

R.E.S.P.E.C.T.

When we assert ourselves respectfully while avoiding the temptation to act unkindly towards others, no one is diminished as a human being.

Can you offer us a Jewish definition of civility?

Rabbi Edythe Mencher (URJ Faculty Member, clinical social work psychotherapist): Most of Jewish law is organized around the guiding principle of our behaving respectfully toward one another, regardless of what we may be feeling. In welcoming the stranger, we are reminded of our people's own enslavement: "You shall not wrong a stranger or oppress him, for you were strangers in the land of Egypt" (Exodus 22:20). The rabbis advise us to regulate our speech and carefully consider the impact of our words. "Why is a gossip like a three pronged tongue? Because it kills three people: the person who says it, the person who listens to it, and the person about whom it is said" (Babylonian Talmud, tractate *Arakhin*). And we are taught to give others the benefit of the doubt, rather than assuming harmful intent: "Judge everyone on the positive side of the scale" (Pirkei Avot 1:6). All of these teachings are means to keep our unbridled emotions under control in order to foster a civil society.

Admittedly, it is not easy to be civil toward someone who we feel has wronged us, been disrespectful to us, and/or has trampled on our values. Still, the ideal in Judaism is to see the holiness in the other—the Divine spark in every person—as each of us has been created in the image of God.

There is one caveat, however: Staying silent when confronted with unjust situations is not always in keeping with

Reform Judaism, which emphasizes *tikkun olam*, the ethical imperative to repair the broken places in our world.



that sometimes we harbor a nostalgic fantasy about an earlier era when all people supposedly had better manners. I wonder if the kind of polite and considerate behavior we remember was extended to only a small fraction of the population.

Is the problem rooted in trickle-down incivility?

Dale: When we see role models treating others poorly, we may believe that we have license to do the same. And too often political leaders with opposing views opt for the basest kind of interaction without

Is there a civility crisis today?

Dr. Dale Atkins (psychologist; author; TV commentator; member of Temple Israel in Westport, Connecticut): I've witnessed an erosion of our communal sense of responsibility to perform the civil act. For example, I was taught that if a person who is frail or pregnant gets on the bus, you relinquish your seat. That no longer seems to be the case. Recently I boarded a bus and saw two pregnant women and three very old people standing—no one had offered them a seat. In anger I called out, "Can anyone get up for these people?" Two boys with whom I made eye contact in a pleading way got up, and the two women who sat down thanked the boys and me. Everyone else stayed put, focusing on their digital devices, oblivious to other people's needs.

Edie: I have observed similar scenes with equal disappointment. Still, I think

regard for the societal consequences. Unfortunately, this is unlikely to change any time soon. In 2009, author Mark DeMoss launched a Civility Project asking every sitting governor and member of Congress to sign a pledge of civility agreeing to three statements: "1. I will be civil in my public discourse and behavior; 2. I will be respectful of others, whether or not I agree with them; and 3. I will stand against incivility when I see it." Amazingly, only three elected officials signed it—Sen. Joe Lieberman, Rep. Frank Wolf, and Rep. Sue Myrick.

How can you best respond to someone who lashes out at you?

Dale: Depending on how you respond, you can ratchet up the tension or bring it down. I heard a story about an elderly gentleman who was in the hospital. A nurse walked into his room, and from her ill-tempered demeanor he could see he would not be treated with kindness.