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A Case for Peace Communications

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There is a big difference between hurtful speech propagated by individuals and similar speech propagated by governments. A greater emphasis on peace communications as a supplement to diplomatic efforts can reduce the damage done by the latter, and ultimately mitigate the former.

A near-universally known English-language children's chant goes like this: "Sticks and stones can break my bones, but words will never hurt me." This adage serves as comeback defense against verbal bullies, as if to say in adult-speak: "I am not affected in the least by your name-calling, so you may as well save your breath." It seems even to work deployed that way, at least from time to time.

But in both a strict and real sense, any assertion downplaying the power of words to hurt is utterly wrong. Others have noticed and commented. In popular culture, for example, talk show host Eric Bogosian once explained the insults he hurls at his audience as, "Sticks and stones may break my bones, but words cause permanent damage." A Randall Munroe *xkcd* comic strip of fairly recent vintage bears a caption reading, "Sticks and stones can break my bones, but words can make me think I deserved it."

If popular culture commentators are wise enough to sense the power of words to hurt, and if every parent, teacher, and caregiver of young children knows it from daily experience—and they most certainly do—you can be sure that the wiser heads of the world's religious civilizations and associated philosophers have sensed it, pondered it, and pronounced on it over a great many years, as well. Among this latter group, my favorite is rabbi Israel Meir Kagan (1838-1933), who went by the honorific title of the Hafetz Hayyim (lover of life).

Hailing from the Lithuanian town of Radin, he burrowed into the normative implications of various kinds of speech under a wide range of circumstances. Taking his lead, as Talmudists do, from scripture—Exodus 23:7, Psalms 12:3 and 34:13, Proverbs 30:8—he was critical even of casual gossip, which led some of his contemporaries to think of him as a scold. But the Hafetz Hayyim reminded them gently that if they were going to say three times every day in their prayers, "Guard my tongue from evil and my lips from speaking guile, and to those who curse me let my soul be silent," then they might as well take to heart what they were saying.

His penetrating and sometimes counterintuitive insights into the power of speech to hurt were incisive. He is perhaps best known for a deliberate exaggeration fashioned for the sake of making his point: Slander is worse than murder, he argued, because murder destroys only two souls—the slayer and the victim—while slander destroys three: the speaker, the listener, and the one spoken about.

The exquisite sensitivity to hurtful language that distinguished the Hafetz Hayyim, and countless other pious men and women from every major world religious tradition, fills us with humility—or it should. It usefully shames us into remembering the harm we may have done with "mere" words, and warns us against causing others pain in the future. We need shame and warning alike, for it takes time and effort to teach and train ourselves into this sensitivity in the face of the eternal temptation to build up our often anxious and fragile selves by verbally belittling and denigrating others.

And at least in contemporary Western societies, nearly everything lately pushes against acquiring this sensitivity. Verbal elbow throwing is an integral part of mass entertainment culture, and the clickbait tendencies of the social media/internet subculture have only made things worse. The anonymity baked into this subculture—normal for it but abnormal in the extreme in typical face-to-face relationships—helps to explain the explosion of incivility and outright rudeness in our politics, and in the culture generally. It is, after all, much harder for most people to despise someone standing right in front of them, in all of his or her manifest humanity, than it is to despise someone virtually from an electronic distance.

These new tendencies are dangerous. Denigrating and hateful speech is often the smoke that warns us of the fire of violence beneath, a fire ready to burst forth and consume innocents without warning. It has composed part of the fuse in every instance of explosive "loner" violence in recent times, whether Dylann Roof's attack on a Charleston, South Carolina church, the shooting up of a Pittsburgh synagogue, or most recently the atrocity perpetrated against Muslim worshippers in Christchurch, New Zealand.

All that said, the overwhelming emphasis of the moral teachings of the Hafetz Hayyim and the many others over the centuries like him pertain to individual conduct. They focus on those who hurt others mostly through inadvertence, not on those who *intend* to hurt and harm. They have rarely probed into the affairs of state and mass-membership political organizations, turning their meticulous ethical analyses to the intersection points between human nature and political culture. They have had little to say about government and group-sponsored propaganda stemming from informal and officially sponsored racism, bigotry, and sectarian prejudice that deliberately use words as weapons. Their guidance, therefore, can get us but so far and no further in such fraught domains.

That is because once we enter the political world, the landscape of logic and causality changes. One change has to do with scale. As horrific as the events in Charleston, Pittsburgh, and Christchurch were—

and so many others with them— they pale before the harm that movements and governments have done, and may yet do. Movements and governments can rouse the spirit of mobs, the pull of emotional conformity that can submerge individual consciences in a frenzy of collective hatred. The Nazi regime's Nuremberg rallies of the mid-1930s are iconic cases in point, but many, many others can be cited. Human *social* nature differs from that of individuals.

This matters practically because any of us can try to reason with individuals, and sometimes try to counsel them, and sometimes try to get them taken into custody before they can harm innocent people. But we as individuals cannot readily reason with governments like North Korea and trans-state actors like al-Qaeda, for example. And we can only occasionally sway the views of an individual who has been brainwashed by these forces.

A second, related contrast has to do with motivation. While leaders need to be scrupulously careful about the tone they set through their rhetoric, no government encouraged the acts of violence in Charleston, Pittsburgh, or Christchurch —very much to the contrary. Longstanding informal norms and formal laws—some having to do specifically with hate speech—all mitigated against them. But when groups and governments use violent language to actively encourage those under their sway to commit violence against others, atrocities can scale up quickly, even to genocidal levels, as we saw for example in the Balkan Wars of Yugoslav succession in the 1990s.

A third, also related difference concerns the relationship between ancient bias and government propaganda. We normally assume that a pre-existing prejudice in a population based on racial, ethnic, or sectarian conflict is embedded in history, and that governments simply instrumentalize it for various purposes of their own. But sometimes governments *construct* histories and invent grievances — or massively distort them, where they were previously absent, negligible, or inert. Having near-monopolies on information and "official truth" enables such deliberate distortions.

When "words that hurt" become embedded in the culture of a political or social conflict, they can do great harm. Of several implications for conflict resolution, two are most critical.

First, what amounts to institutionalized and sanctioned hate speech affects the socialization of new generations. Sometimes the embedding is informal and sometimes it is formalized — in schools curricula, for example — and often it is both. This can protract conflict and seed future violence, even in cases where the origins of conflict have faded with time.

Second, hatreds continually expressed in hurtful language make efforts to negotiate resolutions to conflict much harder. This means that even when leaderships choose to change a conflict-ridden status quo, they must simultaneously find ways to shift the larger social conversation to create political support for their new objectives. If they do not do so, they may find themselves sharply constrained by their own earlier propaganda. As Daniel Boorstin once wryly wrote, those whom God would punish are made to believe in their own advertising.

A good example shrouded Palestinian-Israeli diplomacy in the year 2000. The famous Camp David U.S.-sponsored mediation between Israel and the Palestinians fell short of its goals. Some of the American participants later came to realize that a crucial reason had been a lack of focus on preparing populations for the concessions, and changes in rhetorical tones, that a peace deal would require to stick. As Dennis Ross remarked, "We had talked about the importance of mutually reinforcing public messages, but there was not a lot that was systematically done to make this a component part of peace-building. I think it was one of our biggest mistakes. We should have integrated this into a strategy."

There are many cases, to be sure, in which a "peace of the generals" pragmatically needs to precede a "peace between peoples." If there is ever peace between Pakistan and India, for example, that will likely be the case. There is nothing wrong with that; bold leadership in a positive direction can be

very unpopular, and such circumstances demonstrate leadership at its finest. But if the distance between the two kinds of peace is excessive, a peace of the generals may consequently be undermined by popular antipathy.

Of course, progress does not happen by itself; there are no natural trajectories in protracted conflict situations except to note that things can and do change, sometimes for the better. Europe furnishes noteworthy examples.

At the end of 1945 — in the wake of the Napoleonic wars, the Franco-Prussian War, and World Wars I and II — very few people believed that France and Germany could ever be allies as nations, let alone establish civil ties. But that has happened. Germans and Poles? Yes. Poles and Russians? It's possible, and arguably it is slowly happening, too.

Even Arabs and Israelis? Yes: A "peace between peoples" is always possible if the social forces for tolerance, forgiveness, and healing come to outweigh atavistic forces for insularity, grudge-nursing, and scab-picking. Sometimes social healing can come from within. Other times, locals need, or can use, some help from outside. And thus we come to the modalities of diplomatic mediation.

What general lessons are there in history for international efforts to mediate local and regional conflicts — and in particular, for U.S. diplomatic mediation? Where, moreover, does the problem of "harmful words" fit into them?

It bears noting, by way of context, that U.S. diplomacy does not pursue serious, resource-consuming diplomatic mediations for idealistic reasons alone, but rather mostly because U.S. national security interests are served by their success. Persistent regional conflicts divert attention and wealth away from more promising kinds of investment, not to speak of the dangers they pose in a weapons-of-mass-destruction-laden world. Lessons about hurtful language for mediation efforts are therefore not as marginal to U.S. interests as some may suppose.

Many lessons can be drawn from a combination of logic and experience, but let us content ourselves with three: success is possible; failure is not harmless; and patience is not just a virtue but also a requirement.

Success is possible, as the history of American mediation in the Arab-Israeli conflict illustrates. Some might scoff at this claim, since the heart of the conflict remains unresolved. But this is a shortsighted complaint. Fifty years ago, Arab-Israeli conflict was linked to Cold War superpower competition, and as such was quite dangerous. An Arab-Israeli war had the potential to catalyze a superpower nuclear exchange, as events in October 1973 seemed to illustrate. Step by step, U.S. diplomatic mediation helped to reduce the scope and danger of the Arab-Israeli conflict from an extremely perilous one to a lesser regional nuisance and then to a neighborhood irritant in which rocks and tear gas replaced tanks and potentially nuclear warheads as projectiles of choice. U.S. mediation efforts, even when just marking time, served to lubricate U.S. relations with several Arab countries. In doing so, they helped U.S. Cold War-era policy to succeed at achieving its key objectives: keeping the Soviet Union out, the oil flowing at a reasonable price, and the only democracy in the region safe.

To be sure, the limits of American-driven efforts at peacemaking also showed that the United States government cannot want peace more than the local protagonists. A transformation of hostile relations among regional adversaries requires, above all, strong local leaders who, for reasons of their own, are both willing and able to navigate a significant change against an inevitable rise of opposition to change. And one such leader is not enough. But once that condition is satisfied, the parties can benefit from competent mediation in order to reduce their risks in moving forward. U.S. mediation in Arab-Israeli cases has sometimes furnished insurance policies to both sides — that is, providing compensation for risk-taking through side agreements that bolstered the parties' confidence.

Where does the challenge of ameliorating harmful language fit into all this? Once local leaders

open the door to U.S. mediation, peace communications can become a part of the mediation package. Governments sometimes need assistance in designing communications strategies for their own citizens, and in circumstances where such assistance is requested or accepted, the U.S. Government needs to be prepared to offer it. In the past, this has too rarely been the case.

But *mediations can fail* — when they promise too much, or when they let expectations run too far ahead of likely outcomes. Failure undermines the reputation of U.S. mediation broadly, thus illustrating a line from John Gay's *Mastiffs* (1824): "Those who into others' quarrels interpose, must often wipe a bloody nose." Failure also tends to help rejectionists locally against those who would take risks for peace. So if Camp David 2000 failed in part because of neglecting to prepare the societies for the compromises and painful concessions to come, then underestimating the importance of dealing with the "harmful words" aspect of the challenge did indeed contribute to failure.

Efforts to change popular mindsets cannot be achieved quickly. They take patience and persistence. But high-profile mediation efforts typically time themselves in terms of diplomatic months, not years or decades. So the kind of effort required to urge protagonists to take up the burden of re-educating publics, and to let mediators help with the task if they are willing, is going to be out of sync most of the time with standard diplomatic timetables.

What this means is that what former Secretary of State George Shultz once referred to as the "gardening phase" of successful diplomacy needs to be extended in time and expanded in scope. Full-bore U.S. mediation efforts come and go. They tend to rise when opportunity knocks, and subside when it does not. But the spadework that needs doing in reducing the harmful speech of incitement, ethnic stereotyping, conspiracy theorizing, and the like needs to take no breaks, but to patiently persist no matter the diplomatic weather. For this task, responsible civil action — whether independent of government or, better, in coordination with it — can be essential.

Time does not necessarily heal all wounds. It needs many helping hands, many willing hearts. Wise mediators need to understand when it is useful to pass the baton, and when it is time to receive it back again. They need to understand, too and above all, that combatting the throwing of sticks and stones must be complemented by the combatting of words that hurt.

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