

FAITH STATEMENT ON CIVILITY IN PUBLIC DISCOURSE
NOVEMBER 20, 2009
By Rabbi Robert H. Loewy

Rabbi Shimon ben Gamaliel, sent his servant to the market to buy some good food. The servant returned with tongue. Then he sent him to buy some bad food and again he returned with tongue. Rabbi Shimon asked, why when asked to bring “good” and “bad” food, he brought the same tongue? The servant replied: “It is the source of good and evil. When it is good, there is nothing better, when it is bad there is nothing worse.”

My friends the power of the tongue and the opportunity for men and women to share their views freely and openly is one of the greatest blessings our country offers to us. However, when public debate devolves into name calling, debasing those with whom you differ, even calls for violence against those with whom you disagree, then all good people of faith must rise up.

As many of you have read in the Times Picayune recently that is exactly what a group of clergy in Jefferson Parish has done in response to what we all see as a negative trend in public debate. As the leader of the East Jefferson Interfaith Clergy Association, I recently sent the document that you have in front of you to the Times Picayune and to every elected official in East Jefferson. We are deeply concerned that the tenor of debate over such issues as Health Care, Immigration, Economic and Foreign Policy has become negative. Tongue can be good or bad. Right now our perception is the latter. Thus we decided to issue the statement and raise awareness. I am pleased to see that it has done just that, eliciting one response in the TP, which tells the clergy that we should spend our time working on bigger issues, that politics is politics, but also an actual editorial by the paper, which simply restates our position. I have learned that it has circulated throughout the New Orleans faith community and the country. To date, two elected officials have signed it as a pledge. We also agreed to bring the message to our congregants, with this weekend prior to Thanksgiving being particularly timely.

I would like to look at the document in detail and show how this is in truth, not simply a political statement, but an expression of faith with specific Jewish insights in support.

As people of faith, we are deeply troubled by the lack of civility that we witness daily in public discourse. Since we regard all human beings as God’s children, created in God’s likeness, we regard an offense against our neighbor as an offense to God. Violence begets violence, in speech and in action.

The opening paragraph includes the idea that we are all God’s children. Each of us is created ‘b’tselem Elohim- in the image of God.” This faith statement implies that we look upon all others, including those with whom we differ as equals. We are not better than them, nor they better than us. I have taught this many times over the years. If every time we are about to say something to or about another, we remind ourselves that the other is created in the image of God, then our words would be much more gentle and precise.

Jewish tradition has always understood the idea that when we offend another, we are sinning against God. This is a theme that we raise repeatedly during the High Holy Days, but is not limited to a 10 day period.

Finally, as I read the line “violence begets violence in speech and in action,” I was reminded of a visit to Israel a number of years ago. Our plane arrived right after Yitzchak Rabin had been buried. Months of violent words, public humiliations and denunciations, prompted one individual to alter the course of history. It has happened in America as well with the assassination of Lincoln. We do not want to see history repeat itself.

Specifically, let us look at some of the points raised through the prism of our Jewish tradition:

- 1. We will disagree without being disagreeable.***
- 2. We will affirm the right of the other to differ, as we affirm ours.***

As Jews we have a long history of debating issues. The rabbinic tradition is replete with discussions among the rabbis as they differed over the interpretation of Jewish law. Like in Congress or in public discourse they advocated for their positions. In the Talmud we read the following:

For three years, the School of Hillel debated with the School of Shammai. The former argued that the law follows our understanding, while the latter claimed the same. Then a Heavenly voice came forth, “eilu v’eilu divrei Elohim chaim- these and these are the words of the living God, but the law is according to Hillel. Since both Schools possess the words of the living God, why was the law according to Hillel? Because the followers of Hillel were kindly and modest. They not only studied the teachings of Shammai, they even mentioned these rulings before their own. This teaches that whoever humbles himself, the Holy One exalts and those who exalt themselves, the Holy One humbles.” (Eruvin 13b)

Let us recognize that there are those with whom we strenuously differ, but that their feelings are as deeply held as our own. They are not bad people because they argue for ideas with which we disagree. Eilu v’eilu- these and these are the words of the living God. These and these are legitimate interpretations of our Constitution. These and these are paths that will bring healing to America.

- 3. We will debate the issues, not debase the individual who differs from us.***
- 4. We will avoid listening to encouraging, or endorsing those in public and in private life who demean the dignity of others by name calling and labeling.***

There can be basic rules of how to engage in public discourse. Trying to embarrass another is not a legitimate approach. Our tradition teaches: “A person who publicly shames his neighbor is like someone who has shed blood. To which Rabbi Nahman answered, ‘You have spoken well. I have seen that when someone is shamed, the color leaves his face and he is pale.’” (or perhaps the opposite as you see people turn red) (Bava Metsia 58b-59a)

We should not tolerate such behavior, nor allow our silence to condone it. Let us turn off the talking heads on the right and left who pander politically for the sake of ratings.

Again, our rabbis tell a story: “It once happened that while Rabbi Judah the Prince was giving a lecture, he smelled garlic in the room. ‘The person who has eaten garlic must leave,’ he announced. Rabbi Hiyya stood up and all the other scholars followed him. In the morning, rabbi Shimon, son of Rabbi Judah asked if it was he who caused the offending odor? ‘Heaven forbid! Said Rabbi Hiyya, but he did not want the culprit to be humiliated.” (Sanhedrin 11a)

Simply saying, that name calling and demagoguery are part of the political process, does not make it legitimate. We also realize that many mask their bigotry under the flag of free political expression. We should not provide an audience to that kind of behavior.

5. *We will not acknowledge or forward electronic messages or videos designed to demonize or humiliate persons or groups.*
6. *We will be examples of civility to those who come into contact with us.*

The internet is both a blessing and a curse, the potential good tongue, but also an evil tongue. The delete button is an effective tool when we receive garbage, but the reply button may be an equally powerful force, when we let others know that we do not find what they have sent us to be either accurate or appropriate. It is easy to get caught up in the mob mentality, but we know based in Torah that we should not follow the majority to do evil. Each of us must be individual beacons of decency, respect and tolerance. I would point out that tolerance does not mean you agree with someone. In fact, usually tolerance implies you have to hold your nose to something distasteful. However, our silence can be as powerful a message as our words. We can be tolerant of divergent views, but we must not be silent to lack of civility and decency.

Friends, this is not an issue about them: the red-necks, the crazies, the militants. This problem is right here in our community as well involving otherwise good and decent people, members of our congregation. While I have heard it in relation to the previously mentioned issues, there is also a great deal of name calling and demagoguery regarding Israel and American policy. How is peace to be achieved? Should settlements be stopped or expanded? We hear and read from “right wingers and left wingers.” Each labels the other: coward or war monger, naïve or selling out Israel, fomenting violence. I would again argue “eilu v’eilu.” We need to be tolerant and respectful of all sides in the debate.

Parenthetically, I might also add that in private or not so private discourse, all too many of our members (even if that means a few) engage in racist, religiously intolerant expressions. While we cannot control others’ thoughts and beliefs, we can attempt to muzzle their expression in the public domain. This form of discourse is not even deserving of toleration.

Civility in public discourse is not a Republican or Democratic issue, pro-Obama or anti-Obama, Christian or Jewish or Moslem. It is a problem in our total society.

Civility and the ability to express beliefs and ideas freely without intimidation is a bedrock principle of our society and our faith. On this Shabbat prior to Thanksgiving, let us zealously reinforce that principle.

AMEN

East Jefferson Interfaith Clergy Association

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As leaders in our faith communities, in light of the intensifying debates on such issues as healthcare, immigration, economic and foreign policy, we pledge ourselves to civil discourse and invite all to commit to this pledge:

- 1. We will disagree without being disagreeable.**
- 2. We will affirm the right of the other to differ, as we affirm ours.**
- 3. We will debate the issues, not debase the individual who differs from us.**
- 4. We will avoid listening to, encouraging, or endorsing those in public and in private life who demean the dignity of others by name-calling and labeling.**
- 5. We will not acknowledge or forward electronic messages or videos designed to demonize or humiliate persons or groups.**
- 6. We will be examples of civility to those who come into contact with us.**

We call upon all people, especially our elected leaders, to embrace this pledge by word and deed.

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