

Have you ever been asked to answer the question- are you a Jewish American or an American Jew? It's often used as a discussion starter to highlight questions of identity, but sometimes it's used to discredit a part of the community.

You might think of yourself as a Jewish American, primarily as an American, feeling a common identity with other Americans, while maintaining Jewish practices and beliefs. Or it might be that feeling part of the Jewish people is most important to you, being connected to other Jews around the world, while you happen to be currently residing in the United States- thus an American Jew.

This question of identity and assimilation comes up in this week's Torah portion where we see a divide continuing between Joseph and his brothers. Though the highlight of the portion is their reconciliation, they continue to lead very separate lives. After meeting with the Pharaoh and announcing their occupation as shepherds, the brothers and their families go to live in Goshen, separated from the rest of Egyptian society. The Midrash tells us that they continued to speak Hebrew, use their Hebrew names, and live by their own customs. Based on what we know about immigrant communities, it seems likely that could be the case, particularly in the first generation.

The brothers and their families fall into the category of Egyptian Jews, that is proto-Jews, (the term Jew won't actually be used for another 1,000 years) who happen for a time to be living in Greater Egypt.

Joseph is another story. He has an Egyptian name, Egyptian clothes, and his wife is the daughter of the priest of On. He speaks Egyptian and spends his life with other Egyptians. At several points the text reminds us that he does not live in Goshen with the rest of the Israelites. Though he saves the Israelites from famine, his focus was really on saving everyone. It was not about ethnic loyalty but about universal compassion. Joseph seems to be a pretty assimilated Egyptian Jew, as it were.

It is interesting to me that next week's Torah portion will go out of its way to affirm not only that Joseph is still a part of the people of Israel but that his sons Ephraim and Manasseh are as well. In addition to being blessed separately by Jacob, they will be included by name by Jacob in his final blessing as the other sons are, and Ephraim and Menasheh will take their place among the 12 tribes of Israel. Different in some ways from the rest of the community, assimilated in many ways, yet their identity as Israel is affirmed in our tradition and it is in their names that we bless our sons every Friday night.

In the upset around the United States' abstention in the recent vote at the United Nations, accusations were made that one's position on this vote was an issue of Jewish loyalty. There were insinuations that those who supported the current administration were traitors of the worst sort to the Jewish people and very strong and offensive language was used. This was an echo of arguments made during the election itself, where voting in one particular way was seen as a litmus test of one's caring for Israel.

There is a lot we could discuss about the particulars of these issues. Which presidents have and have not abstained at the United Nations. What was the actual content of the resolution. What Knesset resolutions on annexation were on the table at that time. Why do Israelis love the Clinton's and how the Obama administration was seen as very supportive by Israel's security establishment. I am open to conversation about all of these particulars and more at our Oneg tonight, but in these remarks I just want to highlight the danger and inappropriateness of loyalty accusations.

People's opinions on the U.N. vote did not entirely break down along party lines. There were several outspoken Democratic political leaders, like Chuck Schumer, Senator from New York, who were very critical of the vote. There were also

attacks on the vote from the other end of the spectrum, calling it too little and too late, in terms of its affecting a rescue of the two state alternative. Israelis were also divided with perhaps even more discord and accusations.

After the election, I felt it was important to build ties with the Republicans in our congregation and so I ended up with a subscription to the Wall Street Journal. Its not a total loss. One of the most interesting article on all of this was on the Wall Street Journal's editorial page, an op ed by William Galston that I would have headlined, "Be careful what you wish for." Galston actually works at Brookings but I read it in the WSJ. American support for Israel is critical, he wrote, but too much of the wrong kind of support may make Prime Minister Netanyahu's job harder and not easier. Netanyahu has been using the Americans to reign in his more extreme partners. How will that work when the proposed American Ambassador to Israel is a longtime supporter of the most extremist settlements and policies? The demographic realities, the hard numbers, that turned hardliner Prime Minister Arik Sharon into a two state proponent, are being wished away by some in Israel, in the same manner in which American politicians feel they can ignore the scientific evidence of global climate change.

Galston notes that President Elect Trump's plan to move the American Embassy to Jerusalem threatens Prime Minister Netanyahu's policy of managing, rather than resolving, the conflict. Another article, this one in the New York Times, by Bernard Avishai noted that while many Israelis support the promise of moving the embassy, only 6% think it should really happen. To paint Jewish Americans as traitors for failing to support a policy that Israelis recognize as not worth its costs, seems rather strange.

Joseph with his universal concerns and active assimilation into Egyptian society is not rejected by our tradition, but rather embraced as Yosef HaTzadik, the righteous one. The 70% of Jewish Americans who think in similar ways, should not be cowed by extremist accusations. It is important not to shrink back from speaking, but instead stand up to protect a valid Jewish vision of what Israel and American life should be .