

# Rabbi Dinner's Soul Food

Wednesday, March 23, 2016

## Why I Stayed In The Room for Trump

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Rabbi Lucy H.F. Dinner

This week the largest gathering of Jews in North America AIPAC swept into the vortex of the presidential campaigns in the aggregate and the Trump campaign in specific. AIPAC has decades of experience in bipartisan support for Israel. AIPAC's advocacy has propelled support for the State of Israel into one of the few areas that garners agreement across the American political divide. The invitation by AIPAC to all the presidential candidates to speak, inclusive of Donald Trump, brought a distinct challenge to AIPAC's longstanding policy and to the 18,000 participants in the conference.

Trump's appearance presented an acute dilemma for the 700 plus rabbis and cantors in attendance at the conference as it did for many of the delegates. Trump has used his campaign as a bully pulpit to incite violence, malign Muslims, slander immigrants, and ignite disdain for everyone from the President, to his fellow candidates, and anyone who dares to speak up against him. Many rabbis, cantors, and attendees chose to walk out of the session rather than to honor Trump with their presence. Some rabbis from the Reform and Conservative movement organized alternative study sessions on pertinent Jewish values. A few chose to cancel their attendance at the conference in protest. I was among those who felt compelled to witness Trump's session. I wanted to bear witness: to demonstrate respect for all human dignity, including Trump's, though he denies it to all others; to not remain silent in the face of evil; and to be able to respond first hand to both his presentation and the reaction of those present.

The Torah commands: "Thou shall not stand idly by the blood of your neighbor." I stayed in the room precisely to uphold this commandment. Trump, who has maligned so many and literally encouraged violence against his detractors, can only be stopped if we stand up to him and if we call him out for his derision. My presence in the room preserves the respect I have for the dignity of the office of the President of the United States and for America's great democracy, where every citizen deserves a voice even those with whom I vehemently disagree. My presence in the room gives me the right and obligation to take a stand against the abject hatred Trump spreads. My presence in the room proclaims I will not let the bigotry of one individual usurp my right or anyone else's to full participation in democracy.

As for Trump, he was classic, narcissistic, Trump. He opened with an insult to Muslims, reminding the majority Jewish crowd that it was Muslims who perpetrated 9-11. He claimed that he was The Authority on the Iran Agreement saying: "I have studied this deal very much believe me more than anyone else in the world and it is a bad deal." In Washington, DC, in front of 18,000 people, many of whom worked for weeks and months around the clock against the Iran deal, he claimed that he studied that deal more than anyone else in the world. He anointed himself the top deal maker in the world since he wrote a book that had the word deal in the title -- and since that book was, he said: "the number one best seller in the world, or one of the number one, yes, number one." He was so disrespectful of the Office of the President and of President Obama particularly that AIPAC felt morally

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**Rabbi Lucy Dinner**

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compelled to issue an apology distancing itself from Trump's remarks. No facts, no plans, only wild unsubstantiated assertions about the state of the country today and promises without substance, depth, or form, of where the country will be when he is in charge.

The audiences' response to Trump was what transformed the bombastic, overblown remarks of the candidate and elevated his egocentricity into a volatile and pathogenic blow to the democracy of the United States of America. Upon Trump's entry to the arena the crowd sat fairly stoic. It did not take long for Trump's absurd claims to elicit open laughter that could be heard all the way to the hallways of the sport's arena. And then when the crowd was loosened up with his absurdity Trump turned to his charismatic, bullish charm to draw people into his vortex. With much the same promises, (i.e. The United States will always be Israel's greatest partner) albeit in much simpler language than the other candidates, Trump managed to whip the crowd to excitement, until many were off their feet in one standing ovation after another. This is how he transformed a crowd believed to be so hostile to Trump that AIPAC had at least three times before Trumps' appearance exhorted the crowd about proper respect for guest speakers. And there they were on their feet in unbridled, spontaneous support for this man.

The way that Trump charmed that crowd took me back to a buried memory from a high school civics project. I was doing a report on the KKK and went to gather research material from a freestanding KKK bookstore in my hometown. When I entered the store I was struck by the lack of books. Instead, tables were strewn with pamphlet after pamphlet of outlandish propaganda. At first I was shocked that so much of the material was anti-Semitic in nature - at least 50%. Nevertheless, I took comfort that the poor quality of the writing, the clearly outlandish claims, and the exaggerated cartoon illustrations of Jews, Blacks, and Mexicans, would hardly be convincing to any rational person. The pamphlets were almost laughable, so clearly devoid of any shred of truth or fact. Then the door of the store opened and a seven year old boy walked in and greeted the salesperson, his mom. Who would believe those outrageous pamphlets that I was almost laughing at minutes before-- that little seven year old boy, whose world was surrounded by those pamphlets and the people who propagated them.

Why is Trump a threat to our democracy? He is a threat because he has that combination of bully and charisma that draws people in, who are one minute laughing at his bravado and the next cheering wildly for his feral promises. Trump is the instigator, but the real danger is an American public so desperate for an easy answer, so afraid of their own shadow, that they grasp at the elixir of a modern-day, snake oil, salesman.

Staying in that room gave me not only greater insight into Trump, but also keener understanding of the desperate fears affecting so many Americans. Staying in that room gave me the perspective to work for a more just answer to the alleviation of those fears. In order to "not stand idly by" we have to understand the trepidation of our brothers and sisters. We have to acknowledge those fears and seek an alternative to saving oneself at the expense of the blood of the other. May the voice of the prophets guide us on that path: "to do justly, to love mercy, and to walk humbly before God."

Posted by [Rabbi Lucy Dinner](#) at 9:09 AM

## 6 comments:



**Lisa** March 25, 2016 at 6:55 AM

Thank you for your insightful perspective.

Reply



**Fred Mannis** March 25, 2016 at 11:21 AM

You could have learned as much by watching on TV.

Reply



**Ellen Lerner** March 26, 2016 at 3:12 PM

This comment has been removed by the author.

Reply

Replies



**Ellen Lerner** March 26, 2016 at 3:24 PM

I had to fix some typos. I agree that a lot of what Donald Trump says doesn't make sense, but then some of it does. His use of language is part of the the problem. When talking against muslims, if he said radical Islamist terrorist muslims, that would have sat better. I don't think he is against all muslims - he assumes we know what he means. (Even our president won't say Islamic terrorism which is deplorable but another topic.) People, me included, are angry accounting for his popularity in the polls. Here is the problem for a lot of us, but here is my view- I don't trust Hillary at all and I believe she is a liar and narcissistic insider. I don't think she would be a friend of Israel. Sanders says some things I agree with like changing the current medical system, but I don't trust him either. All candidates say things that don't come to fruition once they are elected. This leaves the republican party. So I for one cannot vote for Hillary and Sanders (but I would take him over Hillary.); that leaves two or three republican candidates that are not so great either, but for me the better of the worst. This is the dilemma I and many are grappling with, Jewish (or not.) I knew Obama would be disastrous before his first election, but the majority fell for him- and I think we are more divided on many issues since his election and more so than ever within the Jewish community. I am glad you chose not to leave and agree with you for your reasons. I am upset that cantors and other rabbis would not attend. I don't believe Trump is Hitler or anything like him so why not give him the respect of hearing him? I think if he were anti-semitic he would have a big problem with his own family. I see it a lack of respect for free speech if people walk out because they don't like what he says. A lot of that is going on in colleges where protestors are preventing free speech - very deplorable in my opinion. So again I am glad you did not walk out.



**Unknown** March 29, 2016 at 9:38 AM

I agree with Rabbi Dinner, but respectfully disagree with Ellen. Freedom of speech sometimes requires giving someone a platform (which AIPAC did). However, it does not require anyone to show up and listen.

I was in Birmingham, Ala. when a KKK march and speeches were planned. (Bad timing on my part; I went for another reason) It fell about a week after an event in a nearby state which became violent and gave credence to the KKK propaganda. Anyway, the city leaders asked people not to attend. People agreed not to. The KKK decided not to even show up. Sometimes if you know someone is only going to spew hatred it is ok not to give him a hearing.

In terms your question about Trump -"why not give him the respect of hearing him?" You have to earn respect. It is not just granted you because you desire it.

Sanders has been consistent in his rhetoric and actions for 40 years. No reason not to trust him. Clinton has decades of accomplishments and failures to judge her on. Trump has none of those things. He isn't even a great businessman (having as many and as large failures as successes). In my humble opinion, he has not earned respect.

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Reply

**Anonymous** March 30, 2016 at 8:17 AM

I don't know why my comment posted "unknown." My name is Joan Plotnick. If I make a comment, I think I should stand behind it.

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