

Jewish Values and the Politics of Civility

By Rabbi Steve Segar
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I have a very distinct and poignant memory from sometime in the middle of this past summer, probably during the Olympics, when some members of our family were spending a fair amount of time in front of the television. It was during one of the many commercial breaks when we were confronted with yet another negative political add related to this year's presidential campaign. For the purposes of this story, it doesn't matter which party was running the add or which candidate was being targeted, but as the add came to its conclusion, our nine year old son Zach, who has a habit of asking questions that I feel like I should have an answer for but usually don't, piped up and asked me if what that add had said about the candidate was really true.

I found myself initially at a loss for words, and then, trying to seize the parental moment, I responded that I didn't know for sure, but that my guess would be that it was probably at best, only partially true and possibly even a complete misrepresentation. I confess to feeling relieved that he didn't ask the logical follow up question to such an answer. But he certainly would have been justified in wondering why, in a country with such a proud history of democratic government, would the two people vying for the top leadership role in our nation, even consider engaging in behavior that would, within Zach's fourth grade moral environment, certainly lead to a reprimand in the principal's office, if not an outright suspension? And why would the American public tolerate such behavior from the people who put themselves forward as candidates for the most powerful job in the world?

The process of holding a national election, and all of the political activity that goes along with it, is now and has always been one of the most powerful rituals in the civic life of our nation. It is both the cornerstone and the most notable expression of our society's political identity and philosophy. Most Americans have an understandable sense of gratitude for the freedoms and the ideals that are at the center of who we aspire to be as a nation. Yet, all of this appreciation and affirmation, which is potentially most available at times like these in our collective political life, is made much more ambiguous by the intensity of the negative rhetoric that unfortunately also seems to be a hallmark of our electoral processes.

It is no surprise that there have been such large numbers of political adds broadcast over the past several months given that it is a presidential election year and that the race is so tight between the two candidates, and given that we live in what may be the most critical swing state in the country. It is also not really surprising that a high percentage of these adds have employed such a decidedly negative tone about the opposing candidate.

I think it's important that we be clear about what is meant by the term negative campaigning. When people raise concerns about negative campaigning, I don't believe they intend to argue that a candidate should never criticize or call into question the decisions or the policies of their opponent. The issue of concern is more related to instances of personal attacks on the quality of their opponent's character, or even more problematic, the deliberate manipulation and distortion of a candidate's record or intentions on any given political issue; practices that are more accurately described by the term mud-slinging. I think it's also important to note that these practices absolutely transcend any categories of partisanship.

What is perhaps a bit of a surprise is the fact that it seems so many people are shocked by the intensity of the negativity of the campaign. This sense of public disapproval is surprising because according to NY Times columnist Frank Rich, election year mud-slinging is an absolutely predictable feature of political campaigns in our country dating all the way back to the turn of the 19th century. He documents a large number of historical examples with the most astonishing being the 1828 presidential race between Andrew Jackson and John Quincy Adams.

In this contest, Adams accused Jackson of a litany of very un-presidential behaviors including, murder, drunkenness, cockfighting, slave-trading, and, cannibalism. Not only were aspersions cast upon Jackson, but Adams even had the chutzpah to drag Jackson's family into the picture with claims that Jackson's wife was a bigamist and his mother, a prostitute. While this example is certainly the most colorful, Rich points to many other elections both recent and further back in which highly negative messaging about the candidates played a significant role.

What is most interesting about this phenomenon is that it seems to generate so many paradoxes and dichotomies. One example is the fact that Americans consistently claim that we disapprove of predominantly negative campaigning, and yet there is a strong sense among campaign professionals that negativity is the way to go if you are in a tight race and need to take your opponent down a notch or two. So it seems that, as an electorate, we respond in a predictable way to negative campaigning even if we would like to believe otherwise.

Another fascinating aspect of this type of campaign is the understandable outrage that politicians and their supporters often express about being on the receiving end of malicious political attacks, but how oblivious they seem to be when they are the ones dishing it out. We have no further to turn for evidence of this than the content of and the reactions to the recent party conventions. And I think that if we are honest with ourselves, many of us in this very room can probably identify with these lopsided and inconsistent responses.

Frank Rich, in his recent column, does not stop merely with pointing out the ubiquity of negative campaigning in our country's political history, but he also puts forth an argument that the very success of our democratic system of government, and of any democratic system for that matter, actually necessitates this kind of extreme political behavior. And he derides a number of recent authors who have written with grave concern about what the continued reliance on attacking fellow candidates bodes for the future of our political culture.

I have to admit that hearing this point of view articulated with such force and confidence upsets and saddens me. It strikes me as a huge compromise on our ideals and suggests that we're giving in to the lowest common denominator. I think we, as a nation, can do better than this, and I would propose that we reject the notion that a democratic society requires political nastiness in order to be worthy of that designation. I would also argue that we in the Jewish community could potentially play a constructive role in trying to raise the bar of our national political discourse in that we are inheritors of a tradition that affirms and promotes passionate debate as the best way for a community of any size to move in the direction of truth and goodness.

One distinctive dimension of this Jewish embrace of dispute and dialogue is its simultaneous insistence on interpersonal respect, and the absolute rejection of derisiveness toward a competing point of view, the classic example of which can be found in the relationship between the ancient rabbinic colleagues and rivals, Hillel and Shammai. In the Talmudic tractate of Yevamot we are told that although the schools associated with each of these two distinguished teachers disagreed on just about every point of

Jewish law, this did not at all get in the way of marriages taking place between the children of the two communities. This openness to inter-marriage between the rival schools may seem, at first blush, like a strange way of expressing mutual respect and acceptance, but if we think about it for a minute and reflect on the challenges that have existed and still exist around inter-cultural and inter-religious marriage in our own society, we can perhaps appreciate the power of the Talmudic example.

Or, from a different, and a bit more far-fetched perspective, let's imagine for a moment what would transpire within the two political parties, and even within the country as a whole, if one of Mitt Romney's grandsons fell in love with one of Barack Obama's daughters, and they decided to get married. I think that the Romeo and Juliette template might only begin to capture the angst and disorientation that would certainly arise in some quarters as a response.

There is an *actual* and well documented development that has taken place among politicians that I think is directly related to this marriage example. Many observers have pointed out that what has changed most about our nation's political culture over the past two decades is the extent to which political rivals are socially connected to one another, beyond the boundaries of capital hill. It used to be very common for political rivals to have meals in each other's homes, to be invited to each other's parties and simply to get together for one on one conversations. Those connections apparently began to atrophy beginning in the mid-1990s and at this point have come to an almost complete halt. Politicians only interact with one another anymore in their official capacity, when they are involved in debating one another's point of view, and this trend has most certainly contributed to the creation of an atmosphere in which mutual respect is no longer intuitive or automatic.

In another Talmudic tractate there is a second story about the dynamics of holy argument. This story tells of how the schools of Hillel and Shammai argued for three years over a matter of ritual purity. Finally, a heavenly voice intervened and made two significant assertions. The first was that the opinions of both schools represented authentic aspects of Divine truth. The second was that the law in practice should follow the opinion of the school of Hillel. Other rabbinic voices in the Talmud are astounded at the combination of these two claims and they ask how can it be if both opinions are legitimate that only one of them is selected as the way that the community should practice?

They then answer their own question in a very thought provoking way. The School of Hillel is chosen over that of Shammai, they say, because the school of Hillel embodies a deeper level of humility. This humility is expressed by their willingness to teach the opinions of the competing school, and not only that, but to teach the school of Shammai's perspective even before they present their own.

What if candidates and parties behaved more like the house of Hillel? What would it take for the leading campaign strategists to truly disavow the disrespectful and unethical practices of character assassination and dissemination of mis-information and focus instead on the content of a candidate's policy and philosophy? Can we imagine a presidential campaign in which all candidates would acknowledge the authenticity of their opponent's point of view, prior to giving their own explanation of how and why they disagree?

It seems to me that our political culture is in a situation not dissimilar from the United States and the former Soviet Union of a generation ago when both countries realized that they had built up a dangerous level of nuclear weaponry. They both understood the importance of reducing their respective stockpiles, but could only move forward if they knew with absolute certainty that their rival

was doing the same, so that neither would be at a disadvantage. This is analogous to the current condition of political debate in our country.

Many people intuit that there is something unhealthy about the extent of crass negativity in our system of electoral politics, but at the same time, everyone knows that hyper-negativity can be an effective weapon in the attempt to win an election and therefore, no candidate and no party would willingly give up that weapon without a guarantee that their opponents would do the same.

It seems that if we, as a nation, were truly committed to doing politics differently, not less passionately, but much more ethically, then a couple of things would need to happen in order to help the entrenched leadership to begin being weaned away from the temptations of gutter politics and towards a model of holy debate .

One is that citizens who are supporters of each political party would have to organize and put pressure on their own political leaders to shift in this direction. But there would probably also need to be some kind of official bi-partisan body created that would be empowered to reject political language from any source that failed to meet some agreed upon threshold of civility. I realize that such a proposal sounds like a pipe dream within our current political environment, but our own people's historical experience gives me hope that it is not beyond the capacity of thoughtful and dedicated people to achieve.

I must acknowledge that we in the Jewish community have not been such great role models in recent times of putting this tradition of holy debate into practice for our own internal conversations and debates. But to my mind that only strengthens the argument that we have much to gain from reclaiming this aspect of our tradition, both for ourselves and as a contribution to the broader political conversation.

The full page add taken out by the leadership of the Cleveland Jewish Federation in last week's Jewish News calling for greater civility among members of the local Jewish community in our discussions of domestic and middle eastern politics seems like an important, but on its own insufficient, step in the right direction. I am also aware of a new initiative within the local Jewish context whose purpose is to foster authentic dialogue between people with genuinely differing political perspectives.

May these sparks of civility within our own backyard, and others that are surely appearing in various geographical and cultural corners of our country be met with appreciation and enthusiasm by the many individuals in our society who realize that we don't have to continue doing things a certain way just because that's how we've always done them. And may the trajectory of political conversation and debate, at all levels of our society, lead towards a future that is less dependent on the destruction of a rival's reputation and more embracing of the shared goals of clarifying a path towards greater collective well being and the preservation of human dignity

I wish you all a Good Yontif and a Shanah tovah umtukah!