

The Mosque and the Lack of Civility
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We are living in a time of tremendous contentiousness and polarization. With all the cable channels and choices we have, I wish I could turn on a station and just get the news – not hyperbole, not shouting, not polemics, not a one-sided presentation, not advocating for one particular position while denigrating the other side – just give it to me straight up. Give me the facts, and let me try to figure it out. I like to think that I am smart enough to be able to come to my own conclusion.

But instead, whenever I turn on one of the TV news networks, it appears that the anchors are not only taking a position, they are always angry and it seems they are shouting -- at me.

I am not sure what came first and what is responsible for the nature of our discourse – is this the way we are and they reflect us, or is the media responsible for contributing to how we interact and respond to each other. In other words, are they responsible for creating this polarized atmosphere, or do they merely imitate and reflect our culture and society?

This divisiveness permeates and dominates the political discourse of today. When I was younger and had at one time entertained the possibility of public service, I believed then and still believe now, that politics is a noble calling. To debate the great ideas and policies of the day in a respectful manner, to try to refine a position and understand the other side, to appreciate that others may have a different perspective and means of achieving the public good, to try to find areas in common and compromise – that to me is how we should be approaching and deciding the great issues of the day that confront us.

No one has a monopoly on wisdom.

Today's atmosphere has become so poisoned with accusations flying from one side against the other, with liberals trying to make points at the expense of conservatives, and conservatives misrepresenting the positions of liberals that more heat is generated than light. Part of the problem is exasperated by special interests that have no interest in hearing the merits of the other side.

The highly charged debate over our immigration policy has lost touch with reality. Take for example the debate going on over the building of the Islamic Community Center near Ground Zero in New York. I am sure that many of you may have strong opinions one way or the other. I am reluctant to wade into this controversy, for I do not wish to alienate anyone. Furthermore, I truly see the concerns of those who oppose its being built there, but as a Jew and as an American, I am deeply troubled by the viciousness and the intensity of those who would deny a religious group the right to build a community center.

Most of you know how I feel about the importance of combating Islamic fundamentalism and that I do not shy away from labeling jihadism for what it is. But we must all do a better job of listening so we can ascertain what is the nature, purpose and orientation of this center, as well as the source of its funding. And until now, I feel that what we have heard is mainly hyperbole and unsubstantiated accusations, from both sides. Important questions must be raised and answered, including whether or not it will be a place of reconciliation and encourage tolerance or will it be a monument to triumphalism. Will it be a place which will honestly confront the problem of Muslim fanaticism or will it be a place that will promote the agenda of those who advocate a more radical approach?

My main point is – we need to move away from the talk radio and cable television shouting matches and polarization – not just on this, but on all the topics of importance of today. What I would call for is a fully spirited, but respectful debate, a discussion based on facts not misstatements, a conversation that takes into account the emotions and feelings of others, but not one that plays on the raw hardships of those who have experienced loss.

In today's Torah portion we read of the contrast, as we do in much of Deuteronomy, between the blessings and the curses. We read of Mt. Ebal and Mt. Geizirim. We read of opposites, and of choices, and of the consequences of our choices. But things are not always so black and white. In Deuteronomy 28:3 from this week's parasha, we read, "Blessed shall you be in the city, and blessed shall you be in the country." The verse is a paradigm for respect, understanding and tolerance. Based on this passage, the rabbis of Yavneh are quoted in the Masseket Berachot as having a favorite saying and one which guides my thinking, and relates to how we approach our differences. The rabbis taught:

I am a creature of God, and my neighbor is also a creature of God.

I work in the city, and he works in the country.

I rise early for my work, and he rises early for his work.

Just as he cannot excel in my work, I cannot excel in his work.

Will you say that I do great things and he does small things?

We have learned that it does not matter whether a person does much or little, as long as he directs his heart to heaven.

They are teaching us the importance of respect for the other, of realizing that we cannot do things alone, and that in the end we all complement and need each other, despite, and perhaps even because of our differences.

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