

An Open Letter to the Westchester Jewish community:

A popular Jewish aphorism states, “*Derech Eretz Kodmah L’Torah*,” or “proper conduct precedes the Torah.” This teaches us that, if we hope to appreciate the rest of our tradition’s most noble values, we must begin with *Derech Eretz* - good and proper conduct. Respectful speaking and listening - an integral part of good conduct - is essential, even in the midst of a heated argument.

Our tradition establishes respectful speech as absolutely necessary by reminding us of the disputes, in Talmudic times, of two opposing schools of thought. The Schools of Hillel and Shammai and their respective disciples argued brilliantly and fought passionately for their respective points of view. But their words were never vicious or filled with hate.

In light of this, the Westchester Board of Rabbis and Kol Hazzanim/The Cantors of Westchester are alarmed over a pervasive social evil. As Americans, we have lost civility in our public discourse, leading to our demonizing of those who disagree with a particular point of view. Such attacks preclude reasonable discussion of complex and pressing issues, polarize our citizenry, and debase our society.

The Jewish community also reflects this degradation, especially as it pertains to our discourse about Israel. We recognize that Jews hold passionate feelings about Israel. That American Jews feel intimately bound with the State of Israel is commendable. What is deplorable, though, is the use of vitriol against Jews with whom one does not agree.

Mutual respect is what we call upon the community to implement in the new year. We know, at times, that we will have widely differing opinions. But we pledge to emulate the disputes of Hillel and Shammai. Such discussions will be considered virtuous even in the Heavenly Court. Let us resolve that, with the arrival of the New Year 5776, we will all strengthen our commitment to speak of all matters with kindness, compassion, fairness and respect.

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