



From Partnership to Community

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President Reuven Rivlin is calling for a dialogue among four “tribes” to develop a framework for a society-wide partnership in Israel. (These are also referred to as population segments, which include secular Jews, Haredim, National religious groups, and Israeli Arabs.) The President outlined four “pillars” on which such a partnership may rest. These include a sense of security, shared responsibility, equity and equality, and a shared Israeli character.

This valuable, indeed vital, agenda can be advanced by carrying out a series of dialogues among representatives of the four “tribes”. To start the dialogues on Rivlin’s partnership-building, I suggest inviting a small number, say four, representatives from each group, to a public meeting. (The meeting must be public in order to bring along the respective constituencies). Those invited should be of the mainstream(s) of each group, not outliers, that is neither the most hard heads nor most conciliatory. By accepting the invitation, those invited will acknowledge that they are coming to dialogue, not to confront. For reasons which will become clear shortly, the meetings will need a highly regarded moderator, best President Rivlin himself or someone he chooses.

Three options follow as to subjects that might be used to launch the dialogues. Each may require several meetings.

Option one: comparative study of minorities and inequality

The group of 16 would be invited to choose a small number of different nations, say the US, Sweden, Russia and India, and visit them as a group report what these nations do to make minorities feel more accepted and to reduce inequality. The group will find that problems often claimed to plague Israel are found in one form or another in *all* societies. And the measures to solve them are very difficult to implement. This will mitigate to some extent the heat in which these issues are treated in Israel, as well as lead to identifying some measures to alleviate these problems the group may agree on.

Option two: examine a specific but limited measure

The record shows that when people of different backgrounds are asked to agree on a measure to be taken, and know that their agreement will be implemented, they tend to become informed and involved in because they know that their discussions will not be idle ones, but will significantly affect the lives of their constituents. President Rivlin mentioned community or civil service as such a measure. I wonder if he could start with a subject that is less challenging—for instance, with changes in laws concerning burial practices. Here pluralism is well established but there is a need for some modification. (The fact that initially the three non-secular groups may find each other closer to agreement than the secular groups is not necessary a bad thing), Surely many subjects could be found or chosen by the group of 16.

I cannot stress enough that this will work only if it is very clear that whatever the group decides, (if it can reach an agreement), will be implemented or least seriously considered by the relevant authorities (and the measure will not be trivial).

Option three: sanctity of life and respect for each other

President Rivlin refers to forming a partnership, not to building a community. I hold that this is a wise choice of terms and focus because forming a partnership—based on shared or complementary interests and mutual accommodations—is much less demanding than forming a community which requires a thick layer of shared values and bonds of affinity. (Note though that nations require a communal foundation; in effect they are best defined as communities invested in a state). However, even partnerships benefit when there are some shared values. If one seeks to find and develop shared values, I suggest each group be asked to present a statement on why it considers each life as an end in itself and—that each person is owed being treated with dignity (I combine the two values because of different weights they are accorded in each of the four tribes). The discussion would follow the presentation of the four statements to see if a common ground can be articulated, followed by an examination of the implication of such a consensus for various policies and norms of conduct. A less challenging substantive topic might be our duty to the environment. Surely other topic can be found. This is especially the case if after say three meetings, the group of 16 will seek to continue and choose its own topics.

A procedural requirement: develop a civil language

There is a strong tendency in the kind of meetings outlined above for those who represent various groups, especially in public meetings, to voice their position in a strong emotive terms and criticize the position of the other groups. Such openings make it difficult to proceed and move to a productive give and take, leading to new shared understandings. I hence strongly urge that either in preparing the meetings, or as part of the first meeting, there will time set aside to devoted to what might be called the rules of engagement, on the norms all agree will guide the dialogues. These rules are a key element of a civil language, essential for any productive give and take. They entail an agreement (a) not to demonize the other sides; (b) speak for your group rather than state what the other groups believe or hold; (c) do not use hot adjectives; (d) avoid pushing the other sides' sensitive buttons; (e) above all, discuss what we might do in the future rather than what was done in the past;¹(f) when a concern of one group is raised, it is improper to seek to tie it to other concerns of other groups. Each group deserves its day in court to speak.

The moderator will, especially initially, need to often remind people to observe the rules. He or she will need to be highly respected by all to be able to keep the meeting on track. The rest of the meeting will be devoted to choosing the substantive topics for say three more meetings to follow.

A parallel forum

In order to ensure that the deliberations of the group of 16 will bring along the four constituencies represented, as much as possible, it is necessary to stream and post the deliberations and provide opportunities for invite comments from the public. However (a) all commentators will need to identify themselves (and be informed that their identity will be verified) and (b) their comments will be edited in line with the rules of engagement listed above. Such a forum will do much to foster a civil dialogue, well beyond that of the group of 16, a long way from the usually acrimonious debates that bedevil Israeli discourse.

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President Rivlin, wisely in my judgment, refers to a partnership rather than a community. The four groups can find many ways to increase shared understanding if initially they focus on shared and complementary interests rather than on shared values. All four groups would gain—albeit not equally—from stronger environmental protection, higher levels of economic growth, less bureaucratic forms of governments, higher public safety (concerns criminals and drug dealers), stronger consumer and worker protection, and much else. These are shared interests and hence allow for a win x 4 deliberations. More complex but potentially very productive are deliberations about issues in which interests of the various groups differ but these interests differ in salience.²Here tradeoffs work on the basis that one group has a very strong interest in A and B, and the other in Y and Z. Hence they can come together by the first group making concessions on Y and Z and the other an A and B.

¹ For more about this, please see: Etzioni, Amitai and Shibley Telhami. 2002. "Mideast: Focus on the Possible." *The Christian Science Monitor* (June 17). <http://aladinrc.wrlc.org/bitstream/handle/1961/1088/B392.pdf?sequence=1>

² Amitai Etzioni. "The Saliency of Saliency in International Relations" *Brown Journal of World Affairs*. Forthcoming (Spring/Summer 2016).

The reason I noted that I see a great wisdom of starting the Rivlin series of deliberations as partners rather than as community builders, is that partnerships are built on interests which are much less emotionally charged than values and which allow one to find new measure that pay off to all groups. Once the sense of partnerships is enhanced and developed, the four groups might be much more ready to examine shared core values, the foundation of communities.

Here a core subject is obvious the relationship between respect for individual rights and the democratic process—and the incontestable fact that Israel is and will be a Jewish state. Here a good place to start is to note that there is no one way to combine these two key elements. Every democracy has developed its own way of making these combinations. France is most extreme on separating church and state, in formal legal terms, but the Catholic Church has considerable influence. The only other major nation that tries to separate state and church is the US, in which Christian groups play a major role in politics. The UK has an established church. While in recent decades the Anglican Church played a rather limited role –it played a major role in the past, long after the UK was considered the mother of democracy. In Norway, until very recently, the king had to be a Lutheran; Lutheran clergy were paid by the state and it financed Lutheran places of worship. Lutheran values are still thought in public schools. In Germany courts ruled that no religious symbols are allowed in public schools—except crucifixes .In short each nation has to work out its particular combination of liberal democracy and religion. However, this is best achieved not by some public intellectuals providing a position paper, but by deliberations of those involved, most likely after they become strong partners.