



Mending the Torn Fabric

Rabbi Shmuel Silber

We had all hoped that 2021 would be different. We hoped that the violence and discord which was so prominent last year would not follow us into this new one. But alas, infighting has reared its ugly head in the first weeks of this new year. It is over a week since the violent protest in our nation's capital, and it still seems surreal. The images, the violence seem like scenes from a distant land. But yet, it was here, just an hour away. There has been much commentary and blame. But is there something to be learned? Is there a lesson? Or is this simply another dark chapter for our great nation? I would like to share some thoughts and insights as I grapple with these events.

Pharaoh was bent on destroying the Jewish people.

And Pharaoh commanded all his people, saying, "Every son who is born you shall cast into the Nile, and every daughter you shall allow to live (Exodus 1:22)."

I have often wondered – how can this happen? How can an advanced culture like the Egyptians take innocent babies and cast them into the Nile? The answer is tragically simple - dehumanization. The moment you can convince a nation that the Jew is not a person is the moment that anything becomes possible. Pharaoh had convinced his people that the Jew was a threat, would consume all of the wealth, collude with Egypt's enemies, and lead an insurgency from within. He transformed us into beasts of burden – he made us into animals. In that moment, it was no longer human children being thrown into the Nile. We were animals, property who could be discarded with little regard. Throughout the generations this very same strategy has been employed. How did the Nazis murder 6,000,000 with gas, ovens, torture, and mass executions? By portraying the Jew as sub-human. When the Jew is dehumanized – anything is possible.

When I look around at our greater society, I am truly saddened by what I perceive as the dehumanization of the "other." The other can be someone who does not agree with my political views. The other can be someone who does not share my opinions on race and religion. We talk about each other as fakes, thieves and deplorables (and many other names not fit for print). How did this happen? When did we lose our way? I believe the answer is quite simple – we have forgotten how to be nice. This is not just in the political sphere. I have seen a difference in many daily interactions as well. Perhaps, people are more on edge with the pandemic and political turmoil, but I have found that people are faster to anger, accuse and attack in a heightened state of emotional volatility. Many of us have forgotten how to express our opinions, concerns, and points of view with respect.

There is no question that there is a trickle-down effect. President Trump has made name calling and public humiliation of others common place and acceptable. But let us be honest; everyone is doing it. The President must own the role his words and actions played in the violence which occurred. Unfortunately, as leader of the free world, the President has not modeled dignity, civility, tolerance, acceptance, and the ability to be nice. The reality is that we have not tried to seek out these attributes and cultivate them within ourselves either.

There is a real danger of dehumanization. When you dehumanize those who disagree with you, you can hit a police officer in the head with a fire extinguisher and end a precious life for absolutely no reason. When you dehumanize someone, you can turn on those who are charged to protect you. But it is not only the events of last week to which I refer. When we look at what happened in Portland, in New York



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City and at numerous other protests which turned violent and unruly, we have seen people turning on each other with sheer hatred. This is not our way.

If there is one thing I know, it is that there will be people who will be upset with my words. Some will say that I am not condemning President Trump's actions in harsh enough terms. Some will say that I am simply lapping up what the media is feeding me. The time has come to stop assigning blame and for each of us to take responsibility to fix our great nation.

So, what we can do? I read an incredible opinion piece in the Wall Street Journal this past week. Mr. Chip Roy, a Republican, represents Texas' 21st Congressional District and wrote a column titled, "*Why I'm Taking a Social-Media Sabbatical.*"

I'm suspending indefinitely my use of Twitter, Facebook, and other social media. I'm doing so not to make a political statement, but in the hope that America can return to kitchen tables, churches, taverns, coffee shops, dance halls (it's a Texas thing)—whatever it takes to look others in the eye and rebuild our communities and humanity ... While social media has proved a useful vehicle for sharing information quickly, I have concluded that it does more harm than good to individuals and society alike. It tempts us to be reactive and feeds the worst of our human tendency to respond in anger rather than to stop and think before communicating. The result is more verbal combat and less deliberative thought—all with language we often wouldn't use while looking someone in the eye. I have been guilty of this recently, and I haven't always been proud of my language ... Of all God's earthly creations, man is the only one with rational speech, but we used to have a better way to communicate with each other. Let us dine together. Let us look each other in the eye. Let us sit down and talk again. Then, let us unite again as Americans.

Now I will admit, I am bit biased; I don't have a Facebook or Twitter account. I know that all of these platforms can be and are used for such incredible good. But imagine if we took a break from the toxicity of social media and started working on repairing relationships. I know that for some, this ask sounds like being asked to give up a limb – but I truly believe that there is great wisdom in Mr. Roy's suggestion.

Another suggestion. The great sage Shammai is quoted in Pirkei Avos (Ethics of our Fathers 1:15):

"Shammai said ... receive every person with a pleasant countenance."

The attribution of this idea to Shammai is very strange. Throughout the Talmud, Shammai is known as the more austere, strong, and rigid personality while Hillel is known for his more gentle, kind, and serene approach. Rabbi Yisroel Meir Lau in his commentary explains that Shammai made this statement after realizing that his more rigid and sometimes caustic approach with people was flawed (see Shabbos 31a). You can't accomplish much in this world if you can't dialogue properly with the other. The great Chassidic master, Rav Yitzchak of Vorka (1779-1848) says, that the word "*sever*" which we translate as *countenance* (in the above-mentioned Mishna) can also be vocalized as "*savar*" which means to "*hold an opinion.*" The Rebbe explains that sometimes I may not like someone and perhaps, even for legitimate reasons, but when we encounter one another, the other should never feel my disdain. The Mishna teaches us, "*receive every person in a way which makes him feel accepted and respected by you.*" Sometimes, you have to use your poker-face to live in harmony with the other. The purists amongst might say that is disingenuous, but as I get older, I have begun to realize, the world has no room for purists. We live in complicated times, and our country has grown ever more turbulent – the time has come to be nice. We must work on this each and every day. Each day we encounter situations which



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cause us to become angry. How do we deal with our anger? Do we unleash upon the other who is evoking these feelings within us? Do we lash out with put-downs, insults, and personal attacks? When we perceive that an injustice has taken place, do we use this as an excuse to unleash pent up animalistic tendencies which manifest in violence, looting, and many others forms of egregious behavior? We are better than this. We have a legal system, and if you have a grievance, there is a mechanism to address it. We have the right to demonstrate and make our voices heard. But the moment you lift your hand against your brother or sister is the moment you lose your credibility, is the moment you no longer stand for a cause, is the moment you become an animal looking for prey.

I know that taking a social-media sabbatical and actively working to be nice are not the sole solutions for our country's issues. But sometimes we look for big solutions to solve big problems, when in fact, we have to take small steps to make some progress. It would be wonderful to think that when President-Elect Biden takes the reigns next week, a wave of civility and comradery will sweep over our great nation – but we cannot engage in self-delusion. I pray that President-Elect Biden has the wisdom and courage to do what is right for this nation and all its citizens. But no man, even the President of the United States, can affect change all alone. The fabric of our nation has been torn, but it is not beyond repair. Let us do our small part and begin to create change.