

Jews and Americans Need to Re-learn How to Listen to Each Other

Blame it on President Donald Trump and Fox News. Perhaps it's the fault of the mainstream liberal media and its leading outlets like *The New York Times*, CNN and MSNBC. Or maybe the problem is Facebook. But no matter which scapegoat you pick, there's little doubt that Americans are more deeply divided than they've been in living memory as traditional left-right debates have stopped being exchanges of ideas and become screaming matches in which neither side even bothers to pretend they're listening to each other.

Instead, we demonize those who disagree with us. Worse than that, most of us have chosen to live in virtual ideological safe zones in which we've declared those who disagree may not enter on peril of being "defriended."

But what I've learned spending much of the months since the presidential election on the road debating with a liberal colleague is that the same people who have largely stopped listening to each other intuitively understand this isn't healthy for anyone, least of all the country. The example of two old friends who disagree passionately about the great issues of the day being able to engage in rational and respectful debate for 90 minutes is so unusual these days that it has an interesting effect on the listeners. For at least one evening, they join in the same spirit. At a time when country seems split not so much by ideology as it is by mutual suspicions of bad intent, that's no small thing. And it strikes me that we need a lot more of this attitude if we're going to survive the next few years without doing irreparable harm to the civic fabric of our republic.

When J.J. Goldberg and I first planned a post-election debate tour, our focus was almost entirely on providing audiences with a chance to discuss divergent views about the chances for peace between Israel and the Palestinians. Goldberg, the editor-at-large of *The Forward*, is a liberal Zionist who thinks the Middle East conflict is ready to be solved by just a little more effort. I'm a conservative who thinks the Palestinians show no signs of being willing to give up their war on the legitimacy of any Jewish state, no matter where its borders might be drawn. But what we've discovered as we've journeyed throughout North America is that the Trump victory worsened the divisions within our own community and American society at large.

At one stop, we heard a rabbi decry Trump's election as analogous to the 9/11 attacks. At another, we were told of children being instructed by their parents who voted Republican to not tell their teachers or friends, lest they be shunned. One rabbi said she's been counseling several couples who are heading to the divorce courts, in no small measure because they'd voted for different presidential candidates.

To some extent, it's been a journey through a land of liberal despair, as many Jews—who as a community voted overwhelmingly for Hillary Clinton—have been willing to buy into conspiracy theories about Trump and were not so much interested in opposing his policies as they were in “resisting” him or treating his Electoral College victory as illegitimate. Along with that has come a willingness on the part of liberals to view the 60 million Americans who voted for the eventual winner as having demonstrated not so much bad judgment as moral deficiency. His voters tend to see Clinton supporters in a similar light. Too many of us are now unable to see political differences as evidence of anything but malice and bad intentions. Much of this is as rooted in class and cultural differences as it is in differing opinions about the issues, and those are the kinds of gaps that are not easily

bridged.

This is hardly surprising, but it is not unrelated to the way American Jews discuss Israel. Since they get most of their information about Israel from the mainstream media, ignorance of the realities of the Middle East is rampant among Jews, and to some extent that skews their view of both Prime Minister Benjamin Netanyahu's government and the relationship. For too long, rational debate within the community has been difficult. Those on the left accuse the right of being fascists or oppressors. The right answers back by calling the other side self-hating Jews. The result is not dissimilar from the dialogue of the deaf about Trump.

Promoting civil discourse is not without its difficulties. Each side of the divide, both in secular politics and on Israel, have to some extent already declared total war on their opponents. Though we've billed this debate as one about a battle for Israel's soul, we now understand that it's also about the struggle for Americans and Jews to understand each other. That can make it difficult to argue, as we do, about the prospects for both the new administration and the two-state solution as well as about how Israel and Jews should react to international criticism and the BDS movement.

But everywhere J.J. and I have gone, we've encountered audiences hungry for something different than the usual menu of invective served up for them every day on the cable news networks. Without fail, we've discovered that when you model civility, you get it back. Though we aired divergent arguments about both the peace process and, to some extent, the prospects for the Trump administration, they heard us treat each other respect and, in turn, they showed us the same respect. During the debates, the question-and-answer periods and afterwards, when the crowds gathered around us to continue the discussion, the result was generally friendly, even where disagreements continued.

The conclusion from this is inescapable.

Both J.J. and I have spent our careers as journalists being told to shut up by people who wanted to squelch our views. Yet despite that, we've not only kept speaking out, but have also learned the value of listening to each other. We think our debates are teaching the same lesson to a wider audience.

What we need both as Jews and as Americans is to relearn how to listen to each other. We must reacquaint ourselves with our neighbors and friends who have been reading, listening to and watching different media and are therefore coming to very different conclusions about events. Instead of stubbornly remaining in the cocoons we've woven for ourselves, in which we have banished views that contradict our predetermined conclusions and biases, we must open ourselves up to the possibility that there are other legitimate opinions to be considered. Spirited, yet civil disagreement may "trigger" a certain degree of distress, but it is also healthy both for American democracy and the Jewish world.

As we head out for more appearances this spring, we look forward to having the opportunity to bring this message to different communities and together doing more listening and learning. We know this won't make our differences disappear, but it will remind us that the things that unite us as Americans and Jews must still be greater than that which divides us. {eo}

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