

Argument and unity June 23, 2010



By Barry Shrage

At Sinai, the Israelites finally camped in peace and unity and the Almighty therefore said, ‘Since they despised strife and loved peace and camped as one person, the time has come for Me to give them My Torah.’

So peace and friendship, and shared purpose bring Torah and perhaps redemption.

But the destruction of the Second Temple was caused by *Sinat Chinam* – Baseless Hatred. When faced with an overwhelming enemy the Jews in Jerusalem started killing each other. Peace brings Torah and redemption but hatred brings destruction.

But there is a contradiction here: The study of Torah is filled with debate.

So, to allow for creative debate without destroying the relationships that hold communities together the tradition provides rules for argument. Rabbi Jonathan Sacks in his new book, “Future Tense: Jews, Judaism, and Israel in the Twentyfirst Century,” suggests that: • **“God lives in language,”** that words are holy, and “that ‘evil speech’ destroys the relationships of trust on which society depends.” • **“When words end violence begins.** ... If we can speak together, we will be able to live together. Speech heals hate; silence incubates it.” • A free society requires more than the tolerance of dissent, it requires acknowledging the **“dignity of dissent.”** • **“Argument is a mode of conflict containment.** So the sages devised a culture of conflict containment ... containing without suppressing the differences of opinion that must characterize any group of people who think long and hard about the problems they face together.” •

Arguments are sacred and need to be carried out **“for the sake of heaven and truth”** because in argument for the sake of truth, everyone wins; but in an argument for the sake of victory, if you lose, you lose, but if you win, you also lose, for by diminishing your opponents, you diminish yourself.

These days it seems that we are forgetting these rules of creative engagement. The political cultures in the United States and in Israel seem to be growing coarser, more polarized and more destructive, so that disunity and strife grow day by day.

Worse, all sides in the political argument seem intent on dragging the American Jewish community into a destructive no win-contest between the left and the right, liberal and conservative, Democrat and Republican. The peace of the Jewish community and our ability to work together in common cause seems threatened as we are pulled between the extremes.

We live in a world where Israel seems to be delegitimized every day; where the United Nations can't seem to find another country worthy of condemnation among scores of violent dictatorships and genocidal conflicts; where Israel is faced with the very real threat of annihilation by many of the same nations that would judge it in the court of world opinion.

In our pain and frustration every internal Jewish conflict can seem to be a matter of life or death. To make matters worse, the Internet provides a perfect forum for those whose own political agendas drive their communication with the American Jewish community, exacerbating our worst nightmares and helping us find scapegoats for our anger and targets for our frustration within our own people. Polarization, vituperation and divisiveness make it increasingly difficult to find common ground and act in our true self-interest.

In this dangerous environment the community must be able to act, and act quickly – but measured debate is also essential.

In a recent controversy about the inclusion of dissenting organizations in communal events, Israeli government representatives insisted on a policy of inclusion. They clearly signaled that a bitterly divided, politically polarized American Jewish community would threaten Israel's security and the bipartisan support that has always been at the heart of the US-Israel relationship.

Another controversy has centered on defining Jewish communal policy toward the Muslim American Society (MAS) and the Islamic Society of Boston (ISB). A harsh battle fills the *Advocate* and the blogosphere. The “enemy” is no longer the mosque or radical Islam, and the discussion is no longer about the correct balance between tolerance and security in a complicated world. It's now fellow Jews who are attacked with anger and venom and with words that can only be described as *sinat chinam*. In the strange world of the Internet, innuendo, hatred and distortion frequently crowd out the truth.

Those who think the ceremony at the mosque was misguided need to acknowledge that Jews, a people who know the heart of the stranger, want Muslims to prosper in the American mainstream, as did our grandparents and countless immigrant groups before them. The work of

building bridges to our Muslim fellow citizens is a worthy (no ... I mean holy!) cause, even as we question the role that the ISB and the MAS should play in this important work.

Those who think that the rabbis' visit to the mosque was a heroic act in support of maligned fellow citizens need to acknowledge that the questions about the political goals of the MAS and the radical origins of the founders of the ISB are real and have been echoed by both the Anti-Defamation League and the American Jewish Committee.

The Jewish community faces many challenges: from advocating for Israel, to the challenge of Jewish identity and Jewish poverty. We can't agree on everything, but a bitterly divided community will fail to meet these challenges. We need all of our talent and all of our energy to build a Jewish world that our grandchildren will want to be part of.

Two action steps that will allow us to move forward:

1) Avoiding *sinat chinam*, baseless hatred, is difficult and all of us have been guilty of it from time to time. But now is the time to stop. As a community we must insist on the rules of respectful discussion as a requirement for participation, and each of us must demand civil discourse from the causes, organizations and leaders we support and the e-mails we choose to distribute. It's time to stop attacking our fellow Jews, our brothers and sisters. Surely we have no shortage of real enemies.

2) It's time for our community relations organizations, our best and brightest and most deeply committed Jews to join the issue and offer some clear direction even if definitive answers are unattainable. The challenge is clear. The Jewish community must believe in and sustain an American dream in which all are welcome, and people of all faiths can live together and build an American future of peace and prosperity. But the Jewish community is also keenly aware of the need to fight the radical Islam we experienced in burning buses and broken lives on the streets of Jerusalem and the terror of 9/11. Together we must struggle to define and act on a strategy to fight the dangers to our people and our society while maintaining civility so that God might say of us:

"Since they despised strife and loved peace and camped as one person, the time has come for Me to give them My Torah."

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Barry Shrage is the president of Combined Jewish Philanthropies. This essay was drawn from "Despising Strife and Loving Peace," a dvar torah originally given at Congregation Shaarei Tefillah in Newton. The full text is available at www.cjp.org.