

Yeshiva University Catches The Disease

by: Rabbi Jeremy Rosen

The Talmud says that the plague that decimated Rabbi Akiva's academy nearly two thousand years ago was because they did not treat each other with respect. This tragedy came to be associated with this period of the year we call 'The Omer.' Some famous commentators have over the years suggested that this was a euphemism for the disastrous Bar Kochba campaign that Rabbi Akiva supported, much against most contemporary rabbinic leaders. This period of mourning has now come to be associated more with the frequent anti-Semitic campaigns in the Diaspora, mainly under Christianity but under Islam as well. Its moral lesson has receded.

I suggest we need to go back to its roots. The biggest internal threat to the Jewish people is the current lack of respectful dialogue, be it religious or civil. There is a mood of bitterness and aggression, and a blind refusal to respect another point of view, which I see as being as big a danger to our survival as the external ones. Because history tells us that we are and have always been the architects of our own downfall.

Wherever you look, you see not just a refusal to consider another point of view. I can understand the dangers of giving any platform or credence to a morally corrupt, despicable regime, or to a point of view that fails the test of morality. Intolerance of intolerance is a virtue. No one in his right mind would give a racist a platform. But along the spectrum of ideas, there are variations which are not existential threats, but rather areas of exploration and respectful consideration. We have a tradition that the great schools of Hillel and Shamai battled for years over legal issues, sometimes acrimoniously. Yet the Talmud reiterates that they still treated each other with respect, and married amongst each other despite their differences over halachic definitions. It is a well-known Talmudic principle that "both contradicting points of view can equally be the words of God".

I am worried by this now universal tendency to dismiss, to rubbish, to abuse, and not even to stop to consider whether there may be a point worth considering, whether it is a religious or a political debate.

For years such abuse has been a feature of Israeli life, between political parties, religious and secular, different immigrant groups, let alone different communities and peoples. We would put it down to hangovers from less sophisticated societies, the tensions of war, of integrating so many different ethnic and cultural minorities. But it has gotten worse not better over time.

To make matters worse it has now become the norm in the USA both in Jewish and non-Jewish circles. One could make out a case that it is the fault of the legal world with its adversarial approach to law and the desire to win at all costs being more important than the truth. One might argue it is the result of the cut, thrust, and grab as much as you can economic climate. It could be

the increasing divide in a society that once encouraged integration and the ideal of a melting pot but now upholds division and separatism. In general, values passionately held are passionately supported and lead to zealous extremism, whether religious or political. The single-minded ideologues created revolutions, not moderates.

A recent sad example of how malicious public discourse has become in the USA (but it's universal) concerns Yeshiva University. It is an admirable institution, of the sort that Old World Jewry has been incapable of imitating. It is a first-class recognized university, both graduate and undergraduate. It has an excellent yeshivah with outstanding Talmudic scholars at its head. It is the last bastion of thinking, academically rigorous Judaism of Diaspora Jewry. Yet it too has been accused of coming increasingly under the influence of the Right Wing.

Its student magazine, The Yeshiva University Beacon, has allowed students to express opinions, often uncomfortably close to the bone and controversial. Recently the magazine had its funds cut off by the administration for daring to publish an article that touched on the holy cow of premarital sex. Now an article written by a student, dated February 21, has suggested that the Jewish world is too focused and preoccupied with looking back to the Holocaust and should instead try to emphasize positive and moral contributions to society. The author did not minimize the Holocaust or the importance of maintaining the memory. But he suggested that we use it as a substitute for other more constructive forms of Jewish identification. We overreact in prosecuting Holocaust deniers. We are too sensitive about its use in public discourse.

This is not new. It's a position that I have often expressed and several outstanding academics have written about. The article was neither innovative nor extreme. It was a student's sincere attempt to think critically about something as horrific as the Holocaust, being so central to current Jewish experience and the sad fact that it does not necessarily succeed in reinforcing Jewish identity.

Poor fellow—all hell broke loose. He was accused of the most horrific heresy, of deserving excommunication, even death. The reaction was a very sad reflection of that brutal, primitive defense mechanism that represents the very worst elements of our people. It was so sad to see the disease now manifest in an otherwise praiseworthy institution.

Instead of confronting challenges, nowadays, the defenses go up. "Don't we have enough enemies outside without you having to attack us from within?" There is no attempt to tackle the issue, just to dismiss it. It's the very attitude that pushed me into becoming a maverick and a rebel a generation ago. It was this kneejerk self-censoring attitude that, in Britain at any rate, produced a colorless, conformist, unexciting community that I only wanted to stir and shake. This attitude now permeates the religious and the political community.

Instead of condemning and marginalizing any opinion or community that wants to offer an alternative paradigm or opinion, we should encourage variety and

debate not bully tactics. Bullies might succeed in the short run, but they rarely last the course.