

Parashat Re'eh

You are children of Adonai your God.

You shall neither cut yourselves nor make any baldness between your eyes for the dead.

For you are a holy people to your God, and God has chosen you

This week's parasha contains the prohibition against excessive mourning over the loss of a loved one. We are told: "*Lo Titgodedu* ... you shall not cut yourselves."

But Rashi, in Yebamot, takes *Lo Titgodedu* as a play on words. He gives it a much deeper meaning – as "*Lo Ta'asu Agudot Agudot*" – do not make factions, separate groupings.

This adds a whole new layer of meaning to the text: the entire Jewish people is one whole; do not create separate factions. Why? For the same reason as in the parasha: because you are a holy people to God, and God has chosen you.

We may look different, speak different languages, come from different backgrounds. But ... we're better than that. We're bigger than that.

We're also much more alike than we thought, and much more connected.

In a recent Pew Survey of global migration patterns, published in the Economist a few weeks ago, there was a fascinating piece about Jews.

Jews move around a lot.

One in four Jews in the world today live outside the country of their birth.

Jews are a migratory people.

And in the last 20 years there's been a massive exponential growth in global Jewish migration.

I'm particularly interested in this aspect of who – and what – we are.

For those of you who don't know me – for the last eight years I've served as the Executive Director of Strategic Partnerships for the Joint, the American Jewish Joint Distribution Committee. It's given me a unique opportunity to see programs of rescue, relief and renewal that help Jews wherever we can reach them. We've been working for almost a hundred years, in Israel and some 80 countries, to provide dignity and hope, saving hundreds of thousands of lives.

So we've built up, I think, a good body of knowledge and experience.

And this article about Jewish migration particularly struck me.

One quarter of Jews in the world today live in a country other than the one in which they were born.

Think about that for a moment and what it represents. Change, diversity, opportunity. Risks, challenges, new horizons. All of this is happening right now.

And even though in modern times Jews have formed separate “factions” among our people, and it appears that we are physically, culturally, and even ideologically quite different from each other, you don’t need to dig too far down to uncover the connections.

The vast majority of Jews today live in a very small number of places. Since the early 1990s, one of the most interesting trends of global Jewish life has been consolidation.

80% of Jews in the world today live in only two countries. That’s it. The US and Israel.

And over 90% live in only 15 countries. 15 and that’s all. So in many ways, you can conclude that Judaism is contracting.

And there's a positive side to that, in that Jews have moved and are moving to wealthier, more stable, more democratic and more accepting societies. We're moving away from dangerous and under-developed places to "better" homes. There's also a price, a negative side, in this contraction, and we'll look at what that means.

But when we talk about consolidation, we're looking not only at what's happening between countries but also inside them.

Urbanization is a critical component of this contraction, of this consolidation.

For example: 52% of Jews in the world, more than half of us, live in only five cities: Tel Aviv, New York, Jerusalem, LA and Haifa.

We're becoming an increasingly urbanized people. 80% of Jews in the world live in only 24 cities.

By the way, the equivalent percentage for the world's population as a whole is something like 50%. In other words, whereas something like 90% of Jews live in cities of a million people or more, only 50% of the world's population live in big cities.

And the developments on the ground are fascinating.

For the past few years I've been spending a lot of time in places like Cuba, Ukraine, Russia and other countries.

And last month I was in Dnepropetrovsk in Eastern Ukraine, one of the most fascinating cities I've ever visited.

Dnepropetrovsk, for many years, was a secret city. It was a closed city.

You literally needed a license on your internal Soviet passport to come in to the city; and no foreigners were ever allowed in.

The reason was, that Dnepropetrovsk was the place where a secret factory called "Yuzmash" was located.

Secret Factory Number 586 was built by German Prisoners of War in the late 1940s. It was called "the Southern Machine-building Factory" or abbreviated in Russian to Yuzhmash.

Officially, Yuzhmash made tractors and kitchen equipment like mixers and juicers for peaceful Soviet households.

But in reality, Yuzhmash became the major centre for designing, manufacturing, testing and deploying strategic nuclear and space rockets for the entire Soviet Union.

Space ships, defense space rocket systems, Intercontinental Ballistic Missiles, and lots more.

But here's what particularly fascinated me: a massively high proportion of Yuzhmash employees were Jews.

Engineers, mathematicians, scientists.
Even today, twenty years after the fall of the Soviet Union, you still have leftover remnants of the Soviet system that show you how the planned economy worked. And Dnepropetrovsk is a prime example of this.

Like North-West Moscow, where much of the Soviet military-industrial complex was located, and where many Jewish scientists and academics were situated, there are pockets all over the Jewish world where quirks of the past shape the way our communities will develop.

We estimate today, for example that there are some 3000 locations where Jews live across the former Soviet Union.

By 2022 – in ten years time – that number will be half, down to about 1500.

So why is that?

There are two reasons.

First is that the elderly Jews are dying out in their small towns and cities all over Eastern Europe and the former Soviet Union and aren't being replaced. Their kids have already left for Europe, for Israel, for the US.

But the second reason, I think is much more interesting, and that is that the middle-class and middle-aged Jews are moving to big cities.

Jews move to big cities. It's a global phenomenon.

And this consolidation is going to have two interlinked effects on Jewish communities and how they look.

First, when the small towns die out, we're going to lose all that Jewish history, the Jewish geography that's dispersed around the world today. And that's a negative, and it's very clear.

But there's a second aspect that's actually quite positive. And that is that it's going to be much easier, much more effective, to build up Jewish community life in the cities.

You can build JCCs, Hillels, leadership training programs, much more effectively with better economies of scale, when you have more Jews around.

And there are, across these countries, amazingly positive points of light.

In Dnepropetrovsk, at a Jewish community meeting, I was watching a young girl come in to the room I was in. And she was wearing a crucifix.

And not just a cross but, you know, the whole shebang.

And the local JDC staffer I was sitting next to, I turned to him and said, nu? And he said, give her

time, she doesn't yet understand what it means to be Jewish.

And that's a really important statement to understand what's developing in the Jewish world today.

We literally have to give them time because they don't yet understand what it means to be Jewish.

For many of them, their formative Jewish experiences are happening right now, as we speak.

You know, I was born Jewish in the West, so my first Jewish memory was maybe when I was three or four. I remember my Grandpa reading from the haggadah at the seder table.

And I'm sure that many of you, all of you who were born Jewish in the States or in the West, have similar kinds of early Jewish memories – apples in honey, Shabbat candles, that kind of thing.

But if you were born in Eastern Europe, even if you were born after the fall of the Soviet Union, you may only now be learning about being Jewish.

So these formative Jewish experiences are not like we're used to here.

They are basically ongoing and being formed as we speak. And there is still a huge level of ignorance to overcome in these post-Soviet societies and post-

Communist societies.

So, there are still challenges ahead ... and there is so much to learn. But the underlying message, I think, of this concept of Lo Titgodedu is the right one. Our customs unite us; our learning defines us.

And in the middle of Dnepropetrovsk, in a Jewish Community Center filled with light and happiness, I found some kind of an answer.

The joke in the Soviet Union was that a JCC was three crimes in one: you couldn't identify as being Jewish, you couldn't belong to the Community, and you certainly couldn't come to a Center.

But there, in the JCC, I saw hundreds, literally hundreds of Jewish kids, and elderly Jews, and families, and young adults. Dozens of activities. Because although there is real hunger in many of these countries, real need, real poverty.

There is also thirst.

A thirst for Jewish knowledge, for Jewish identity.

And most of all, a thirst for Jewish community.

And the songs they were singing in Dnepropetrovsk were exactly the same songs I have heard in Havana and Jerusalem and Vilnius. And the same Israeli dancing we teach young Jewish kids in Budapest, Berlin, Buenos Aires and hundreds, thousands of other locations.

It is awe-inspiring, and uplifting, to sit in a Jewish Community Center in the middle of Ukraine, or Cuba, or Uzbekistan, and see Jews exactly like us.

Jews whose parents or grandparents made slightly different decisions than ours on where and when to move ... thirsty for Jewish life.

We shouldn't cut ourselves off from this revival.

Lo Titgodedu, I would say, is not just an individual imperative but also a communal imperative.

We are part of one Jewish people.

We shouldn't cut ourselves away from it.

There is too much at stake, and so much to gain.

Shabbat shalom.