

CIVILITY AND DISCOURSE ON ISRAEL IN THE JEWISH COMMUNITY

Parashat Ahare-Kedoshim 5772

Published on *The Jewish Week* (<http://www.thejewishweek.com>)

Beinart And Gordis In Verbal Slugfest On Israeli Policy

Thursday, May 3, 2012 Gary Rosenblatt Editor and Publisher

There were no verbal “knockouts” in a debate between Peter Beinart and Daniel Gordis that was promoted as a “heavyweight fight on Zionism” at Columbia University on Wednesday night. Both landed telling blows about whether a true Zionist is one who offers ethical critique or moral support to the Jewish State. But the clear winner was civil discourse between the debaters and respect among the hundreds in the packed auditorium who listened intently, applauded each speaker and refrained – with one exception – from booing or yelling out.

At a time when civility among Jews, and especially over Israel, is at a low point, Beinart, the author of “The Crisis Of Zionism,” which asserts that the continuing occupation of the West Bank is destroying Israel diplomatically and morally, and Gordis, president of the Jerusalem-based Shalem Foundation and an author of several books defending Israel’s policies, proved that two people with deep political differences can have an engaging, articulate and enlightening encounter – at times quite sharp – and come away respectful of each other.

Indeed, the two reportedly were set to have coffee together the morning after the high-level two-hour program (about 20 minutes too long, judging the audience’s response), which attracted at least 400 people – about half of whom were students – to an auditorium at the Kraft Jewish Center that held about 300 seats.

The event was co-sponsored by *The Current*, a Jewish journal on campus at Columbia, and *Tablet*, the daily Jewish website, and deftly moderated by Bari Weiss, an editor at *Tablet*.

The positions of both men were well known to the audience, given the extensive coverage Beinart and his book have received in recent weeks, and Gordis’s writings on the subject, including a stinging review of the book.

But witnessing them going toe-to-toe, and responding to each other’s charges, was a dynamic and positive experience, humanized by the comments they made that were not directly about whether one man’s caring Zionist is another’s dagger in the heart of the Jewish State.

For example, after Gordis responded eloquently to a question about what he would say in “a two minute pitch” to a disaffiliated young Jew – he said he wouldn’t bother because it was demeaning – Beinart offered that while they disagreed substantially on Israeli policy, “for that answer I would want him [Gordis] to be my rabbi.”

Gordis evoked a big laugh from the audience when, trying to not be overly negative about Beinart, said, “I didn’t detest the book...it just made me sad.”

But most of the debate, on the proposition that “Zionism is failing, and American Jews are hastening its decline,” found the two men sharply disagreeing.

Beinart focusing on the danger of the Netanyahu government continuing to support settlement growth, which he said “only pushes the Palestinians in exactly the wrong direction.”

He repeatedly referred to the fact that the recent leaders of Mossad and the Shin Bet favor a two-state solution essentially along the lines of the 1967 borders as a risk, but preferable to a one-state solution that would effectively end the Jewish character of the state.

Gordis, who described himself as “a deflated optimist” after settling in Israel 14 years ago from Los Angeles, asserted that no true Zionist would harp on Israel’s faults when “it is hurting,” but would be comforting and loyal to the nation he loves. “Pressuring Israel,” he said, “makes peace less likely.”

Beinart, he added, is a “a realist on reading Israelis and a romantic in viewing the Arabs.”

At evening’s end, both men spoke of their satisfaction in participating in the program and called for more such discussions in the community.



news and views from our editors

May 3, 2012, 12:00pm

Thoughts on Beinart vs. Gordis

By Gal Beckerman

I got a chance to go to the Peter Beinart-Daniel Gordis debate last night at Columbia (you can still watch it here) and walked away with a few impressions I thought I’d share.

It’s much harder to be mean to someone to their face. The tone of the Beinart book reviews have been strangely personal. I don’t know if it’s something about Beinart himself that is inspiring this kind of out-of-proportion animus, but it has many otherwise levelheaded analysts turning to a kind of sniping that distracts from the content of the book. That was not the case last night. Gordis, who wrote one of the harshest takedowns, going so far as to wonder why Beinart “hates” Israel so, was respectful and gracious, saying that that though the book made him “sad” that he absolutely thought

Beinart had a right to say what he was saying. Beinart was friendly as well, at one point offering Gordis the compliment that — with the exception of his positions on the conflict — he's the kind of man Beinart would want to have as a rabbi.

I found all this very hopeful.

Not that much divides them. It became quickly clear that there is a very thin line dividing Beinart and Gordis. They are both in agreement about how corrosive the settlement enterprise is and the need to halt any expansion. They both worry about threats to Israel's democratic nature. And they both believe, as Beinart put it, that the Jewish state "should not be a secular democracy like the United States. Israel is a mix of the tribal and the universal." What separates them is the question of who should bear the onus of making the first move toward upending the current dismal status quo. Beinart thinks pressure should be applied on Israel to end, at the very least, the settlement project, if not the military presence in the West Bank. Gordis thinks this is not the right place for pressure. It should be applied instead to the Palestinians who, he insists, have not shown their willingness to accept a Jewish state. Until they do, said Gordis, Israel shouldn't touch the existing settlements because it might appear like a concession.

This seems like more of a tactical difference. Not a small one, but still a tactical difference.

What separates them ultimately is a question of appearances. Gordis doesn't think America Jews should give the impression that they or anyone else is "turning the screws" on Israel, as he put it, because it would provide aid and comfort to the Palestinians, prolonging their refusal to accept peace. Beinart thinks that making it clear to Israel in the most dramatic way possible (i.e. a mostly symbolic boycott) that it is losing its soul is the only way to stop a slide toward an apartheid state.

Engaging with anti-Zionists. Much of the debate looped around the above question. But there was another interesting moment that pointed to what divides the two men. Beinart said that he felt a responsibility to engage even with anti-Zionists and non-Zionists because they were the ones pulling undecided and disengaged young Jews away from Israel. Gordis vehemently disagreed. He simply did not see the point of trying to convince people whose motives, he was willing to assume, were most likely anti-Semitic. This illuminated the difference in sensibility between the two. For Beinart, there is an intellectual realm in which it would make sense to try and out-argue those who think Zionism is a racist, imperialist enterprise. Gordis looked like the prospect of having to do this would probably lead to him spitting blood.

Is Beinart too cold? At the very end of the debate, Gordis tried to characterize what he thought, ultimately, was wrong with Beinart: a kind of emotional double-standard. You are "a realist with Israelis, and a romanticist with Palestinians," Gordis told Beinart. Gordis was trying to pin some kind of orientalism on Beinart, telling him that he assumes the worst motives in Israeli leaders and the best in Arab ones. I don't think that was quite right. But what he was trying to express, I think, was that he doesn't believe Beinart really, truly, cares about Israel, deep in his kishkes, extending to it and its people and leaders enough compassion. No matter how many quotes from his book Beinart offered in which he showed deep sympathy for what Israelis go through, it didn't seem enough for Gordis. Hearing the two men debate, there was no doubt that Beinart came more equipped with facts and prepared to make a smartly reasoned argument. And he did. But Gordis, though he was much vaguer and didn't make his case with the same degree of logic and intellect, was just warmer, more convincing and comfortable in his convictions.

It just made me feel like all the harsh backlash against Beinart might have less to do with anything he has said than with a *sense* — and I emphasize that this is just a sense — that he is approaching all of this from too far of an intellectual remove. It's this perception, precisely on issues that have such deep

emotional resonance for those involved and invested, that might be the cause for him making so many people uncomfortable with him and his book.

Rabbis' Letter to Methodists

We, the undersigned Rabbis, reach out in hope to our Christian friends and neighbors. We have close relationships, deeply treasured and shaped over many years. We are partners on many social issues including fostering peace between Israelis and Palestinians. We ask you to stand shoulder to shoulder with us in rejecting the counterproductive proposal to selectively divest from certain companies whose products are used by Israel.

Any place in which a single human being suffers, we all suffer. We know that your concern for the Palestinian people, some of whom are your Christian sisters and brothers, comes from a deep commitment to the alleviation of human pain. There is suffering enough in the land of our common inheritance on both sides of the conflict. A just solution demands peace and security for Israelis and Palestinians. We share goals of a just and lasting peace, an end to affliction, a two-state solution, and the protection of the dignity and security of all in the Holy Land. We must marshal our efforts together to bring about this peace.

We understand and respect your calling to invest in a morally responsible manner. A policy of divestment to pressure Israel runs counter to these goals. Such a one-sided approach damages the relationship between Jews and Christians that has been nurtured for decades. It promotes a lopsided assessment of the causes of and solutions to the conflict, disregarding the complex history and geopolitics. Furthermore, it shamefully paints Israel as a pariah nation, solely responsible for frustrating peace.

For Jews, the use of economic leverages against the Jewish state is fraught with inescapable associations. They resonate in the Jewish consciousness with historic boycotts against Jewish companies and the State of Israel. They are experienced by Jews as part of a pattern of singling out Jews for attack. To determine and continue policies that knowingly tap into the deepest fears and pain of another is, in our tradition, a serious failure of relationship.

Divestment, and the specious Apartheid terminology that frequently accompanies it, polarizes people and communities so that the policy of divestment, and not peace, becomes the central issue. Divestment will undermine the ability of many Israelis to imagine peace. Decades of terrorism and rejection have left Israelis feeling threatened and isolated. Many of the major proponents of divestment do not support Israel's right to exist – thus deepening this fear. Divestment as a policy is more likely to encourage those with more extreme aims than to foster reconciliation. Simply put, the bitter debate over divestment drowns out the real conversation about how to end the conflict.

At a time when politics in general have become so divisive, here and abroad, our efforts should be aimed toward reconciliation. Together and independently, Christians, Jews, and Muslims must give the parties to the conflict the confidence they need to move toward peace. There are many meaningful coexistence programs that are necessary to foster a generation of Israelis and Palestinians that will work and live side-by-side – moving past the teaching of hate and the resort to violence. As leaders of the Jewish and Protestant communities we need to deepen our understandings of the multiple narratives in the region.

We recognize the urgency of these efforts and the frustration on all sides with achieving our lofty goals. Our collective voices can play an instrumental role, working with the American government and others, to help Israeli, Palestinian, and other Middle Eastern leaders to prevent violence and attacks on civilians, support Palestinian state-building and economic development, promote positive investment opportunities, provide humanitarian aid through appropriate channels, protect existing agreements between Israel and the Palestinian Authority and, most importantly, encourage a resumption of negotiations among the parties toward a two-state agreement that will help bring about peace, which is at the core of our traditions. We recommit to such efforts, independent of any other matter.

Yet quite honestly, were American Christian denominations to indict only Jews and Israel for the conflict with the Palestinians, they would justify the violence perpetrated against Israeli civilians – including children – as the unfortunate result of Israel's unilateral guilt. In other words, Israeli victims would be responsible for their own suffering. Frankly, such a representation is anything but an expression of friendship and common purpose, and it would replace the closeness and comfort the Jewish community feels in existing relationships with distance, distrust, and disappointment.

The Scriptures that bind us reveal that G-d created all of us in the divine image -- human dignity and equality is a core value of Jewish and Christian traditions. Further, our traditions call upon us to be peacemakers. In Hebrew, the word Shalom doesn't just mean "peace" but wholeness and completeness. Peace comes about by our labors to complete the work of creation. We must work towards the day when every human is granted the dignity, security, and beneficence that is the promise of the created universe.

Can Civility Be the Answer to Polarization?

Eyal Rabinovitch & Melissa Weintraub

Article printed from Sh'ma: <http://www.shma.com/2012/04/can-civility-be-the-answer-to-polarization/>

With the country and the American Jewish community increasingly and stubbornly polarized, fatigue, rampant frustration, and residual hope have led many to call for civility. Volatile community conflicts rife with attacks, threats, and pervasive fear have spurred a wave of efforts seeking to undo the damage of our polarized public space. In the Jewish community, polarization has been most acute around the Israeli-Palestinian conflict, with Jewish organizations and synagogues creating official policies to avoid Israel

altogether, and rabbis across the country retreating from “the death by Israel sermon.” In the resultant wave of civility efforts, those invoking civility generally have one of three things in mind. For these efforts to succeed, we must rightly assess the value and consequences of each line of thinking.

Version One: Play Nice

By far the most common interpretation of “civility,” the idea of “playing nice” is also the reason so many people roll their eyes when they hear the word. People immersed in the urgency and emotions of high conflict do not want to muzzle themselves in a bland exercise of false politeness. If civility means holding back passion and assertive action, people understandably see it as a waste of time.

But there’s more to the niceness meme. For many, the ugliness of polarization is about more than mere decorum; it’s about the sense that divisiveness is eroding our core bonds and pushing us to undermine our basic values of integrity, community, and dignity. Furthermore, when people are too uncomfortable to speak and feel that no one is listening, the conversation misses out on much creative thinking and problem-solving. There are moral and practical reasons — reasons not only of style but of substance — for turning down the volume and learning to communicate constructively.

Version Two: Isolate the Extremists

This strategy tends to focus on excluding those whom the “reasonable middle” regards as beyond the pale, the idea being that a productive, civil conversation becomes possible once we marginalize the extremists and unite ourselves against them. This theme often leads to debates over where to draw the line and how wide to extend the tent.

Without a doubt, successful depolarization would disarm those determined to shut down communication or instigate violence. However, in a polarized context, the effort to marginalize the “haters” can be deceptively dangerous. The distance, distrust, and antagonism between opposing groups means that we are predisposed to see those who disagree with us as malicious, irrational, or even hateful, primarily because our understanding of them is based on fear, caricature, or stereotype. This makes it likely that the extremist tag will get invoked opportunistically or prematurely to dismiss people, even though there remain both room and need for constructive engagement across our differences.

Moreover, once people have been labeled and marginalized, they don’t pack up and go away. More likely, their frustration with what they see as an avoidant and arrogant mainstream only heightens, which in turn may radicalize their tactics, intensifying polarization and cementing their “troublemaker” status in the eyes of the mainstream.

Version Three: Let the Silent Speak

Finally, the call for civil discourse is sometimes read as a request for inside groups to listen to those who have felt ignored, excluded, or oppressed. Marginalized or dissenting voices want a place at the community table, and conveners sometimes want to absorb them into the mainstream as a moderating force.

While the intention to be inclusive and to address grievances is important, this mode of civility can also exacerbate the very polarization it’s trying to undo. For example, inside groups may anticipate that the effort will amount to diatribes of political correctness in which they will be lectured about how horrible they are. They may see outside groups as simply venting anger, with no recognition for the positive work of the establishment or viable solutions to the problems at hand. Marginalized groups, meanwhile, resist co-optation when the goal of the mainstream is to neutralize challenges to the status quo. Constructive communication may fail to get off the ground or be quickly overcome by resentment and defensiveness from mainstream and marginalized groups alike.

What We Learn from Potential Pitfalls

When any of these strategies is the primary goal of civility efforts, destructive consequences are almost certain to follow. When that happens, participants often leave more disillusioned and cynical than before, vowing not to fall for such nonsense again and making conflict only more intractable. The great challenge is

to address the legitimate desires behind calls for civility — turning down the volume in order to speak constructively, stopping those bent on derailing the conversation, and creating an authentically inclusive conversation — without falling prey to the traps.

Getting there requires embracing a different interpretation of civility: a way of treating our conflicts — especially our hardest, most enduring ones — as signposts that there is something essential for us to learn together as a community, something that needs our greatest collective wisdom if we are to learn its lessons. Seen this way, civility transforms us from adversaries to partners in conflict, involved in a generative, collaborative pursuit of the best course of action. This leads us to discipline our speech voluntarily so that it will be heard, and to listen as resiliently as possible to anyone willing to grapple alongside us — especially neglected voices that may contain uncommon but essential insight. Only this version of civility can be a true catalyst for transforming polarization, replacing it with a rigorous, vibrant conversation that advances sustainable solutions and strengthens communities rather than destroys them.

Israel Education and Action Committee – Temple Sinai, Brookline MA

Mission Statement

Temple Sinai recognizes our responsibility as a synagogue community to the State of Israel, as a Jewish and democratic state, within the broader context of our responsibility to k'lal Yisrael, Jews world-wide. We bear that responsibility to the State of Israel through action, words and learning. The Israel Education & Action Committee is charged with carrying out our congregational responsibilities to the State of Israel.

You can also read about the “Passport to Israel” program below.

Core Mission

The Israel Education and Action Committee will:

- provide opportunities for Temple Sinai members to take action regarding the State of Israel and her welfare;
- provide opportunities for Temple Sinai members to advocate in the Boston community on issues of concern regarding the State of Israel;
- oversee and facilitate learning opportunities that broaden our understanding of the State of Israel’s history, politics, and culture;
- work to support the institutions and synagogues of Progressive Judaism in Israel;
- convene the congregation, with the rabbi, in times of crisis, celebration and commemoration regarding the State of Israel;
- promote opportunities for travel to the State of Israel; and,
- work to ensure tolerance and respect for the multiplicity of opinions within our congregation regarding the State of Israel.

Guiding Principles

We recognize that within our congregation there exists a wide variety of opinions and experiences regarding the State of Israel. (We acknowledge, for example, that it is possible to support the mission and purpose of the State of Israel without supporting the policies of any particular government of the State of Israel.) We are dedicated to creating a “safe” and respectful atmosphere for Temple Sinai members to pursue advocacy on behalf of Israel, even while we recognize the possibility for divergent views and disagreements.

In our learning opportunities about Israel, we will strive to present reasonably objective perspectives when possible, and/or identify a bias or otherwise provide balance.

A Congregational Conversation: Israel and Temple Israel (Boston)

A Congregational Conversation: Israel and Temple Israel*

Tuesday, October 25, 7:00 p.m.

We hope that you will join us to discuss our perspective on why the future of the American Jewish community is intertwined with the future of the Jewish State. Please partner with us in the difficult but necessary work of weaving into the fabric of the life of Temple Israel our shared commitment to learn about Israel - past, present, and future - and to learn how to talk about Israel in a mature and civilized way among ourselves, regardless of our individual opinions.

**This conversation is only open to members of our Congregation.*

Dear Congregant,

Inspired by our love for Israel and moved by a genuine concern about an attenuation of the ties that connect us as American Jews and as members of the Temple Israel community, we are writing to enlist your help in our quest to re-invigorate our congregation's engagement with Israel.

The infrastructure of Judaism consists of three pillars: God, Torah, and Israel. In our community, we embrace and encourage the exploration of disparate and wide-ranging understandings of God and spirituality. Similarly, we have long cherished our open, dynamic and critical investigation of our relationship with Jewish texts. But the third pillar - constructed from a composite of people-hood (*Am Yisrael* the people of Israel) and place (*M'dinat Yisrael* the State of Israel) - is, within our synagogue, something of a third rail. Considered too emotional, too complicated and too divisive, Israel has become a high-voltage topic that we, as a community, have become scared to touch. Furthermore, the tensions that we are experiencing within Temple Israel are coterminous with challenges faced by the broader American Jewish community.

- Presently, to mention the word "Zionism" in a public setting at Temple Israel is to inject tension into an otherwise relaxed environment.
- Unlike any other Jewish topic, parents have asked why we are teaching about Zionism in our school and promoting a relationship with Israel.
- A growing percentage of our members wonder as to Israel's importance in the evolution of their lives.

This letter is an invitation to become partners with us as we seek answers to these questions: In a community that promotes diversity, civil discourse, and the exploration of challenging ideas how did we arrive at this point? And more importantly, what should we do about it?

The causes of a growing sense of alienation from *M'dinat Yisrael*/the State of Israel among liberal Jews are multi-dimensional and comprising issues of age, politics, and religious identity.

In part, this situation is generational. Many of those born before World War II can remember the founding of the State, and their children have memories of the victorious Six Day War. By and large, these two generations "see Israel as tolerant and peace-seeking...efficient and proudly Jewish, a society that has withstood mortal threats from enemies." ¹ But it is a different story for younger Jews. Many of those born after 1967 draw upon memories of the wars and internal conflicts of the last thirty years: conflicts considered much more politically and morally complex than the wars fought between 1948 and 1973. This generation -and increasing numbers of its parents - finds it exceedingly difficult to square certain policies of Israel's government with liberal values. Educationally, the Jewish community has been slow to respond to this dilemma, or as Peter Beinart wrote last summer in the *New York Review of Books*, "For several decades, the Jewish establishment has asked American Jews to check their liberalism at Zionism's door, and now, to their horror, they are finding that many young Jews have checked their Zionism instead." ²

Our community is trapped in a conundrum of its own making. Generally, among our members, there is a lack of knowledge and information about the State of Israel and its history. Yet our congregants' uncertainty as to what they think and feel about Israel often leads to an avoidance of the issues, which, in turn, prevents individuals from pursuing a relationship with Israel and from further education about the State. Additionally, several times in the past when we have sought to address these issues within public gatherings, those voicing strong opinions about Israel crowd out the voices of those unsure of their

stance, or those whose opinions put them in a more moderate position on the political spectrum. Extreme positions - on both the Left and the Right - have effectively silenced the Center. Both within and outside of the walls of our synagogue, Jewish criticism of the State of Israel is frequently condemned as anti-Zionist and stalwart support is often characterized as anti-humanist.

Although we are fortunate to live in an era in which the world has two vibrant centers of Jewish life with equivalent populations of Jews, our increasing sense of alienation from *M'dinat Yisrael* has attenuated our sense of connection to *Am Yisrael*/the People of Israel. Our avoidance of the political and religious complexities that confront us threatens to sever our relationship with a large percentage of the world's Jews. To separate our fate as Jews living in America from that of Jews living in Israel will - over the long-term - diminish the vibrancy and creativity of our community.

As leaders and educators of Temple Israel, we feel responsible to articulate why we believe that the future of the American Jewish community is intertwined with the future of the Jewish State:

- *Kol yisrael arevim zeh ba-zeh* - all Israel is responsible, one for the other (*BT Shavuot 39a*). American, progressive values have been essential to the flourishing of Reform Judaism. As the future of American Judaism is intertwined with that of Jews living everywhere, we are obligated to promote the values of Reform Judaism among other Jewish communities, and in particular, among Jews living in Israel. *Am Yisrael* consists of a coalition of different, sometimes conflicting, religious interpretations; the Jewish people will be best served when *M'dinat Yisrael* is constituted as a pluralistic society, in which no religious interpretation of Judaism takes legal precedence over another. Our experience with pluralism here in America informs us that the benefits of strengthening liberal Judaism in Israel will redound upon Jews living everywhere, and upon other peoples with whom Jews stand in relationship. Our Zionism is predicated upon our Jewish moral sensibilities and our commitment to human dignity.
- The State of Israel exists not only for the benefit of its citizens but also to protect the physical security and spiritual integrity of the Jewish people living throughout the world. Those who came of age after 1967, often take for granted how the establishment of the State of Israel served to ameliorate social stigma for Jews living in America. Furthermore, as strategic allies with Israel in American foreign policy, the security of the United States is interwoven with that of Israel.
- The Jews of Israel and America are well-matched partners in a great debate as to the meanings of Judaism and our purpose as Jews. Little else provokes us to broaden our tradition more powerfully than encountering the "Judaisms" of Israel. Little else moves us out of our Jewish comfort zones more than going to Israel. A relationship with Israel - both as people and place - is central to our evolution as American Jews.
- Hebrew serves as the connective tissue between Jews across time and place. Since language conveys culture and Israel is the only country in which Hebrew pervades every aspect of life, our exploration of - and (when possible) immersion into - Israeli culture enables us to be skilled partners in the continual revitalization of *Am Yisrael*.

Our Shabbat morning liturgy reads, *Or chadash al Tzion ta'ir, v'nizkeh chulanu m'heirah l'oro* - "Shine a new light upon Zion, that we all may swiftly merit its radiance." We urge you to become a partner with us as we work to shine a new light on our relationship with Israel as people and place. In concert with our continual engagement with God and Torah, we are dedicated to ensuring that Israel becomes an integral part of our community. To that end, we hope that you will join us on **Tuesday, October 25, at 7:00 PM**, to discuss both the contents of this letter and to embark on the difficult but necessary work of weaving into the fabric of the life of Temple Israel our shared commitment to *Am Yisrael* and *M'dinat Yisrael*.

Please contact [Sue Misselbeck](#) to let us know if you will be joining us or, if you cannot attend, that you would like to be further engaged with these efforts.

L'shalom,

Rabbi Ronne Friedman, Cantor Roy B. Einhorn, Rabbi Elaine S. Zecher, Rabbi Jeremy S. Morrison, Rabbi Matthew V. Soffer, Rabbi Bernard H. Mehlman

1 From Steven M. Cohen and Ari Y. Kelman, *Beyond Distancing: Young Adult American Jews and Their Alienation from Israel*, p. 3.

2 Follow [this link](#) to read the full article. Peter Beinart will be our [Burstein Scholar in Residence](#), November 5-6.

Courtesy and Civility in the Jewish Tradition

The following are some Jewish sources dealing with civility and related topics. We encourage their use as the basis for study sessions and to motivate and support congregational action in the public arena.

The Importance of Civility: The Torah commands, "Love your neighbor as yourself" (*Leviticus 19:18*). A *midrash* on this verse quotes Rabbi Akiba as saying that this is a very important principle of Torah. Ben Azzai counters that the verse "This is the book of the descendants of Adam, in the day of God's creating Adam in the image of God He made him." (*Genesis 5:1*) is a more important principle (*Sifra, Kedoshim, 4:12*). A parallel *midrash* on the verse in Genesis explains Ben Azzai's comment as follows: "Therefore, you should not say, 'Since I have been shamed, let my neighbor be shamed' . . . If you do so, know whom you put to shame, [since the text says] 'In the image of God He made him'" (*Genesis Raba 24: 7*). When we embarrass, shame, humiliate or denigrate another human being, we are also doing so to God Who created us all in the Divine image. The Rabbis compare the act of shaming someone to the act of shedding blood (i.e., murder) because the blood drains from the face of the person (*Baba Metzia 58b*). Perhaps they also recognized that shaming someone can often cause long-term or permanent damage to the psyche, reputation and/or livelihood of the person. It is as though you have killed or taken away a piece of the person.

Everyone knows the story of the great sage Hillel who, when asked by an idolater to teach the entire Torah while the challenger stood on one foot, answered, "What is hateful to you, do not do to your fellow, that is the entire Torah; the rest is commentary. Go and study" (*Shabbat 31a*). Clearly, Hillel believed that acting decently to your fellow human being was the most important teaching of our tradition. Accordingly, one of his famous statements is "Be of the disciples of Aaron, one that loves peace, and pursues peace, that loves mankind and brings them close to Torah" (*Avot 1:12, Siddur Sim Shalom, p. 607*). Even the sage Shammai, who is depicted as being less patient in the story of the heathen, elsewhere said "receive everyone with a cheerful attitude" (*Avot 1:15, Siddur Sim Shalom, p.607*).

Hatred and Anger: "You shall not hate your sibling in your heart" (*Leviticus 19:17*). "Rabbi Joshua [ben Hananiah] said: The evil eye, the evil impulse, and hatred of mankind put a man out of this world" (*Avot 1:16, Siddur Sim Shalom, p.607*). "Ben Zoma said: ... Who is mighty? One who subdues his evil impulses, as it is said, 'One who is slow to anger is better than the mighty, and one who rules his spirit is better than one who conquers a city'" (*Avot 4:1, Siddur Sim p.631*). Commenting on this advice, it is recorded in *Avot d'Rabbi Natan (ARN): "And some say: Mighty is the one who makes of his enemy a friend" (ARN 23)*.

The Talmud records an instance in which Rabbi Meir prayed for the death of certain lawless men who caused him trouble. His wife, Beruria, asked how he could pray for such a thing. By use of a clever word-play on a verse in *Psalms 104:35*, "Sinners will cease from the earth, and the wicked will be no more" (*Siddur Sim Shalom, p. 38*), she interprets the verse to mean when sins cease from the earth (because sinners repent and sin no more), the wicked will no longer be wicked. She then suggests that her husband pray rather that these sinners repent. He did, and they repented (*Berakhot 10a*). The Talmud states that the First Temple was destroyed because of three sins: idolatry, immorality, and bloodshed; while the Second Temple was destroyed because of senseless hatred. It is concluded that senseless hatred is as deplorable as all three of the former sins combined (*Yoma 9b*).

Lashon Harah -- the Evil Tongue: Saying anything derogatory about another person is absolutely forbidden by Jewish law, except under very limited circumstances. If a statement is true, it is considered *lashon hara* -- and it is forbidden. If a statement is false, even if only in some minor way, it is considered *motsi shem ra* (defamation of character) -- an even worse offense. It is no defense to say that the statement is true. It is also no defense to say it was made in jest, or that "everybody knew it anyway," or that the speaker included him/herself in the derogatory remark. All of these are forbidden.

Courtesy and Civility in the Jewish Tradition (cont'd)

The laws of *lashon harah* are far-reaching and difficult to observe. Nevertheless, they provide much-needed guidance in a fundamental aspect of human interaction -- speech. It is safe to say that most uncivil conduct comes under the category of *lashon harah* or is the physical response to some act of *lashon harah*. Two books in the bibliography below -- Zelig Pliskin, *Guard Your Tongue: A Practical Guide to the Laws of Lashon Hora based on Chofetz Chayim* and Joseph Telushkin, *Words That Hurt, Words That Heal: How to Choose Words Wisely and Well* -- discuss this very important subject.

Arguing: It is recorded that the school of Hillel and the school of Shammai disputed for three years over whose view was correct in matters of Jewish law. A voice from heaven, a *bat kol*, announced that both views were the words of God but that the law was in accordance with the view of the school of Hillel. Why, the Talmud asks, if both views are the word of God, should the school of Hillel prevail in establishing the law? The answer given is because they were kind and modest. They studied both their own position and the position of the school of Shammai, and they cited the opposing view first even before their own (*Eiruvim 13b*).

Another principle, which applies to how we perceive others generally, as well as how we should examine their position in an argument, is the statement of Joshua ben Perahyah: "Judge everyone with the scale tipped favorably" (*Avot 1:6, Siddur Sim Shalom, p. 605*). In other words, give the other person every benefit of the doubt.

Bearing a Grudge: We sometimes act uncivilly toward another when we feel we have been wronged. Our tradition counsels: If you have done some minor wrong to another, consider it a big thing, while if you have done someone a great benefit, consider it a minor thing. On the other hand, if someone has done you a minor favor, consider it a big thing, while if another has done something very bad to you, try to see it as a small thing (*ARN 41*). We all have a tendency to overrate or underrate an event to suit our own position. It is wise to try and counterbalance this tendency.

Reproving Someone: There are times when it is necessary to point out to someone else that he or she has, in fact, erred. The Talmud, citing *Leviticus 19:17*, states that one has an obligation to rebuke another when necessary, and even to do so more than once if the other persists. However, it further admonishes that one is not permitted to shame the person to the point where he or she turns white from shame (*Arakhin 16b*). This is a tricky matter as the ensuing discussion makes evident. The Rabbis doubt whether there existed in their time a person who knew properly how to rebuke or how to accept rebuke!

One helpful principle is to remember that the rebuke is supposed to help the other person to change his or her ways. It is not supposed to be an expression of the rebuker's rage or hatred. (See Zelig Pliskin, *Love Your Neighbor, pp. 278-92*.)

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