

Rabbi Lewis' Message for February 2008

I was walking down Broadway towards Union Square when I heard all kinds of shouting. What could this protest be about, I wondered? As I got closer, I realized that I was hearing political campaigners trying to out shout each other. While the supporters of John Edwards were fairly muted, the supporters of Barack Obama and Hilary Clinton grew louder and louder as I got closer. It was like being at a subway series and listening to Yankees and Mets fans trying to outdo each other. It was all good-natured and pretty routine for Union Square.

Then I walked into a theater on 13th Street to see a play called "*New Jerusalem - The Interrogation of Baruch de Spinoza at Talmud Torah Congregation: Amsterdam, July 27, 1656.*" Suddenly I realized how much I had taken for granted the free speech that had made me smile in Union Square. Spinoza was born in 1632 to Portuguese Jews who had been evicted from Portugal and were living in Amsterdam.

According to the playwright David Ives, those Portuguese Jews had made legal compromises with the Amsterdam government in order to be permitted to stay in Amsterdam. Those compromises limited their social activity (e.g., no marrying non-Jews) and their freedom of speech. Spinoza himself was a freethinker who was originally groomed to be a successor to the community's rabbi, but who later became a philosopher whose views offended the Jewish community and jeopardized their status in Amsterdam.

In 1656, we know that he was expelled from that same community, for reasons that remain obscure but probably had to do with his religious and philosophical views. The Jewish community put him into *herem*, a status that forbade any Jew from having contact with him. The play implies that the Dutch governors, by threatening the well-being of the Jewish community, had forced the synagogue to expel Spinoza.

Initially I found myself thinking along two tracks. First, I was reminded of how lucky we are to live in a country where we can speak our minds, live where we choose and earn our living in freedom. The government cannot infringe on those rights. Second, I was also reminded of the dangers inherent in a community's censoring itself. Jewish communities in Europe couldn't afford allowing freedom to their individual members lest the community itself be jeopardized. In America, however, we can speak as individual Jews without being intimidated by that danger.

We still have to keep in mind the welfare of the Jewish community, of course, and there are those who would argue that we Jews should present a united front in public although we can disagree quietly among ourselves. Our view about Israel is usually

the source of this disagreement. Personally, I prefer a healthy public disagreement to a fearful quiet one.

But there is actually a third danger, as I think about it, and that is that the outside pressures on us can cause us to respond to that aggression by turning it on each other. This is how communities destroy themselves. Because they don't have healthy ways of debating issues, they end up destroying each other and themselves in the process.

So I experienced another kind of gratitude, a simple one, and that is for the kind of board meetings we have at our Center. There is no hysteria. There is so much good will and respect for differing views. People speak in responsible and considerate tones even on issues about which they feel passionately. No matter the pressures people experience outside the room, they do not respond by attacking each other. They know that you can't say anything you feel without considering other people's feelings, so they find ways of speaking constructively.

In this election year, I feel gratitude for it all - for living in a country that guarantees our right to free speech, for living in a country where the Jewish community can speak freely, and for living in a congregation which promotes free speech in the interest of the welfare of the community.

Rabbi Ellen Lewis