

A Thanksgiving for Civility – November 26, 2010

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Yesterday was the quintessential American holiday. A day set aside for the entire country to appreciate what we have. Sumptuous meals, gatherings of family or friends or both. It is remarkable for a country to have a day set aside for something often relegated to the religious sphere, and even more powerful that it is a religious day that is purposefully not tied to a specific religion. It is the embodiment of the first amendment, allowing for religious aspiration and expression without prejudicing one particular path. Though it is notable that the holiday was fashioned after Sukkot our harvest festival of giving thanks.

When Thanksgiving first became a national holiday in 1863, President Abraham Lincoln proclaimed a day of Thanksgiving and Praise to the Almighty God in Heaven: He wrote: The year that is drawing towards its close, has been filled with the blessings of fruitful fields and healthful skies. To these bounties, which are so constantly enjoyed that we are prone to forget the source from which they come, others have been added, which are of so extraordinary a nature, that they cannot fail to penetrate and soften even the heart which is habitually insensible to the ever watchful providence of Almighty God.

Lincoln purposefully chose Thursday, because it was not the Sunday of Christians, the Saturday of Jews, nor the Friday of Muslims. It was a day that belonged to no one so that it could become a day that belonged to everyone.

How much is this sensibility needed today, a way of honoring all peoples in this country! In the political realm, we are sorely lacking a sense of gratefulness and honor. If Thanksgiving first came to be a holiday in the wake of the fractious feelings of the civil war, today our country is again divided and the expressions of that division in the public square are far from what any religion preaches. Our country is suffering from a lack of, in a word, civility.

In *Civility: Manners, Morals, and the Etiquette of Democracy* (1998), Yale Law professor, Stephen L. Carter offers a concise definition of civility as “the sum of the many sacrifices we are called upon to make for the sake of living together.” As Rabbi Stephen Pierce, from San Francisco, recently stated in his Yom Kippur sermon: “In a truly civil society, we demonstrate our willingness to put others first and that selfless act makes society a better place.”

It should not surprise us that such a civil society is challenging to create. A founding father, John Adams, wrote in a letter to a friend in the spring of 1776.

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, by contracted hearts and not large souls. There is one thing, my dear sir, that must be attempted and most sacredly observed, or we are all undone. There must be decency and respect and veneration introduced for persons of every rank, or we are undone. In a popular government, this is our only way.

Today there is more noise than sense. A recent statement from the Jewish Council for Public Affairs, the JCPA, diagnoses the situation as:

....today, the expression and exchange of views is often an uncivil, highly unpleasant experience. Community events and public discussions are often interrupted by raised voices, personal insults, and outrageous charges. Such incivility serves no purpose but to cheapen our democracy. When differences spiral down into uncivil acrimony, the dignity of individuals and community is diminished, and our precious democracy is weakened. People holding diverse views cease to listen to each other. Lack of civility makes it more difficult, if not impossible, to open minds, much less find common ground.

The JCPA is the parent group of Jewish Community Relation Councils in the country and thus sees itself as the consensus voice of the Jewish community on issues. Starting on November 2nd, a few weeks ago, they started a national appeal for civility in our country, making it one of their top priorities.

Rabbi Steve Gutow, the head of JCPA, has lead the charge. He feels that: "Civility is simply demonstrating respect for the dignity of our fellow humans - even those humans with whom we have sharp disagreement. Civility is allowing others to speak, and having the humility to admit that we may have something to learn. Civility favors truth over cheap gain, and patience over knee-jerk judgment.

Civility is more than good manners, however. It's also the pro-active advancement of codes of behavior that will heal our society from the damage it has sustained. We need to plan our public events carefully, so that they can't become occasions for ideological grand-standing; we must stand up to defend each other from attack; we must maintain an attitude of respect even when faced with smears and falsehoods. We must become aggressively reasonable."

Fortunately at Mount Zion, we have stressed this sense of civility in the way we interact here hoping that it has ripples across our local community. We hosted one of the more than 20 gubernatorial debates and the discourse here both on the pulpit from the candidates and from the 1000 people who gathered was civil. I heard it was the only one of the debates where the candidates were supportive in their discourse. And all this year, our conversation about Israel is predicated on the belief that we may have differing opinions, but we will be respectful to each other, listening to views that may anger or confound us, appreciating struggles that others feel, without resorting to hateful speech. Far from this tension, we are realizing how much there is to gain through thoughtful sharing of views and when needed debate.

Derech eretz is the Hebrew word for civility. It stresses the importance of problem-solving consensus-seeking societies that champion civility rather than promote incivility.

The Psalmist admonishes: "Guard our tongues from evil and our lips from speaking deceitful speech (Psalms 34:13)." When the rabbis gathered to discuss what kind of character trait is worthy of honor, Ben Zoma reflected with his colleagues. His answer: "One who honors others." The rabbis further caution: "Those who endeavor to gain honor at the price of another person being degraded have no portion in the world to come." Jerusalem Talmud Chagigah 2:1

JCPA's national campaign includes a pledge that you are invited to sign. You can find it on-line at www.jewishpublicaffairs.org or google it. It states: Therefore we as a community and as individuals, must pledge to uphold the basic norms of civil discussion

and debate at our public events. We do this not to stifle free expression of views, but rather to protect it.....We therefore agree to treat others with decency and honor and to set ourselves as models for civil discourse, even when we disagree with each other.

We commit ourselves to this course to preserve an essential element of a community – the ability to meet and talk as brothers and sisters.

As we try to nudge our society back into the vision of our forebears who could create a holiday of Thanksgiving for us all to share in equally, may we help restore civility in the public sphere as well as private sphere at home, keeping in mind a saying of Rabbi Yochanan's^[1] "It is better to whiten one's teeth for another than to serve him [food]." So keep smiling to family, friend, acquaintance and even enemy, and then don't forget to pass the turkey.

^[1] Rabbi alan Moranis in his book Everyday Holiness teaches a statement of Rabbi Yochanan Ketubot 111b