

How To Quell The Verbal Civil War

My prayer this Yom Kippur for the Jewish community is that we listen to the words we utter to God throughout the holiest day of the year and take them seriously enough to change the way we speak to each other. Because our track record this past year was awful, and it may be time to consider instituting some forms of communal pressure on ourselves to counter the verbal civil war.

In our public confession on Yom Kippur, a central component of the service, we beat our breasts and pour out our collective sins, so many of which deal with the spoken word. We ask forgiveness "for the sin that we have committed before You with the utterance of the lips ... through harsh speech ... through foolish speech ... through impure lips ... through evil talk." The list goes on.

And yet we look back on a year in which the unity of the Jewish people, ever fragile, was further shaken, in part by hurtful words spoken, Jew against Jew.

No element of the community is blameless, and much of the hurtful talk can be traced to our rabbis and leaders. I kept a list of some of the harshest statements made over the past year, and rather than repeat them here, will only point out that they came from a chief rabbi in Israel dismissing the stature of Reform Jews as well the leaders of the Conservative and Reform movements in this country asserting the worthlessness of the chief rabbinate.

Unfortunately such statements indicate an attempt on both sides to deal with an ideological opponent by negating his value rather than confronting the merits of his position. This attack, diminishing the humanity of another fellow being, goes against the grain of Jewish ethics, which teaches us to respect every person as a reflection of God's image.

What can be done to improve this situation beyond bemoaning the level of hatred among Jews and speaking out against it? In this season of prayer and reflection, it is instructive to note how we can tell if our *teshuvah*, or repentance, is successful. Our rabbis tell us that if the opportunity to transgress presents itself again and is resisted, then the penitence is complete. It means that we have not only learned from our mistakes but changed our behavior as a result.

Applying this concept to the Jewish community, let us consider whether we have learned any lessons from regrettable behavior in the recent past. For instance, if a group of Conservative and/or Reform Jews choose to pray in an egalitarian minyan during the High Holy Days or Simchat Torah at the Western Wall in Jerusalem, can we expect an-

other embarrassing episode to capture media attention around the world? Changes in behavior will have to take place to avoid additional crises of this nature.

The non-Orthodox segment should appreciate that secular as well as Orthodox Jews in Israel perceive their recent prayer effort on

Tisha b'Av as an act of provocation — motivated by politics more than prayer — and intended to trigger a violent response. Regardless, the haredim (ultra-Orthodox) and police need to

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display new levels of restraint and avoid interfering with their fellow Jews.

Ideally, level-headed leaders will work out a compromise on this and other issues dealing with religious freedoms and expressions in Israel, and avoid making the Western Wall into a battleground. Indeed, a government-appointed committee is working diligently toward averting an irreparable rift between American Jewry and Israel over the conversion bill pending in the Knesset that would allow only Orthodox rabbis to perform conversions in Israel. But even if the committee of seven, made up of Orthodox, Conservative and Reform representatives,

reaches agreement, there is no guarantee that their recommendation will be approved in the Knesset.

Perhaps one way to effect a positive change in the community is to establish parameters about acceptable public speech by Jewish leaders, and to publicize the list of transgressors. Since nothing else has worked, maybe the embarrassment of a formal condemnation by a communal body for overstepping the boundaries would give pause to those so quick to speak out in anger and derision.

Of course we would need to be careful not to repeat *lashon hara*, or disparaging language, even if our goal was to curb the wider dissemination of such language. But without penalties for the way we speak to and about each other the prospects for improvement are dim.

Historically, Jewish communities have taken similar actions, such as establishing spending caps for weddings, funerals and other ritual events so as not to embarrass the poor or encourage ostentation among the wealthy. Such efforts are successful when there is a central communal body that is widely respected and whose decisions are heeded. That may be difficult to replicate in our cantankerous community, but it should not prevent our civic and rabbinic leaders from getting together to discuss putting some teeth behind their calls for civility and tolerance.

Until that happens, we'll go on beating our breasts on Yom Kippur and beating each other up verbally the rest of the year. □