

## Civil Discourse

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We are here today to worship, to learn, and to reflect. As we draw on the treasury of Judaism — the sensitivity of our ethics, the equity of our justice, the beauty of our prayers, the customs of our holy days, the comforts of our *chesed* practices, the wisdom for living together — we should remember that they all were developed through civil discourse. The Talmud is not a code of law, but a transcript of discussions — sometimes heated, but fair and respectful. The Rabbis set norms for proper discourse, as does any healthy polity or organization.

It's really quite remarkable. Even though their discussions were based on a firm belief that the Torah was the word of God, our system rejected any notion of hierarchy or monopoly of authority. Rabbis came from every walk of life, united by learning and by their commitment to the principle that many minds in conversation are the best way to discover the truths in God's words.

This is why I find the nature of public discourse today to be so distressing. It's not dialogue at all; it's dueling monologues. Political operatives openly state that it's not enough to win — you have to destroy the opposition. Talking heads on TV fire verbal broadsides at each other. The tone is angry, unforgiving, and *ad hominem*. Popular political books have words in their titles like "treason," "betrayal," "unfit," "fat," "stupid," and "liar". Nuance and shades of gray are scorned. Courtesy, respect, and genuine dialogue are absent.

And the Jewish world is similarly infected. As I indicated yesterday, Israel is faced with difficult and complex problems, but too often discussion both here and there is black-and-white. Someone can be for the security fence, but question where it is being built — that person will be attacked as a traitor or a self-hating Jew. And how many Jewish organizations have been torn apart by people who bring the total war style of attack into the boardroom?

Technology has enhanced our ability to fling harsh words. There was a great cartoon in the paper recently. It shows the husband in his corner at his computer, e-mailing his wife, who is sitting in another corner at *her* computer. He writes to her, "Do you think there's anything to those reports about the Internet making people more isolated and losing social graces?" She fires back, "Of course not, you idiot."

So today let's consider the value of civil discourse. Most of us are alienated by the nasty tone of public debate these days. It's why so many people have disengaged from the political process. We instinctively grasp that attack mode produces bad results. And, as Jews, we benefit from a tradition that has long appreciated the power of words to hurt and to heal.

I want to begin with a wonderful quote from the American canon:

We may please ourselves with the prospect of free and popular governments, God grant us the way. But I fear that in every assembly members will obtain an influence by *noise* rather than *sense*, by *meanness* rather than *greatness*, and by *ignorance* and not *learning*. There is one thing...that must be attempted and most sacredly observed, or we are all undone. There must be decency and respect and

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eneration introduced for persons of every rank, or we are undone. In popular government, this is our only way.

Founding Father John Adams wrote those words in 1776. I'd like to mount them on the wall of every legislative and executive office and every radio and television studio in our land. Adams' negatives— noise, meanness, and ignorance — describe the state of discourse today. And indeed we are undone.

Debate today takes an angry tone. Rage, not reason, rules the airwaves. Our rabbis distrusted anger. They said that anger makes a person forget his wisdom. A classic example was the moment when Moses' accumulated anger at the whining Israelites boiled over and he struck the rock.

Anger causes us to lash out, to say hurtful things. In public discourse, it leads to insults and personal attacks.

But when you lose your temper, you lose the argument. I can't think of any issues that can be resolved by saying "You're ugly and your mother dresses you funny."

Unfortunately, for the media, anger is the emotional equivalent of "If it bleeds, it leads." Two talking heads screaming at each other is good television. Too bad if two talking heads discoursing with respect and mutual concern for truth is good for society. That doesn't increase the ratings.

During the Republican convention, I was saddened by a *New York Times* story about the demonstrators. The organizers made a great effort to prevent violence and vandalism. The *Times* article said, "Lacking bloody scenes of billy-club wielding police or billowing clouds of tear gas, the cameras—and the public's attention—have focused elsewhere." The media privilege the extremes and the screamers.

So it's important not only to restrain our own anger, but also not to reward it in others. Furthermore, rage is not just losing one's temper. It is an attitude, an intolerance of opposing views. If you call someone a traitor, or an idiot, you squelch discussion. How can you talk with a traitor or an idiot?

I have a theory about one contributing factor to the worsening of public discourse. The philosophical opposite of our Jewish encouragement of debate is the Manichean world-view, which sees the world as a battleground between the forces of good and evil. *We* have the absolute truth. Everyone who doesn't accept *our* truth is of the devil. There is a secular version of this on the left, and a triumphalist version of this from the Christian right. If I believe that my opponent is not just wrong, or uninformed, but that he and his ideas are Satanic — once again discourse is impossible. My only response must be to suppress his ideas and to destroy him.

The Talmudic approach says that good people can differ. And so does the tradition of American democracy. Political scientist Thomas Mann said,

Democracy is a means of living together despite our differences. Democratic deliberation is an alternative to physical violence. It's predicated on the assumption that it's possible to disagree agreeably, that it's better to laugh than to cry, that one can vigorously contest the positions of one's adversary without questioning his or her personal integrity or motivation, and that parties to a debate are entitled to the presumption that their views are legitimate if not correct.

Name-calling, personal attacks, and character assassination are tactics to delegitimize and demonize the opposition. That is not civil discourse; that is not democracy. Thomas Mann calls it "The politics of accusation and moral annihilation." It

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is a form of totalitarianism. We Jews should know better than anyone that demonization leads to exclusion, violence, and oppression.

So how can we raise the level of public discourse, which also means improving politics, governance, and democracy in our country and in our organizations? We can begin with the wisdom of Rabbi Israel Salanter, who said, "Be vigilant in protecting the honor of all people, especially those with whom you disagree." And we have many other resources in our tradition.

Rabbi Joseph Telushkin wrote a wonderful book called *Words that Hurt, Words that Heal*. I commend it to you all. At the end of the book he gives practical advice on how to incorporate ethical speech into everyday life. I'll blend his ideas with some of the principles of civil discourse that I've come across in my reading.

Regarding anger, he recommends, "Limit the expression of your anger to the incident that provoked it." In other words, say "That thing you did or said made me angry." In public discourse this means that we address issues rather than people.

When we indulge our temper, we stop listening and reach for a verbal weapon. We mock the other person or dredge up every old grudge and bad behavior. That leads to another principle: fighting fair requires that we never "bring in information about the person with whom you are arguing to discredit or embarrass him or her."

In public life that requires that *ad hominem* attacks be ruled out of bounds. In his book, Telushkin tells of a congressional campaign in 1980. One candidate unearthed and publicized that fact that his opponent had once suffered from depression when he was a teenager, which was treated by electroshock therapy. When the candidate complained about this unethical and inflammatory intrusion on his privacy, Lee Atwater, who was directing the opponent's campaign, responded that he wasn't going to answer charges made by a person "hooked up to jumper cables."

Nice. He not only degraded the candidate, but also everyone who has suffered from depression or undergone electric shock therapy.

Atwater is worth mentioning, not because he pioneered the new level of attack that poisons political life today, but because he repented of his deeds.

Ten years later Atwater was dying of cancer, himself hooked up to machines. He then sent a letter to the candidate apologizing for his vicious behavior. He wrote,

Long before I was struck with cancer, I felt something stirring in American society. It was a sense among the people of the country — Republicans and Democrats alike — that something was missing from their lives, something crucial... But I wasn't exactly sure what 'it' was. My illness helped me to see that what was missing in society is what was missing in me: a little heart, a lot of brotherhood... Mostly I am sorry for the way I thought of other people. Like a good general, I had treated everyone who wasn't with me as against me.

Too bad he didn't learn from Harry Truman. Congressman Tip O'Neill told about meeting President Truman in 1953 as part of a group of freshman congressmen. Eisenhower was president. Someone said something about Mamie Eisenhower. Truman said, "Leave his family alone. If I ever hear that one of you attacked the wife or family member of the President of the United States, I'll personally go into your district and

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campaign against you.”<sup>1</sup> Where are the political leaders today who are willing to show that kind of moral leadership?

In Los Angeles, a group of Rabbis, concerned about harsh interdenominational rhetoric in the Jewish community, came up with some principles. One of them was, “Avoid words of incitement. Language meant merely to mock, deride, and insult should never be used. Criticism and challenge should be addressed to the substance of the issue, and should stand on its own merit.”

These teachings all guide us toward a response to this corrosive problem. First, we can look at our own conduct and control how we argue and how we engage others in debate. Second, we can work to assure that every institution with which we are involved follows the rules of civil discourse.

Third, we must be discriminating consumers of entertainment and information. The media present so much angry rhetoric, screaming extremes, and public humiliation because they sell.

So don’t reward them. I don’t care how much a talk show host confirms or outrages your opinions. I don’t care how much a reality show amuses you. If it’s based on anger, insult, degradation, or humiliation, then it is playing to your worst nature. It’s appealing to your *yetzer hara*, your evil inclination. It is constricting your soul and abrading your empathy. Ask yourself, what would Rabbi Salanter say? He’d say, “Be vigilant in protecting the honor of all people, especially those with whom you disagree.” And turn that garbage off.

Finally, we must tell our political leaders that we are starving for John Adams’ positives: sense, greatness, learning, decency, respect and veneration. We must speak clearly, and let our leaders know that we will not reward the politics of moral annihilation. We do this most effectively by monitoring our own side, and addressing our own parties.

I’ll conclude with a little story I learned from an article by Rabbi Allen Maller. There was once a little girl who had a problem with her temper. And when she lost her temper, she would insult other people. So one day her mother gave her a hammer and a bag of nails and told her that every time she lost her temper or insulted someone, she had to hammer a nail into the back fence.

The first day the girl pounded 14 nails into the fence. Over the next few weeks, the number of nails per day decreased, as she discovered that it was easier to hold her temper than to drive those nails into the fence.

Finally a day came when she didn’t lose her temper even once. No harsh words escaped her lips. When she told her mother, she said, “OK, now pull out one nail every day you keep your temper.” And even when she heard that, the girl kept her temper!

Days passed, and finally all the nails were gone. When she told this to her mother, she took her daughter by the hand and led her to the fence. She said, “You have done well, but look at all the holes in the fence. The fence will never be the same. When you say things in anger, they leave a scar just like these.”

“How can I repair the fence?” asked the girl. “Will it have to remain damaged forever?”

“Yes and no,” said the mother. “Our Rabbis say that if the fence is alive and responds to the way you have changed, it too can change and heal itself. If the fence is dead to the possibility of your repentance it will carry its scars onward. The fence will

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<sup>1</sup> Tip O’Neill with Gary Hymel, *All Politics is Local*, p. 35, quoted in Telushkin, p. 127.

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never be as it was before, but it doesn't have to become like new to be a good fence. If you do your part and change, and the fence does its part in response, God will do something wonderful. God will promote a healing that will make you and the fence better. This process is called atonement. It means that the changes that come about from repentance and forgiveness lead people to higher levels of relationship than was the case before."

We've seen too many nails hammered into the fence in American life and in Jewish life. It's time to stop the insults, invective, and character assassination. It's time to purge public life of meanness and incivility. Democracy will fail unless we follow the Talmudic model, treating issues as serious questions that require critical thinking and wide, respectful discussion, not as a stick with which to beat your opponent. It's time to stop rewarding the shouters, the haters, and the attackers. It's time to take the war metaphors out of political campaigning, and political campaigning out of the gutter.

On the first night of Rosh Hashanah we heard how every human face is the image of God, every human being is a Thou, not an It. We must take this message of *kavod*, of honor for every person, out into the public square, so that democracy can fulfill its promise, and people can live together in amity and peace. As John Adams prayed, so must we: may God grant us the way.