

Rosh Hashanah – Civil Discourse in America, Israel and Our Congregation

We are losing our ability to talk civilly to each other – as a nation, in Israel and in our own Jewish community and congregation about Israel. The stakes are high - civil discourse is the essence of democracy and of a healthy community. We are witnessing a toxic time where issues play out with venom - and the implications are dramatic.

Regardless of our personal politics, we should be disturbed by the tone and tenor of the debate in America. It is disturbing when forums about health care routinely result in name-calling, interruption of speakers and vilification of those with whom we disagree. We should be alarmed when a Congressman calls the President a liar during a speech. And it is both sides of the political spectrum that have been infected by pervasive nastiness.

I believe we face a landmark moment in America, in Israel and in our Jewish community. Our Rabbis teach that it was *sinat chinam* – *causeless hatred* – that brought about the destruction of the Temple. That type of hatred is present in our midst. It is time to lift our voices in a call for civil discourse and ethical disagreement.

Rabbi Daniel Gordis observes that the same issue is playing out in Israel with a different twist. He points to recent violence in Jerusalem between the Haredi community and the police over parking issues on Shabbat, threats against the gay and lesbian community after they gathered to protest the murder of two youths in a support center and argues that the response is one of an initial reaction of upset -we shake our heads - and *then we ignore the issue* – hoping against reality that it will go away. Rabbi Gordis observes for all that there is intense policy disagreement in Israel, there is very little

meaningful public discourse about issues of future borders, relationship with American, and a one or two state solution.

He makes an analogy to America in 1837, where on the surface, despite the rumblings of slavery discussions, America at age 61 – the same age as Israel, was thriving; but we were ignoring the real issues that would explode in years to come. In 1837, Congress passed a “Gag Law,” designed to stifle congressional debate on slavery. Those favoring the law hoped to conduct the business of state as usual without undue attention to that nagging problem of enslavement. *When we ignore the real questions that face us, the issues fester and worsen and we doom our children to future conflict.*

Our Jewish community is similarly divided when it comes to Israel. Leonard Fein writing in the Jewish Forward depicts that division as having three parts: “the ‘Who are we to criticize Israel?’ crowd, the ‘How can we refrain from rebuke when rebuke is warranted?’ crowd and a growing number who want the whole matter of Israel to be pushed off-stage, who find it too confounding or too painful to tangle with.

Today I call upon us to bear the mantle of those who crusade for civil discourse in America, who thoughtfully debate the complex issues facing Israel, and who work as a Jewish community to create meaningful, passionate discourse.

Let’s begin in our own community - starting by understanding the situation.

Rabbi David Cooper of Kehilla Synagogue frames the polarization surrounding discussion of Israel in terms of Guardians and Prophets. Guardians are the group that Leonard Fein characterizes as the ‘Who are we to criticize Israel crowd?’ For Guardians, Israel is a haven for Jews from oppression in a hostile world – a solitary, democratic bastion of freedom amidst a sea of enemies bent on her destruction. The Guardians

believe with all their heart that it is a sacred task to defend Israel from those who would attack and defame her, seeing him/herself as Israel's ally in the struggle to survive and thrive as a nation-state. Prophets are the group that Leonard Fein calls the 'How can we refrain from rebuke when rebuke is warranted?' They too feel a sacred task to address injustice and violence suffered by people with less power - in this situation, the Palestinians. In Rabbi Cooper's words, "Guardians hear Prophets talking about justice and the Guardians think, 'Where is their love of Israel? Where is their concern for the Jewish people?' And when Prophets listen to Guardians talking about security for Israel or questioning Palestinian motives, the Prophets think, "Where is their concern for justice and for Jewish values?"

Most of us are a combination of the two tendencies and therefore labels are inaccurate. I use the labels today to frame the nature of the divide that exists in our community. It is a divide that is growing bitter and deeper. We are losing our ability to speak to each other. We speak at each other, rarely truly listening, venting to people who share our same opinion about how wrong minded anyone who disagrees with us is. It is a divide that will intensify given the events happening in American and the Middle East – particularly as we enter a new peace process with difficult issues like the settlements where American and Israeli leaders disagree.

There is a heavy price to this poison atmosphere – people disengage, ideas aren't thoughtfully explored, we cease to challenge our assumptions and stop growing. A deeper price is that our youth disengage. If they feel there is only one way to love Israel, and it is not the way that is developing in their own souls, they'll feel community is meaningless and shallow – justifying their alienation.

The challenge that we face is to create space in the Jewish community and this congregation to accept the variety, multiplicity and complexity of responses to Israel that currently exists. Certainly there are boundaries to the discussion. In this community I have laid out those boundaries as: acceptance of Israel as a sovereign Jewish state, rejection of terrorism and rejection of racism. Within those boundaries there is room for wide-ranging, broad discussions.

Two assumptions drive the environment that I strive to create and be part of: First, love and loyalty to Israel is not the same as agreeing with every Israeli act or policy. **Unity does not equal uniformity.** Israelis don't agree with every Israeli policy – why should we? In fact, real love is based on the ability to criticize that with which we disagree – that's what relationship is all about. Second, there is a difference between lifting our voices in disagreement and telling Israel what to do. We don't get to tell Israel what to do – she is a sovereign state with her own democratic decision making apparatus. *This is an important starting point that often gets lost. We don't dictate policy. We do get to say what we think and feel. And our voice matters.*

Can we create space for respectful discourse with those with whom we passionately disagree? Part of me despairs that the answer is “No.” But for community to thrive, the answer has to be “YES!” Our job is to figure out how to make that happen.

To make that “YES!” become real requires embrace of the value *anavah* – *humility*. Humility is the ability to acknowledge the legitimacy of the opinions of those with whom we disagree.

I spoke last High Holidays about the Jewish ideal of a holy controversy being one between Hillel and Shammai, where Hillel taught the diverging opinion of Shammai

before teaching his own opinion. By esteeming an opposing point of view and lifting it up before the community as legitimate, Hillel acknowledged that contrasting opinions are important to consider. I shared the beauty of the *gemara* – our holy text that is full of disagreement – varieties of points of view on the same question. Our tradition esteems and records disagreement. The more viewpoints the better! *Anavah* requires that we listen, probe and seek to understand rather than pronouncing that we are right and they are wrong. The Jewish ideal of sacred divergence calls upon us to listen to our opponents – not planning the response that will convince them how wrong they are – but attempting to understand their point of view.

There is a verse in this morning's Torah reading that deepens our understanding of what it means to communicate with *anavah*. Abraham has sent Hagar and Ishmael out into the wilderness following Sarah's insistence they be expelled. Unable to find water, Hagar weeps as Ishmael lies dying of thirst. The text then says: God heard the voice of the boy *ba'asher hu sham* – *where he was at*. Classic commentaries use this as a guide for how we listen – we listen to people where they are at – not where we want them to be. Let's translate that to real life here in our community. Can we create a way for people who disagree about the Middle East and Israel to hear each other where they are at – *basher hu sham*? As I mentioned: *We have not succeeded in achieving this goal. As difficult issues arise the rhetoric heats up quickly. I despair that we can ever achieve civil discourse.* So I ask you to work with me to re-think our approach.

We begin with our narratives. For many years here we have tried to build a community based upon appreciating the stories each of us bring as individuals. Those stories weave together into beautiful connections as we come to appreciate each other. As

divergent views gather around the table, we begin with story: “What created your connection to Israel? What drives your opinions?” Through listening to story we create environment of *basher hu sham – hearing another where he/she is at* – and it has the potential to shift the nature and tone of the discourse. The only way to move past the deep abyss that divides us to notice the human being in front of us while quieting the ideology inside of us. We start with story. Stories create connections. Shared values emerge. We’ll continue to disagree, but our connection will ensure that our disagreements won’t devolve into denigration. The next step is ground-rules that ensure respect.

We will embroil in controversy after controversy to our grave detriment unless we find another way to disagree. Once we begin with story - gently and thoughtfully learn what’s moving people, *then* we begin to have the more difficult conversations. There is an organization with roots in the Bay Area called Project Reconnections, connected with the JCRC, whose work focuses on just this challenge. It has successfully brought together Jewish leaders from across the political and religious spectrum for dialogue and deliberation, building bridges of connection that allow us to move from operating in short term crisis mode to participating in more engaged processes. We will bring Project Reconnection to CBJ this year.

Let’s appreciate each other. We need our Guardians and our Prophets.

Thank God for those speak out in defense of Israel, and do all they can to support her.

Thank God for those who challenge Israel to find peace, and find the courage to question policies that seem unjust.

Thank God for the activism that creates deep connection to Israel.

Thank God for the activists here who point to all that is still remarkable about Israel in so many ways.

Thank God for those who have meaningful connections and support important institutions in Israel.

Thank God for all of you who cared enough to go to Israel – for nothing shows more support than personal presence.

The Jewish community and CBJ need to be a place where we can talk to each other, pray together and love each other even when we disagree about the Middle East. This congregation needs to foster the shared values and passion which unite us as we discuss the Middle East. We need to provide myriad ways to connect to Israel, Israelis and to learn together about the Israel's challenges. We can succeed in this task.

I conclude with the words of Theodore Herzl who in the face of a seemingly impossible task of creating a Jewish state said: "*Im tirzu, ain zo agaddah – If you will it, it is no dream.*" Let's realize our dream of standing up for civil discourse in our country. Let's engage in difficult issues regarding Israel with honesty and respect. Let's lead in creating a culture of diverse engagement where disagreement happens with holiness. *Im tirzu, ain zo agaddah - If we will it, it is no dream!* Shana Tovah