

Temper of the Times

What was behind the Tucson supermarket shooting on January 8 and what should be changed to prevent the next one?

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THE TRAGIC SHOOTING OF US CONGRESSWOMAN Gabrielle (Gabby) Giffords and the killing of six others on January 8, as Giffords was holding one of her trademark outdoor meetings with her constituents at a Safeway store in Tucson, Arizona, shook the entire nation. Even as Gifford's situation remained critical, the country quickly began speculating about what was behind the tragedy and what should be changed to prevent the next one: Were the gun laws too lenient? Were the cutbacks in programs to assist the mentally unstable too large? Or was it the incendiary language in the public debate that had unleashed a killer?

Even though anti-Semitism was quickly ruled out – accused Jared Lee Loughner is not assumed to be acting out of anti-Semitic motives – both US Jews and the wider community soon learned that Giffords was the first Jewish politician from Arizona to be elected to national office. Yet, although the Jewish community is troubled by other questions regarding the increasing animosity of the political debate among Jews, paradoxically there is some evidence that Americans may be looking to the Jewish community for leadership as it struggles to change the tone of political discourse in the country.

After a grueling campaign during which the Congresswoman was the target of vitriolic attacks, especially for her support of President Barack Obama's health-care reform legislation, Giffords just barely won her third term in Congress in November. Although Tucson is considered more liberal than the rest of Arizona, Giffords was under attack not only from some of her constituents but conservatives from around the country, who fought vigorously against the reform bill. Rep. Eliot Engel (D-NJ), a close friend of Giffords, tells *The Report* that while he "doesn't blame ideology for the shooting, the US Supreme Court ruling referred to as 'Citizens United' allowed corporations to pour big bucks into any district without any identification, resulting in her being targeted with the most vicious ads against her (anonymously from around the country)." He adds, "If people keep hearing these kinds of messages, they start believing them." One of her opponents' signs read: "Giffords Stole \$500 Billion From Your Health Care."

According to Engel, opposition to Jewish candidates often takes on anti-Semitic overtones. He notes that he, too, often received vitriolic phone calls to his office during the health care debate. Some of the calls, he says, were anti-Semitic, while others were "just hateful." He adds that he is sure that "all Jewish congressmen at times get anti-Semitic calls, even Gabby."

Anti-Semitism has been only a sliver, however, of the vociferous rage that has erupted in American political debate over the last few years. Some of it came from the fact that President Obama is the first black leader of the country, sparking racist attacks and threats. The

wrath of the conservative element of the populace found its footing in the anxiety caused by the worst recession since the Depression of the 1930s. That fear was the ground in which the seeds of bigotry and vicious and inaccurate attacks germinated.

Josh Protas, an Arizona native, personal friend of Rep. Giffords and formerly Tucson-area director and currently head of the Jewish Council for Public Affairs (JCPA) in Washington, tells *The Report* with bitter irony that Giffords herself had been "disturbed by the tenor of debate in political discourse, which turned ugly the last couple of years." He recalls a meeting with Giffords two years ago to discuss immigration issues and relates that there was a rally outside her office "that seemed to include a large number of people sympathetic to the Tea Party movement. Many of those demonstrating were holding signs attacking Giffords and criticizing the proposed plans for health care reform. There was some ugly stuff on the signs and being chanted – calling Gabby a traitor and un-American and things like that," he recalls.

Indeed, within hours after her vote in favor of the health-care reform legislation in March 2010, Giffords' Tucson office was vandalized. No one was charged with the crime.

FOLLOWING THE ATTACK ON GIFFORDS, SARAH Palin, the 2008 Republican vice presidential candidate, succeeded in thrusting herself once again into the limelight. Former governor of Alaska, a Tea Party supporter and paid Fox News commentator, Palin had published a map during the congressional campaign, which featured rifle crosshairs on the congressional districts of 20 Democrats – including Giffords. She then tweeted it to her followers, saying "Commonsense Conservatives & Lovers of America: Don't Retreat, Instead – RELOAD."

Notably, it was Giffords herself, in an interview on MSNBC, who first objected to Palin's crosshairs map. "We're on Sarah Palin's targeted list...the way she has it depicted, it has the crosshairs of a gun sight over our district. When people do that, they have to realize that there are consequences to that action."

Both during the heated congressional campaign but more notably after the Tucson shooting, Palin was harshly criticized for the "crosshairs map," which was subsequently retracted. But then Palin drew the American Jewish community's outrage when, in what may be seen as an attempt to deflect criticism or blame, she released, on the day of the memorial for the Tucson shootings, a video on Facebook in which she labeled as a "blood libel" the linking of her rhetoric and the crosshairs map with the shootings in Arizona.

Although Giffords appears to be making an astounding recovery, the Republicans have been on the defense. Reflecting the sense of victimization and marginalization felt by many members of the Tea Party,



CALL FOR TOLERANCE: A sign at a ceremony in support of Rep. Gabrielle Giffords outside her Tucson office in January

the strongly conservative but non-cohesive group associated with right-wing Republicans, Palin had appropriated the phrase specifically associated with the long history of pogroms and other violent crimes against the Jewish people. In her “defense,” some claimed that she did not know the meaning of the term, but Palin stood by her comments, insisting that not only did she know the meaning of the term – but that she is convinced it is the correct and proper description for her situation.

Indeed, Palin was strongly supported by some in the Jewish community. Within hours of her video posting, American Jews for Sarah Palin sent out an “initial statement” saying: “Gov. Palin got it right, and we Jews, of all people, should know a blood libel when we see one. Falsely accusing someone of shedding blood is a blood libel – whether it’s the medieval Church accusing Jews of baking blood in Passover matzos, or contemporary Muslim extremists accusing Israel of slaughtering Arabs to harvest their organs, or political partisans blaming conservative political figures and talk show hosts for the Tucson massacre.”

In the following days, at least six more e-mails were sent by Benyamin Korn, director of Jewish Americans for Sarah Palin, referring to comments or articles written by famed attorney Alan Dershowitz, Rabbi Shmuley Boteach and writer Jonathan Tobin who pointed out that the Jewish publication “Commentary” has used the term “blood libel.”

At the same time, others in the Jewish community were lambasting Palin for using the term. One of those was Simon Greer, president and chief executive officer of the progressive group, Jewish Funds for Justice (JFSJ), a left-wing organization founded to affirm the commitment of Jews to work for social and economic justice in the US.

IN MARCH 2010, THE JFSJ launched its “Solutions, Not Scapegoats” campaign.

Greer, president and chief executive officer of JFSJ, tells The Report that over a year ago, the organization surveyed “800 Jews across America about what American Jews should stand for.” According to Greer, “many people expressed a desire for our community’s leadership to be more outspoken on issues of communal concern. This included a stronger Jewish voice countering the rhetoric coming from Tea Party leaders, including Sarah Palin and (conservative radio and Fox TV commentator) Glenn Beck. They felt too often this rhetoric played on people’s fears during a time of economic crisis. And they were concerned where this anger would lead our country at a time when we need people working together to solve very real problems facing millions of Americans.

“We saw that the culture was wanting to do more scapegoating rather than find solutions and we wanted, as Jews, to be part of the solution,” he adds.

In April 2010, Greer published an op-ed in the Washington Post online, criticizing

Beck, praising the “common good” and explaining that the Jewish community is interconnected with other communities. Beck responded by asserting that talk of “common good” was what led to “death camps.”

As a Jew, Greer says, he was outraged by the comment – even though he knows that Beck also frequently uses the term Nazi to describe individuals with whom he does not agree. Following a media ruckus and a heated exchange of barbs between Greer and other Jews and Beck, Greer and other Jewish leaders met with Roger Ailes, head of Fox News, in early July 2010. Apparently in response to the outcome of that meeting, Beck promised to be more circumspect in his use of Holocaust terminology.

“That seemed like a good sign,” until Fox then ran a three-part program about George Soros in which Fox “reintroduced Jews as puppet masters who control the press and finance,” Greer says. “This is what the ‘Protocols of the Elders’ has said for a long time and now it was reintroduced into popular American culture. We took an ardent stand. They violated their commitment.”

In response, less than one week after the shooting in Tucson, Greer and a handful of his followers stood outside in sub-freezing temperatures at the New York offices of News Corp., which owns Fox News and attempted to submit the names of more than 10,000 people – gathered through e-mail, Facebook and Twitter – calling for the firing of Glenn Beck. The group was not allowed to deliver the petition nor the large “pink slip” requesting Beck’s firing, but the petition was mailed along with a list of Glenn Beck’s 10 worst quotes from 2010 to News Corp. Greer has yet to receive a response. Perhaps coincidentally, that same week, Beck’s radio show on New York’s WOR was dropped. Neither WOR nor News Corp. responded to The Report’s request for a response.

Rabbi Steve Gutow, president of the Jewish Council for Public Affairs (JCPA), a national umbrella organization for Jewish Community Relations Councils (JCRC), as well as other Jewish groups, has staunchly supported Greer's campaign against Beck's rhetoric. In November 2010, JCPA rolled out its own attempt to tone down the rhetoric by publishing a "Civility Pledge." In fact, JCPA hosted a discussion with nationally recognized Jewish leaders including Blu Greenberg, Rabbi Doug Kahn, Rabbi Joseph Telushkin and Rabbi Melissa Weintraub on what the Jewish community should do to encourage civil and reasonable dialogue about the issues most important to it. In addition to these pledge signers are Rabbi Irving Greenberg and Matthew Brooks, head of the Republican Jewish Coalition.

According to Gutow, approximately 1,600 Jewish leaders have signed the pledge, which says, in part: "Civility is neither the lack of difference nor the squelching of debate. It is the application of care for the dignity of every human being, even those with whom we may sharply disagree. It is listening carefully when others speak, not just to understand what they are saying and thinking, but to open ourselves to the possibility that they may have something to teach. It is the guarding of tongue and the rejection of false witness."

Gutow tells The Report that efforts to create the pledge were initiated because the "body politic of the country had gotten so bad. Also, in Jewish communities, you couldn't talk about Israel" because the arguments would get out of control. Many American Jews follow the example of the American Israel Public Affairs Committee (AIPAC) in supporting the policies of Prime Minister Benjamin Netanyahu. But others, newly represented by the two-year-old pro-Israel, pro-peace group J Street, believe the US government should push the Israelis and Palestinians to reach a negotiated settlement that would result in a Palestinian state next to Israel. Still others, especially in the San Francisco Bay Area, promote boycotts and divestment measures against Israel. Arguments between the various sides often result in name-calling and shattered relationships that threaten the unity of the Jewish community.

Republican Jewish Coalition head Brooks pointed to the ad hominem attacks that have increased in American culture. "The language we use needs to be more civil," he tells The Report.

Other Jewish organizations agree. In the weeks after the Giffords shooting, the Anti-Defamation League (ADL) called for more respectful political debate and the Union of Orthodox Jewish Organizations of America issued a resolution that calls for education about the "paramount importance of civility in public and communal discourse; to set an example for others by eschewing language that polarizes; and to publicize the JCPA Civility Campaign."

SAYING THAT HE AGREES WITH THE NEED FOR MORE civil discourse, David A. Harris, president and chief executive officer of the National Jewish Democratic Council, tells The Report that "violating such pledges has no consequences, which renders it meaningless." Gutow acknowledges that this is a problem. "Who calls you out and what for? Do you do it in the Jewish tradition and do it privately?"

The JCPA has created a committee of nine to try to answer these questions and determine how to create consequences for, and hold accountable, any pledge signers who break their commitment with uncivil language. "We are studying this from a Jewish perspective," he

said, noting that the committee is referred to as *tokhecha*, which means rebuke. "We'll have something to roll out in 2011," he says, adding that he has already received phone calls from people who said "a [pledge] signer attacked me."

"I'm not the police force of the Jewish community," Gutow says.

But he does believe that if a move toward more civil conversation "gets rolling, we can have an influence on the wider American community." But then he adds, "That's kind of a 'messianic' way of thinking."

Yet the idea may not be so far-fetched. The JCRC in the San Francisco Bay Area has just launched its "Year of Civil Discourse Initiative," designed to elevate the level of discourse in the Jewish community. The program, according to its website "will provide Jewish community members, institutions, and leaders with the tools to have respectful, engaging conversations about Israel and emerging controversial issues." Abby Michelson Porth, associate director of the Bay Area, tells The Report that several foundations contributed more than \$200,000 to the initiative.

The Year of Civil Discourse Initiative offers facilitation and skill training for a dialogue and deliberation effort called Project Reconnections to various local institutions where controversy has threatened to break them apart, says Porth. (See *The Jerusalem Report*, November 9, 2009.) So far, five synagogues in the San Francisco area have signed up. The initiative also includes a Rabbis Circle, designed for local clergy, who are starting to model civil dialogue and empower others to join them. In addition, for the unaffiliated, the JCRC is offering the wider public programs based on studying text, films and books.

"We've already heard from the Christian community and other ethnic communities who have heard about what we're doing and are interested in replicating this effort," says Porth. To facilitate efforts by other faith groups as well as other Jewish communities, by year's end, the JCRC plans to assemble a manual for best practices on how to manage controversy and help find consensus when controversies arise.

Greer is optimistic about the future of the tenor of political debate in the country, suggesting that there might be a "post-Tucson America," similar to post-9/11 when the country unified in the wake of the massive terrorist attacks.

But will all of these civility efforts really change the volatile climate both in and outside the American Jewish community? Rep. Engel believes the rhetoric will tone down initially, in a sober response to the Tucson shooting, but then return to its fiery level. However, even before Giffords' condition improved and she was moved to a Houston rehabilitation hospital, Tennessee Democratic Congressman Steve Cohen, during a Republican-led debate to repeal the health-care reform legislation, likened the Republican rhetoric to lies spread by Nazi propaganda leader Joseph Goebbels. Cohen was strongly criticized by both Republican and Democratic leaders as well as the ADL and other prominent Jews.

And just four days after the tragedy in Tucson, Mark DeMoss, a prominent Republican and evangelical Christian, who runs an Atlanta public relations firm and who had launched a civility pledge for governors and congressmen two years ago, called it quits. He folded the project, on which he spent \$30,000, according to The New York Times, because only three legislators signed the pledge.

One of those three was Jewish Senator Joseph I. Lieberman, an independent from Connecticut, who just announced that he will not run for re-election in 2012. ●