

He decided to say to her, “I just want to tell you how much I appreciate the work that you do. And it’s really amazing how some people devote their lives to caring for others.” In his way, he affirmed her role and hoped to remind her, subtly, without getting too personal, of why she had become a nurse. In that instant she softened, and thanked him. One can imagine that his remark made her day a little better. Now, do we all do that? No. Do we all have the capacity to do it? I think we do, if we step back and stay mindful of the larger picture, recognizing that everybody can have a bad day.

### In Israel, incivility is regarded almost as a virtue.

**Eddie:** Historically, from a Zionist perspective, the excessive politeness of Diaspora Jews was viewed as an indication of insecurity and fear. Conversely, behaving assertively when someone offended you was seen as a sign of courage and self-respect. The shock and devastation in the aftermath of the Holocaust, coupled with the continued

dangers of everyday life, prompted many Israelis to cultivate a demeanor of brusque strength and to be wary of behaviors conveying easy acquiescence. While Israelis in no way blamed the victims, they also sought to impress upon future generations the destruction that befell those who doubted the need for self-assertion and even aggression. In the U.S. Holocaust Museum in Washington, DC, visitors are invited to enter a cattle car used to deport Jews to death camps in order to understand the experience of the victims. In contrast, at Yad Vashem, the Holocaust museum in Jerusalem, a similar cattle car is perched precariously on a cliff. If you ask Israelis why it is perched on a precipice rather than offered as a place where visitors might enter, they will say, “Blindly obeying authorities will lead Jews off a cliff to their death. We want no person to politely accept an invitation to enter such a place.”

For the sake of self-preservation, Israeli assertiveness is the dominant social value, even if it is sometimes construed by outsiders as rudeness. Those who look closer will often find

concern, support, hospitality, and generosity expressed in ways that don’t always conform to our norms.

### How can we encourage people to become more civil?

**Eddie:** We need to reduce people’s stress by providing religious and communal structures that cultivate calm through mindfulness, through prayer, through supportive friendships, through the expressive arts, and through taking care of our bodies. People who are less stressed, who feel more secure, are more apt to behave civilly toward one another.

**Dale:** Another way is for each of us to do things that make others feel good about who they are. You might say to someone, “Oh, you look so great!” You cannot control whether that person believes you, but you can exercise control over whether or not you speak with intentionality, which increases the chance of a positive response. Studies show that when we experience someone’s kindness, we feel happier and are more able to receive love. □

## Civility as a Spiritual Practice

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are not inherently positive. Anger can be an important signal that something is very wrong, and envy can be a helpful motivator. Infinite patience can lead a person to act passively in situations that call for action, and unlimited generosity can spoil a child. None of these traits are, in and of themselves, either positive or negative. What turns them so is the measure of the trait—excessive, deficient, or balanced—as it lives within us and is expressed in our lives.

And when it comes to governing a country, Maimonides explains, anger and envy are simply no help, whereas compassion and kindness are.

This perspective opens up a new understanding of civility and incivility. Jewish tradition emphasizes practices of kindness, graciousness, and respect, not only because they promote a vision of the ideal human being, but because of their practicality in social relations, whether they be within the family, in the workplace, or in government. If we as a soci-

ety were to hold fast to the qualities of compassion and kindness attributed to God in the Torah, civic life would not only be more pleasant, but much more effective as well.

Why, then, do the insistent calls to be more civil go unheeded?

A Mussar perspective would locate the root of incivility in selfish desire. In contrast, civility grows from walking in God’s ways by being compassionate, merciful, gracious, kind, and forbearing, all of which are traits that emphasize the well-being of others over that of ourselves. Whether we are interacting with a spouse or child, parent or co-worker, postman, store clerk, or state legislator, when we are considerate of the other above and beyond our own self-centeredness, we walk the path of a spiritual life while upholding civility in society.

The starting point to reforming social discourse is our own conduct. Only when we endeavor to become less selfish, more other-oriented, and more Godly in our everyday behavior do we have the legitimacy to demand civility of others. Let us give our leaders something to emulate. □

## Conviction with Compassion

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other’s version of the truth, but hearing each other can help lead to peaceful coexistence. It is amazing what can happen when we meet our adversaries on a human level.

The midrash says that “*Derech eretz*, the commandment to act with common decency, preceded the giving of the Torah” (Midrash Leviticus Rabbah 9:3). As Rabbi Joseph Telushkin explains, “God could imagine humankind existing for thousands of years without the Torah, but [God] could not imagine human beings existing without...civility” (*A Code of Jewish Ethics, Vol. 1*).

So, raise your voice and cry out like a shofar. Speak your truth with courage and conviction. But open your heart to the humanity of all people, be open to their truths, and love your neighbor as yourself. If we do these things, we have the right to demand them of our leaders, and reason to hope we will see them in our children. And when we do, we will put the civil back in our civilization. □