

INTERFAITH INSIGHTS

Can we react to calamities in unity rather than division?



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Note: After writing today's Insight, I learned of additional calamities in our own country with the shootings in El Paso and Dayton last weekend. It is another reason to mourn and to seek moral renewal and action.

The next week is a special holiday for our Muslim friends, the Eid al Adha, which in America this year begins Saturday evening and goes through the following evening. It celebrates the completion of the time of pilgrimage to Mecca known as the Hajj.

Next week also marks a special day in the Jewish calendar, although it is a day of mourning, not celebration. Tisha B'Av is the ninth day in the month of Av according to the Jewish calendar, which this year falls on Aug. 10 in the commonly used Gregorian calendar. This day is for remembering the destruction of the First Temple by Nebuchadnezzar, King of Babylonia, which occurred in 586 B.C.E. The Second Temple, a rather modest structure, was rebuilt by the returning exiles. In the first century B.C.E., King Herod the Great did a major reconstruction that was then destroyed by the Romans in 70 C.E., again in the Jewish month of Av.

In America, we can relate to recognizing certain dates that mark tragic events. The term "9/11" recalls that fateful day on Sept. 11, 2001, when planes flew into the two World Trade towers, as well as a third plane hitting the Pentagon and a fourth plane overtaken by passengers crashing in Pennsylvania. President Franklin D. Roosevelt declared Dec. 7, 1941, "a date which will live in infamy," recognizing the surprise Japanese attack on Pearl Harbor which brought the United States into the Second World War.

Rabbi Jonathan Sacks, previous chief rabbi in Great Britain, in a recent posting points out that both temple destructions followed a time when the Jewish people were very divided. He says there were three times when such a division led to disaster for the Jewish community. The first was when Joseph and his brothers were in such disharmony that the Torah says, "They could no longer speak peaceably together." The brothers then sold Joseph as a slave in Egypt, leading up to the whole community becoming slaves there.

The second time such division occurred was following the death of King Solomon, when his son took over, leading to the division of the two kingdoms. This, Sacks writes, was the beginning of the end and led to the eventual destruction of the First Temple. He says the third division "was during the Roman siege of Jerusalem when the Jews besieged inside were more focused on fighting one another than the enemy outside."

When a people are divided, Sacks proposes seven principles for maintaining their identity. He writes about them with reference to the Jewish people, but I believe they could also apply to us in America, as we also seem to be increasingly divided. Let me review his principles and add comments regarding our current environment.

PRINCIPLE 1: KEEP TALKING.

Sacks again refers to Joseph and his brothers in the Genesis passage, "But when his brothers saw that their father loved him more than all his brothers, they hated him, and could not speak peaceably to him." (Genesis 37:4) Sacks suggests that had they kept speaking they would have made peace.

PRINCIPLE 2: LISTEN TO ONE ANOTHER.

Sacks refers to the "Shema Yisrael," which is the beginning of the passage from Deuteronomy that is the essence of Jewish faith. The verse translates as "Hear, O Israel: the Lord our God, the Lord is one." The first word is "hear." In other words, "listen." The Shema also refers to the morning and evening prayers. It is part of the prayer that, Sacks continues, "calls on us to listen to one another in a way that we can actually hear what our opponent is saying. If we do this, we discover it is not just a powerful way to avoid conflict, but profoundly therapeutic as well."

PRINCIPLE 3: WORK TO UNDERSTAND THOSE WITH WHOM YOU DISAGREE.

Sacks refers to the great 1st century BCE scholar Hillel, who "was humble and modest; he taught the views of his opponents even before his own. He labored to understand the point of view with which he disagreed."

PRINCIPLE 4: NEVER SEEK VICTORY.

Sacks comments: "If you seek to inflict defeat on your opponent, they must, by human psychology, seek to retaliate and inflict defeat on you. The end result is though you win today, you lose tomorrow, and in the end everyone loses." Rather than thinking in terms of victory or defeat, we should think in terms of what is good for the whole community.

PRINCIPLE 5: IF YOU SEEK RESPECT, GIVE RESPECT.

"As you behave to others, they will behave to you. If you show contempt for other(s) ... they will show contempt to you. If you respect other(s) ... they will show respect to you."

PRINCIPLE 6: YOU CAN DISAGREE, BUT STILL CARE.

Sacks calls each of us to take responsibility for others. "Ultimately, I do not need you to agree with me, I just need you to care about me." Caring is more important than winning or even agreeing.

PRINCIPLE 7: REMEMBER THAT GOD CHOSE US AS A PEOPLE.

Sacks here refers to the Jewish sense of having been a chosen people, but we can also think of this in terms of our larger community. We can be united by seeing each other as children of God, Sacks would add, "even if we do not share the exact same faith."

These principles could well be used by each of us as we seek to negotiate the divisions and conflicts that are becoming too apparent in our world today, conflicts that can lead to violence.

In a recent article, David Brooks, author and columnist, also calls us to raise the level of discourse in the political arena. He writes that we as Americans need to remember the values we share. He calls for "an uprising of decency." This means, for him, a reaffirmation of our commitment to unity, honesty and respect for truth. It also calls for sympathy for those who are suffering, as well as helping create opportunity for all, especially the youth. He also reminds us of the value of pluralism. He writes, "Human difference makes life richer and more interesting. We treasure members of all races and faiths for what they bring to the mosaic."

As we remember previous calamities, let us also be diligent in making sure that disagreement does not lead to divisions that can destroy our common good. In the midst of difference, let us seek "an uprising of decency."

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