

## Toward a More Civil Discourse

Yom Kippur Evening  
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Kahal Kadosh Beth Elohim  
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Let me begin this evening, in the spirit of the holiday, with a personal *viddui* for any way in which I have disappointed you as your rabbi in the past year. When we were sharing our regrets and resolutions on the way to *Tashlich* last week, I told my son that I want to be a better listener. He got a puzzled look on his face, and said, “But Mommy, when people come to temple, aren’t they supposed to sit still and listen to *you*?” I suppose he is right, in part. But I only merit this awesome opportunity to have you “sit still and listen to me” by being attentive to you. So for any way in which I fell short this past year, please know that I am truly sorry.

What I’d like to discuss with you tonight has much to do with listening, and attentiveness; the nature of our discourse in this country, and the respect we show to others. Martin Buber wrote the following: “The human world is today, as never before, split into two camps, each of which understands the other as the embodiment of falsehood and itself as the embodiment of truth. ... Each side has assumed monopoly of the sunlight and has plunged its antagonist into night. Each side demands that you decide between day and night.” Buber wrote those words in 1967, and unfortunately, they are as true today as ever.

We get our news from different sources. We watch the same speech on different networks, with the result that before we can engage in our own critical thinking – alone and with others – the spin we inevitably hear already distances us from one another. We call people names. We question their integrity. We firmly believe that, “I am right.” And assertively conclude that, “You, therefore, must be wrong.”

Earlier this summer, the Stockton Ports, a minor league baseball team in California, offered a special promotion. When ticket-holders arrived at the game, they each received seat cushions with President Obama’s face on one side and Mitt Romney’s face on the other. Fans were told to sit on the face of the candidate they wanted to lose, and to share their thoughts on Twitter using the hashtags #SitonMitt and #BunsonObama. *Really??* We are looking to these leaders to help us navigate some of the most daunting challenges our nation and world have ever faced, and

we're going to *sit on their faces*? Some say of the political climate in our country: It's been worse. Let's not forget there was a time when policy and primacy were decided by duels, after all. Well, I'm sorry if I don't take consolation from the comparison. At times it seems a sign, not of how far we have come, but of where we might yet go.

It's not new, of course, for political rivals to go after one another. But one wants them to sit down over dinner afterwards; share stories of their constituents, their grandchildren and children; and figure out how they can work together for the public good. I heard as much from President Clinton when he said at the Democratic National Convention that, as fierce as his rivalry with Republicans was when he was president, he was never taught to *hate* them. And I heard it from Senator Lindsey Graham when he spoke at our Francis Salvador Award dinner and underscored that none of our country's greatest achievements, and certainly none that may yet be achieved, were accomplished without reaching across the aisle to find partners. If we lose that camaraderie in our civic institutions, we lose precious social capital. For when rancorous dispute replaces respectful dialogue, the personal bonds that cause people to hang together at times of strain or crisis are jeopardized and come apart.

And the same holds for our local institutions, our community organizations – and our synagogue, as well. Friends, there is no reason for us to be that brittle. After seeing each other through sickness and family emergencies, celebrating together at one another's simchas, worshipping beside one another during these High Holy Days, we should be able to express ourselves respectfully, and hear one another share points of view that differ from our own – even disappoint us – without heading for the exits. And God forbid there should ever be seat cushions with faces on them in this sanctuary (unless maybe it's Haman's).

For Jewish history is all too familiar with needless fighting. Our sages tell us that many of the great tragedies in our history were due to *sinat chinam*, causeless hatred among us. In Roman times, Jews took up passionately different positions as to how to respond to Roman oppression and the threat to the Temple in Jerusalem. As the Empire's legions methodically secured the country against rebellion, five separate Jewish factions battled within the walls of the capital. Rebel elements overthrew the traditional leadership of the city, pillaging and killing. They turned against each other, balkanizing the city. As the conqueror's noose tightened around the city walls, those who tried to flee were killed by their countrymen. Hunger mounted, because rival factions had burned stores of grain in the course of their battles. As the siege worsened, rebels tortured the wealthy to reveal their hidden food supplies. Meanwhile, the Romans understood that the battling factions were doing their work for them, so they took their time, pacifying the rest of the country. Finally, starving and divided, Jerusalem fell, the Temple was destroyed, and 2000 years of exile began.

That's a part of our history we seldom tell – that the Jewish people were divided over whether to revolt, that the verbal arguments became violent, that ideological conflicts and factional hatred left them weakened and fractured. Disagreements completely obscured any sense of shared values and concern; each group became convinced that it alone held the truth.

So how *then* – and how *now* – does Jewish tradition instruct us to restore a spirit of respect and civil discourse? First, we must remember the power of our words. To some extent in Jewish culture, words are all you really need. In the Torah, naming creates reality. Saying what something is gives it an identity and makes it real. Life and death are in the power of the tongue, the Bible teaches, and the rabbis tell wonderful stories about body parts – arms and legs, thighs and shoulders – competing for supremacy, only to be shown up by the power of speech. The strongest muscles, literally and figuratively, are not the biceps or the quads, but the muscles in the tongue. The right words can rescue a sensitive situation, even save a life; while the wrong words can destroy months or even years of patient and thoughtful work.

There's a prayer I often have parents share with their newborn child at a baby naming or bris, which includes the following:

We wish for you to be a person of character, strong but not tough, gentle but not weak.  
We wish for you to be righteous but not self-righteous, honest but not unforgiving.  
Whenever you speak, may your words be words of wisdom and friendship.

Judging from the responses of those present for these simchas, the prayer seems to resonate with parents and others. It seems to capture what we want for our children – a certain balance of character, strength and integrity that doesn't come at the expense of openness and respect. So when did we stop praying for ourselves, the grown and theoretically wise, that *we* might emulate these same qualities. Our High Holy Day liturgy continually reminds us to speak honestly, yet with gentleness; to demonstrate humility – not only with our God, but with one another, as well. May we take these words to heart.

Second, we need to continually challenge our assumptions, our assessment of a situation. Rabbi David Cohen shares the story of a young man who was in line to visit the Skverer Rebbe in Monsey, NY. He was wearing jeans, a polo shirt and just a small crotched kippah – not the typical garb for a visitor to the Rebbe, so the gabbai (the one who facilitated meetings with the Rebbe) eyed him suspiciously and not without a bit of contempt. When it was his turn, the young man asked the Rebbe for a *Mi Shebeirach* (a blessing for healing) for Dovid ben Sara. The gabbai overheard the request and asked the young man what his connection to Dovid ben Sara was. The young man explained that he was a counselor at a camp for special-needs children and Dovid ben Sara was his camper. It was David's birthday, and – since the boy was a Skverer Chassid – he had thought it would be a meaningful gift to receive a *b'racha* from the Rebbe.

Then the young man noticed that the gabbai was crying and asked him why. The gabbai replied, “Dovid ben Sara is my son, and I am incredibly moved by your efforts on his behalf.”

Friends, we need to be willing to get past our assumptions about one another and dig deeper to where our common humanity lies. For are we really so sure, so absolutely confident in our assessment of a situation that we cannot for a moment conceive of a different reality, another possible and more positive explanation?

And third, we must make a point to *listen* – not only to that with which we know we already agree, but to a variety of perspectives and ideas about any given issue. And here I’d like to talk specifically about Israel – about *how we talk* about Israel. As we are keenly aware, these are very tense and difficult times in the Middle East. The scepter of potential war with Iran looms large; the persistent dangers of violence and terrorism remain. Uprisings throughout the region bring a sense of doom *and* the seeds of hope – sometimes simultaneously. Within Israel there are daunting domestic challenges, as well. There, like here, concerns over rising unemployment dominate public discourse; questions of equality and discrimination demand to be answered. And there are no shortage of responses being offered to all of these uncertainties, both in Israel, and here at home.

Yet all too often, serious dialogue deteriorates into name-calling and finger-pointing. We hear it said of someone who supports a settlement freeze, for instance: “You don’t really love Israel – you’re a self-hating Jew.” Or of someone who opposes a settlement freeze: “You don’t really love Israel – you’re an enemy of peace.” We hear it said of those who advocate maintaining a course of diplomacy with Iran: “You don’t really love Israel – you’re hiding your head in the sand.” Of someone who feels Israel must launch a preemptive attack: “You don’t really love Israel – you’re willing to let her be blown off the map.”

Friends, no one knows what the future will bring in Israel. I encounter the same circulating emails you do that bomb shelters are being readied, troops mobilized. Yet my Israeli colleagues assure us that the relatively small military movements have been to reinforce embassies in the wake of recent violence, and there has been no indication of activating army reserves. Whatever the future holds, certainly our hearts are turned toward the East and our prayers for peace are as urgent as ever. We should avail ourselves of every opportunity to learn more – follow a variety of news sources, attend the many lectures and programs related to Israel at the College of Charleston and elsewhere. There will be an inspiring film about Israel at the Terrace Theater next Wednesday; and, of course, a chance to hear Alan Dershowitz speak on Sunday, October 14<sup>th</sup>.

And then we should discuss ... respectfully. I do not know that any of the words we speak will determine the fate of Israel, but I am certain they will determine the fate of this community. For

when we assume that only those who agree with us really love Israel, that unless everyone agrees with us Israel is doomed, all we really do is force people out of engagement at all and close off discussion of complicated and fraught issues. What Israel needs more than anything are people who *do* love Israel, and that love comes in many shapes and sizes. That pluralistic spirit is a part of our past, too.

So let me conclude with one more episode from ancient Jewish history. It's revealed in the oldest inscription that's been uncovered in Jerusalem, found at Hezekiah's tunnel south of the Temple Mount. The words date back to the 7<sup>th</sup> century BCE, and they read:

“And this is the way that the tunnel was cut through: Each man toward his fellow, and while there were still three cubits to be cut through, there was heard the sound of a man calling to his fellow, and there was an overlap in the rock on the right and on the left. And when the tunnel was driven through, the quarrymen hewed the rock, each man toward his fellow, axe against axe, and the water flowed from the spring toward the reservoir.”

Nearly three thousand years ago, humanity accomplished an amazing feat: Through the spirit of cooperation, they merged separate tunnels to create one water source that could nourish the entire city. And they thought enough of their accomplishment that they immortalized, not only their achievement, but the spirit of camaraderie by which it was won. May we today recapture that spirit – in our politics, in our discourse of timely issues, in our everyday speech. May we remember the power of our words, challenge our assessments and assumptions, and welcome the chance to listen to all perspectives and ideas. For not by might and not by power – and *certainly* not by name-calling – but by spirit alone may we all yet live in peace. Amen.