

My friends, I am still trying to increase the number of members who follow CST on Twitter. Those who do got a tweet from me this week saying that I had just heard the most disgusting commercial I had ever heard on the radio, and that I worry about how coarse we are becoming as a society.

One only gets 140 letters and spaces in a tweet. Here I can disclose more: I was listening to a sports show on satellite radio. Therefore, perhaps there was an assumption that the audience would be predominately male and more accepting of the trash they broadcasted. It is significant that it was satellite radio because I doubt the FCC would have allowed this commercial over terrestrial radio. Even taking these things into account, I was shocked. It was so vile that if you ask me privately what the commercial said, I would be too embarrassed to answer directly.

This is one example of how coarse we are becoming as a society, but I want to focus on another sign of the same tonight. We seem to have lost the ability to disagree with civility. Our nation was born, or perhaps better, conceived with a document of disagreement, the Declaration of Independence. It has probably been some time since you read it from start to finish. I urge you to do so, to see firsthand why I hold it up tonight as a model of civility.

It begins by stating that the American colonies were duty bound to explain their actions out of “a decent respect to the opinions of mankind.” It lists the many complaints the colonists had regarding the King of Great Britain. Each is a simple, factual statement. There are no insults directed at the King or anyone else. The closest it comes to doing so is the following: “In every stage of these oppressions we have petitioned for redress in the most humble terms: our repeated petitions have been answered only by repeated injury. A prince, whose character is thus marked by every

act which may define a tyrant, is unfit to be the ruler of a free people.”

Fast forward to present day. I recently attended a meeting of a Jewish organization during which a political issue was discussed. At least twice, one attendee made disparaging, offensive statements about a group of people. Although I do not know the person, I have no doubt that this individual would never publicly say such things about women, minorities, or in fact, almost anyone. However, making these remarks in public about those who hold political opinions that differ from his posed no problem.

My friends, there are two ways to look at those whose politics differ from your own. You can assume they are well intentioned, decent people, but believe things you think are incorrect. The alternative is to see them as indecent, evil, and stupid. The public remarks I heard reflected that view of others.

In Judaism, there are also two ways to disagree. The Talmudic term for a disagreement is מחלוקת (*ma-cha-LO-kef*). There are two types: a מחלוקת for the sake of heaven, and a מחלוקת that is not for the sake of heaven. To restate this in more modern terms, the former is well intentioned but the latter is not. Decent people who sincerely but respectfully disagree personify the מחלוקת for the sake of heaven. Those who see those with whom they disagree as evil personify the מחלוקת that is not for the sake of heaven. More and more, we see the demonization of one group by another because they differ in their opinions on something. When we demonize well intended people with whom we disagree (well intended excludes, for example, terrorists who deny Israel's right to exist), we diminish our own humanity.

My friends, we Jews are famous for disagreeing with one another—the proverbial two Jews with three opinions. If

Jews were always in agreement with one another, the Talmud would be a pamphlet instead of a twenty volume work. We will always have disagreements within the Jewish world, and we will always have disagreement in American society. To demonize others, to make snide remarks about people who hold different opinions, is not merely rude. It is both unAmerican and unJewish. It does not have to be this way. We, the American Jewish community, can serve our role as a light unto the nations by modeling the *מחלקת* for the sake of heaven, by showing through our actions that civil disagreement is not only possible, but the only acceptable form of disagreement among decent people of good will. Let us serve as a model of civil disagreement for our American society, and let it begin within our Jewish community.