a whole people, and so it resided at the physical and spiritual center of the community: the Torah guided the life of the people, their day-to-day decisions and direction. Not individual comfort or convenience, but the good of the community and its continuity, measured by the physical *and* spiritual health of its members, present and future, were the guiding criteria.

When Torah ceases to be at the center of our lives, no longer the measure by which we decide and act, which has been the norm in modernity, then each one of us—and ultimately our whole congregational community—becomes subject to the whim and scheme of every lost or misguided soul. The rationale allowing this perversion is that individual preferences should comprise the centerpiece of community life, reflecting the ranking of personal autonomy as the highest social value.

What is the price of not keeping Torah at the center of congregational community life?

One of the common results is that we countenance those who seek to divide and subvert for their private purposes (often by our misconstruing the requirements of maintaining "*shalom bayit*," i.e., peace of the house). In doing so, we unwittingly empower an unaccountable faction that covertly rejects and ridicules the authority of congregational leaders, implicitly disdaining the democratic electoral process. For the sake of keeping the "*peace*," we mandate a group that sabotages *sub rosa* the legitimate mission and methods of the congregation.

Then those who are either seeking spiritual solace, a religious foundation for justice and righteousness, or social fellowship, are alienated by the painful divisiveness that eventuates. Those who imagine themselves to be future beneficiaries when current policies and practices are covertly undermined are motivated to join the ranks of the unaccountable. And those who rely on the anesthetizing hope that temporary fixes and diversions

will relieve the crisis, resisting the painful but needed reunifying remedies, find that, after applying organizational band aids, the internal corruption returns with a vengeance when they or their successors least expect it.

The downward spiral of unchecked conflict and disunity—driven by distortion, exaggeration, misrepresentation, and mischaracterization—has an inevitable outcome. The only question is how long it will take to reach the denouement. As with all prevarication, the truth will ultimately emerge, because, as we're taught, the seal of God is truth: the rule of creation is that we cannot permanently suppress the truth. But before we finally have an opening to affirm the truth, lives may be needlessly damaged or destroyed, or whole communities shattered. And as we learn in childhood, the longer we avoid telling the truth, the more damaging are the

consequences when it ultimately and inevitably comes to light.

The ancient wooden ark was covered with gold not only on the outside, but also on the inside. Our Sages taught that our inside must be like our outside—our intentions must be matched by our actions—to lead our people effectively and unify our congregational communities.

Israel's tribal founders were told by their father (Genesis 49:1), "Gather yourselves [האסף] and I will tell you what will befall you. . . ." Rabbi Samson Rafael Hirsch (1808-1888) teaches that the root for "gather," א-ס-ף, means "to bring something from the place . . . where it does not really belong, to where it does belong." So the Hebrew האסף means to "break away from everything to which you really do not belong, and find yourselves united in one common purpose"—Torah.

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