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D'var Torah on Civil Discourse
Delivered at the Year of Civil Discourse Opening Program on 12/12/10

For the past three weeks we have been reading about Joseph and his brothers – including Vayeshev, Miketz, and Vayigash. In Genesis 37 we read:

“Now Israel loved Joseph best of all his sons, for he was the child of his old age; and he had made him a coat of many colors. And when his brothers saw that their father loved him more than any of his brothers, they hated him so that they could not speak a friendly word to him.

Once Joseph had a dream which he told to his brothers; and they hated him even more.”

After he told them his dream about their sheaves of the field bowing to his sheaf his brothers responded, “Do you mean to reign over us? Do you mean to rule us?” And they hated him even more for his talk about his dreams.”

Listen to these words from the parsha “...they hated him so that they could not speak a friendly word to him...” and then they hated him even more...and they hated him even more...”

And we know what can happen with that blinding hate. In this case, Joseph’s brothers conspired to kill him. Reuben convinced them not to kill Joseph but to throw him into a pit unscathed (though stripping him of his beloved coat of many colors and bathing it in blood to convince their father that his beloved son was killed by a wild beast) and they ultimately sold him to Midianites enroute to Egypt.

Reconciliation was the end of the story when Joseph, now Prime Minister of Egypt, reveals himself to his brothers who have descended to Egypt in search of food during a famine and they finally embrace each other. But it was a long and painful journey to get to that point. Think of Jacobs’ agony, believing his beloved son was dead, the guilt of the brothers, the years of suffering that Joseph endured before rising in Egyptian society.

We may not have quite reached that level of drama in the Bay Area yet but the incivility within our Jewish family is growing rapidly and carries it with it profound implications for the Federation and our community if it continues to spread.

It is evident in some of our synagogues where it has become increasingly difficult to discuss Israel without “camps” forming.

It is evident in some of our Hillels where students with strongly divergent ideologies struggle to be in the same room.

It is evident in the public square, the J Weekly, and our communal institutions where attacks are increasingly personal and vitriolic.

And it is evident in the tone of communications – electronic and verbal – that are too frequently mean-spirited.

The breakdown of civility is not an intellectual matter – it is playing out in our community on a daily basis and represents a serious challenge to our community's cohesiveness. Much of the polarization that is playing out in our community is a result of the agonizing split between that segment of our community that sees Jewish survival as inextricably linked to a strong Israel and that segment that feels disillusioned by a Jewish State that they believe does not live up to its potential. Bridging that divide is essential.

The Year of Civil Discourse represents, I believe, the most ambitious initiative in the country aimed at addressing the ever-growing polarization that unaddressed can only harm all of our collective community-building efforts.

Our goals of the project are specific and ambitious:

- 1) to empower the voice of moderates and let good talk drive out bad;
- 2) to model civility in institutions where it's no longer so clear the price everyone will pay for its breakdown;
- 3) to honor exemplars of building civility;
- 4) to create early warning systems where polarization begins to seep in;
- 5) to train a cadre of professionals and lay leaders in the how-tos of building bridges within our community
- 6) to support our leaders who are often feeling the brunt of the attacks by problem-solving with them and building important support systems.

I urge you to stay actively involved in efforts to transform the culture away from growing polarization...to recognize the danger of letting mounting anger fester... to be energized by and fully engaged in the Year of Civil Discourse – starting with today. We all know just how much is at stake for our community and our communal institutions. And, the truth is we are here, literally, in part because moderates before us spoke up against incivility.

Reuben, Joseph's eldest brother, was so upset about his brother's plot to kill Joseph because of their hatred for him that he convinced them to put him in a pit unharmed instead. Had he not spoken out and Joseph had been killed, had he not suggested a less extreme course, our history may have turned out very differently. May we all find those moments where we can step into the breach and help repair the rifts in our community. And may we be inspired today to do more.