

We need 'civil' discourse

By Rabbi Steve Gutow, president of The Jewish Council for Public Affairs

With the midterm elections ahead of us, America is not only sorting through the political implications of the results, but also dealing with the aftermath: A swath of destruction wreaked by months of mean-spirited campaigning.

Democracy is messy, and American politics have always been hard-fought – but for some time now, the fight has not just been hard, but ugly. The art of listening has been jettisoned in the rush to be heard, as we amplify our voices through name-calling, mud-slinging, and fabrication.

Those making the most noise insist that they have the country's best interests at heart, but pundits, politicians and activists alike need to understand one thing: What is in this country's best interests is not more fighting – but more civility.

America is a land of many religions, but our faith traditions share powerful messages about both the need for honesty, and the need for kindness. Treating each other well, regardless of our relationships or opinions, is at the core of our belief systems – now is the time to bring this simple moral imperative to bear on our national discourse.

Americans face a host of issues of enormous import: covid, environmental woes, financial decline, wars in the Middle East, security concerns at home. It's only natural that we bring passion to our efforts to resolve such problems, and that disagreements over methodology run deep – if these issues weren't of such great consequence, we wouldn't care so much.

And yet, this very consequence demands that we approach our struggles not just with passion, but also with care. Rather than shout each other down and shut each other out, we must engage in frank and civil discussion, with the understanding that we need not only to talk, but also to listen.

Democracy simply cannot function without a respectful exchange of ideas. Our entire system of government is predicated on the notion that no single ideology holds a monopoly on truth, and that compromise is a necessary component of a healthy body politic.

Yet early 21st century America has been fractured by growing political and socio-economic polarization, a corresponding shrinking of our sense of common ground, and a deterioration of common manners. Bigotry is on the rise and often painted as wisdom. Words are stripped of context, and used as weapons. Even conversation becomes a zero-sum game – and ultimately, we all lose.

The challenges we face cannot be effectively met until we change the poisoned atmosphere in which we function. We must actively seek and promote civil modes of discourse and codes of conduct – and this is precisely what the Jewish community has begun to do.

Changing our behavior will not be easy. The zero-sum-game mentality too often leaves us feeling that polite listening signals unquestioning agreement, or gives those we oppose leverage against us. Too often, we fail to understand that civility requires neither acquiescence nor censorship.

Civility is simply demonstrating respect for the dignity of our fellow humans – even those humans with whom we have sharp disagreement. Civility is allowing others to speak, and having the humility to admit that we may have something to learn. Civility favors truth over cheap gain, and patience over knee-jerk judgment.

Civility is more than good manners, however. It's also the pro-active advancement of codes of behavior that will heal our society from the damage it has sustained. We need to plan our public events carefully, so that they can't become occasions for ideological grand-standing; we must stand up to defend each other from attack; we must maintain an attitude of respect even when faced with smears and falsehoods. We must become aggressively reasonable.

The Jewish community has begun to take steps in keeping with the moral imperative to treat each other with respect. A statement sponsored by the Jewish Council for Public Affairs calling for more civil discourse, as part of a far-reaching campaign to set a new tone, has been signed by a who's who of Jewish community leaders including the heads of prominent Jewish community and pro-Israel organizations, Republicans and Democrats, conservatives and liberals, rabbis, academics, former Presidential Administration officials and renowned Jewish activists.

As troubling as this past election season has been, we can choose to turn it into a national turning point. Rather than continue down the same angry, destructive path, we can choose to replace invective with respect, disrespect with civility.

In doing so, we will not only be working to perfect our union, but acting to fulfill the demands of our faiths, and our consciences. We will not only be healing our nation for today, but building a better one for tomorrow.

Rabbi Steve Gutow is the president of the Jewish Council for Public Affairs. Under Rabbi Gutow's leadership, the JCPA is launching a new campaign to inspire more civility into our national discourse

Reflection Questions

- What stood out for you in reading this statement?
- For you, wonder what it means to be a Christian first and everything else second?
- For you, what does it mean that Jesus is Lord? What does that look like in your life?
- How would our fellow citizens know we are Christians by our love?
- What does it mean to commit ourselves as Christians today?