

When Might The Rancor Stop?

Current Events Class, May 6, 2016

Let me now warn you in the most solemn manner against the baneful effects of the spirit of party. It serves always to distract the public councils and enfeebles the public administration. It agitates the community with ill-founded jealousies and false alarms, kindles the animosity of one party against another, foment occasionally riot and insurrection....A fire not to be quenched, it demands a uniform vigilance to prevent its bursting into flame, lest, instead of warming, it should consume.

– Excerpt from George Washington’s farewell address, September 17, 1796.

A better politics doesn’t mean we have to agree on everything. This is a big country, with different regions and attitudes and interests. That’s one of our strengths, too. Our Founders distributed power between states and branches of government, and expected us to argue, just as they did, over the size and shape of government, over commerce and foreign relations, over the meaning of liberty and the imperatives of security.

But democracy does require basic bonds of trust between its citizens. It doesn’t work if we think the people who disagree with us are all motivated by malice, or that our political opponents are unpatriotic. Democracy grinds to a halt without a willingness to compromise; or when even basic facts are contested, and we listen only to those who agree with us. Our public life withers when only the most extreme voices get attention. Most of all, democracy breaks down when the average person feels their voice doesn’t matter; that the system is rigged in favor of the rich or the powerful or some narrow interest.

Too many Americans feel that way right now. It’s one of the few regrets of my presidency—that the rancor and suspicion between the parties has gotten worse instead of better. There’s no doubt a president with the gifts of Lincoln or Roosevelt might have better bridged the divide, and I guarantee I’ll keep trying to be better so long as I hold this office.

– Excerpt from Barak Obama’s State of The Union address, January 12, 2016



The Mission of the JCPA

The mission of the Council is to serve as the representative voice of the organized American Jewish community in addressing the principal mandate of the Jewish community relations field, expressed in three interrelated goals:

1. To safeguard the human rights of the Jewish people and others, here and throughout the world;
2. To dedicate ourselves to the safety and security of the state of Israel;
3. To protect, preserve and promote a just American society, one that is democratic and pluralistic, one that furthers harmonious interreligious, inter ethnic interracial and other intergroup relations.

These goals are informed by Jewish values. History teaches us that Jewish security is linked inexorably to the strength of democratic institutions. Thus the Jewish community has a direct stake and an ethical imperative to assure that America remains a country wedded to the Bill of Rights and committed to the rule of law, a nation whose institutions continue to function as a public trust.

The JCPA reflects a unique and inclusive partnership of national member agencies, local community relations councils and committees, and the federations of which they are a component part or affiliated agency. It convenes the "common table" around which member agencies, through an open, representative, inclusive and consensus-driven process, meet to identify issues, articulate positions, and develop strategies, programs, and approaches designed to advance the public affairs goals and objectives of the organized Jewish community.

The work of the JCPA, especially in matters relating to democratic pluralism and social justice, reflects the profound Jewish commitment to tikkun olam, the repair of the world. It expresses the conviction of the organized Jewish community that it must be active in the effort to build a just society. The JCPA has the responsibility to enhance the capacity of member agencies to effectively pursue the public affairs agenda. This responsibility requires the JCPA to provide coordination, support, and guidance for public affairs initiatives undertaken by national and local member agencies, to advocate on behalf of the public affairs policies of the organized Jewish community, and to respond to those member-identified needs which strengthen their individual and collaborative capacity to advance the communal public affairs agenda.

JCPA History

The **Jewish Council for Public Affairs (JCPA)**, the united voice of the organized Jewish community, was formally established in 1944 by the Council of Jewish Federations, the forerunner of the Jewish Federations of North America (JFNA). The JCPA was known for many years as the **National Jewish Community Relations Advisory Council (NJCRAC)**. The name was changed to the Jewish Council for Public Affairs in 1997 to reflect more accurately the agency's mission.

For over 70 years, the JCPA has served as an effective mechanism to identify issues, formulate policy, develop strategies and programs, and has given expression to a strongly united Jewish communal voice. By virtue of the JCPA's unique position and structure, our ability to reach out and motivate Jews and non-Jews alike to action is

unparalleled. Through our network of 14 national and 125 local independent partner agencies, the JCPA serves as a catalyst that heightens community awareness, encourages civic and social involvement, and deliberates key issues of importance to the Jewish community.

Statement on Civil Discourse during Elections and Beyond

Rich and respectful debate is essential to a free society and democracy. However, during elections, our rhetoric too often becomes needlessly acrimonious and divisive. Join us in encouraging the leaders of our political parties to reject shrill political discussion that can cross the line into intolerance and bigotry. Especially during elections, when divisions are most pronounced, we must be vigilant in preventing our public discourse from drawing on deep-seated resentment and intolerance.

Please sign this letter below to support this effort to make our politics represent the best of our American values -- free thought, mutual respect, and civic engagement.

Dear Party Chairs, Platform Chairs, and Delegates,

This fall, Americans will cast their ballots and choose elected officials whose decisions will shape our nation for decades. As the world becomes more interconnected, our economy realigns, and our politics evolves, it is critical that we affirm our shared core values: free thought, mutual respect, and civic engagement.

Our nation was -- and still is -- a great experiment in democracy and diversity. We believe in an engaged citizenry and vibrant public discourse. In that spirit, we urge you consider adopting the following few paragraphs in your party's platform this year:

We, as Americans, enjoy a rich tradition of political discourse, ideological diversity, and debate. This diversity can be a durable source of strength. A vigorous exchange of ideas featuring different perspectives allows us to experiment with varied approaches and arrive at effective public policy solutions that help improve the lives of us all. Held in a spirit of respect, this exchange can allow us to find common ground when warranted and foster a more united America.

However, at times, particularly during elections, political discourse can become needlessly acrimonious and undermine the spirit of engagement and citizenship among Americans. Such discord can pull us apart and make it more, not less, difficult to find common ground or even maintain neighborly relations. Moreover, shrill political discussion can cross the line, and spread intolerance and bigotry. Especially during elections, when divisions are most pronounced, we must be vigilant in preventing political discourse from drawing on deep-seated resentment and intolerance.

We call upon our party officials, elected representatives and party delegates, as well as all Americans, to engage during this election season in a thoughtful, respectful, and civil discussion over the future direction of this country. We strive to make our politics represent the best of our American values -- free thought, mutual respect, and civic engagement.

These words are designed to demonstrate leadership and reflect a commitment to spirited and thoughtful public debate. We appreciate your consideration and look forward to working with you.

Respectfully submitted,

http://engage.jewishpublicaffairs.org/c/627/p/dia/action3/common/public/?action_KEY=22797

When Opinions Differ

Rabbinic Perspectives on Political Differences

כל מחלוקת שהיא לשם שמים. סופה להתקיים. ושאינה לשם שמים. אין סופה להתקיים. איזו היא מחלוקת שהיא לשם שמים. זו מחלוקת הלל ושמאי. ושאינה לשם שמים. זו מחלוקת קורחה וכל עדתו:

Every argument that is for the sake of Heaven will succeed in the end. Those that are not for the sake of Heaven will not succeed in the end. What is an example of an argument for the sake of Heaven: Hillel and Shammai. What is an example of an argument that is not for the sake of Heaven: Korach and his community.

Mishnah Pirke Avot 5:17

Rabbi Abba said in the name of Samuel: For three years there was a dispute between the school of Shammai and the school of Hillel, the ones asserting, "The law is according to our views," and the others asserting, "The law is according to our views." Then a divine voice went forth and said, "The utterances of the one and those of the other are both the words of the living God, but the law is according to the school of Hillel."

Since both are the words of the living God, what entitled the school of Hillel to have the law fixed according to their rulings? Because they were kindly and humble; they taught their own rulings as well as those of the school of Shammai.* And even more, they taught the rulings of the school of Shammai before their own. This should teach you that he who humbles himself is exalted by the Holy One, and he who exalts himself is humbled by the Holy One

*E.g., in saying the Shema, Rabbi Tarfon, a member of the school of Hillel, followed a Shammaitic ruling at the risk of his life. *Babylonian Talmud Berachot 10b*

Babylonian Talmud Eruvin 13b and En Yaakov, ad loc.

Although the school of Shammai and the school of Hillel were in disagreement—what the one forbade, the other permitted—nevertheless the school of Shammai did not refrain from marrying women of the families of the school of Hillel, nor did the school of Hillel refrain from marrying those of the school of Shammai. This should teach you that they showed love and friendship toward one another, thus putting into practice the injunction "Love truth, but also peace" (Zechariah 8:19).

Babylonian Talmud Yevamot 14b

משרבו תלמידי שמאי והלל שלא שמשו כל צרכן - רבו מחלוקת בישראל, ונעשית תורה כשתי תורות.

When the disciples of Shammai and Hillel who had not studied sufficiently grew numerous, disputes multiplied in Israel, and the Torah became two Torahs.

Babylonian Talmud Sanhedrin 88b