

The Best Defense



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There’s an expression which I think is particularly relevant for our community these days. “The best defense is a good offense.”

We live in a time when many in the Jewish community feel besieged. We definitely find ourselves in a fraught contest, with one side seeking to attack the underlying values and bonds that has tied our community together – our mutual support and cohesiveness, the justice and rationale for Zionism, and the security of being “seen” and identified as Jews.

A key question is – just what are we doing about that?

For many years we have relied on “defense” organizations to try and secure our rights and ensure our place and se-

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curity in society. Such an approach has been focused on defining common norms and acceptable behaviors of others. And, if there is enough public support, peer pressure, and government or official enforcement mechanisms...that can work. Societal norms and understandings of the common good can adapt and change with the right encouragement.

The challenge today is that norms and appropriate behaviors have become a thing of the past, in many respects. Voices promoting disunity, privileged identities, and blame are overpowering any encouragement of diversity and respect.

Plus there’s one other contributing factor...

The Jewish community in America has never been particularly good at showing our pride. We have been fixated on fitting in rather than standing out. We have built consensus and coalitions, often behind the scenes and so that we are not out in front, possibly standing alone. We haven’t wanted to rock the boat. Many of our folk have been focused on being accepted – at country clubs; through being on donor lists at hospitals, museums, and

arts organizations; and as proud citizens and leaders in (non-Jewish) civic endeavors. Being proud Jews hasn’t been the clarion call bringing our best to the fore.

Even as we have become more visible and comfortable in Hollywood, Broadway, journalism, and media – we have remained self-effacing, as if we are unsure of our continued welcome. Self-deprecating humor, deflection, and avoidance have become our community’s internal norms.

Bottom line: I think we have sold ourselves short. This is a mistake which has contributed to some of the challenges we face today. From our own younger generation not knowing what they should think about being Jewish or Israel...or why they should care about being identified or connected. To growing embarrassment about Israel as an affront to our liberal Western values regardless of the circumstances faced by our extended Jewish family living there. To Jews today throughout our community who just want to remain under the radar and avoid triggering anything or anyone else.

In this light, playing defense when it comes to our pride and identity has not helped us in the long term. The Lubavitcher Rebbe was right when he insisted that we should make every effort to celebrate Jewishness in the public space, to spread the light about our values/beliefs/practices/community ties.

Now is the time to embrace the maxim that the best defense is a good offense.

We need to double down on the who’s, what’s, when’s, where’s, and why’s of what it means to be proud Jews. How do we embrace Jewish culture? How do we celebrate our identity and community? How do we educate – and learn more – about our values and history and purpose? Especially when it comes to Israel.

And how do we come together and say to others who seek to put us down and make us cower that we are proud, we are committed to embodying our values and identity, and we are not going anywhere.

This is a focus of the Jewish Federation. Through programs like Heroes Against Hate, our Jewish Cultural Festival, and our efforts to educate the community about what is going on in and around Israel. In addition to our core work of helping those most in need in our community and among the Jewish people.

All this brings to mind another expression: What’s the definition of insanity? Doing the same thing over and over again and expecting a different result.

It’s time to try something new – being loud and proud of our Jewish identity, community, and connections.

As you observe and celebrate the High Holidays, think how you will continue to be engaged and grow and be proud throughout the year. This is a fitting message for all of us to take to heart.