On Conflict Resolution

by Michael Gordon, Ph.D.

Tensions have mounted in our community around the war in Gaza. It's a situation so complicated, so confusing, so heart wrenching for so many that even expressing the simplest of opinions can ignite a fury. Many of us have become hesitant to even discuss the situation with others for fear of provoking upset.

Nothing I could say here will make a dent in how we humans tend to handle conflict and stress. Those coping mechanisms are hard-wired and have evolved over millennia. Prime among them is that we'll huddle together with others of similar mind so we don't have to deal with ambiguity or analyze alternative positions. It's our side versus their side, and our side is right without question.

We also feel better when we alight on information whose only virtue is that it supports our point of view. We'll cherry pick the data that support our contention and dismiss or distort information we find inconsistent or troubling. It's a way of converting the messy grays of life into clear blacks and whites. Psychologists call this phenomenon "confirmation bias" and it rears its ugly head at every turn.

This tribal and rigid approach to managing any controversial topic calms us. We can walk around with confidence, less torn by doubt, more comfortable that we're right, and forever supported by others who concur. Circling the wagons has salved many a conflicted soul.

But it is not a productive method of conflict resolution and sure has its downsides when we engage others in a discussion. You won't make much progress changing opinions (or keeping friends) when you listen not to understand the other side but to first prove your point. We can all become so focused on being completely right (or proving the other person completely wrong) that we forget to make sure we understand what the other person is trying to say, why they might be saying it, and that they might actually be making a valid point.

What makes talking about the Gazan conflict especially difficult is that there are no saints in war. When survival is at stake, nations will do whatever they feel necessary to ensure a lasting security, even if that might entail crossing lines perhaps best not crossed.

Because no fool proof method exists for fighting a terrorist organization who uses civilians as shields, the situation in the Middle East provides ample opportunity for debating thoroughly debatable decisions.

It's just a shame (but sadly predictable) that those discussions too often proceed as if the "right" answers are unassailably clear and that anyone who offers a differing opinion is flat out wrong -- and detestable. That stance might be personally reassuring, but it's unrealistic, divisive, and, ultimately, counterproductive.

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Victimhood

by Dennis Lerner, J.D.

We might argue about the reason, but there is little question that we are living in an age that finds victimhood everywhere. Societies here and around the world have parsed themselves into groupings that are characterized by their suffering victimization. There is seeming competition to be the most victimized. Women are victims of institutionalized male misogyny. Men, are threatened with displacement or disadvantage. Maleness itself is threatened. We have seen an explosion in the number of ever-narrower groupings. Homosexuals became gays and lesbians, which then became LGBTQI+, each and all of whom see themselves as victims and their group, as disadvantaged. Victimization trauma is easy to come by when the cultural commandment is that no one is allowed to be disadvantaged. No one gets left out. Certificates for participation for all, no slight, insult, or unpermitted discomfort, is tolerable.

There is a paradox in all this. We, society's universal, all-time victims—the Jews, aren't victims now. The Jews of Israel are not victims. They stand astride their (our) land and defy those who would limit or control their actions in their self-interest. We hear about a surge in antisemitism, about threats and name-calling, here and elsewhere in the world. I am not denying that terrible things can and do happen, but our position in American society has never been as strong or as secure. It is our power and strength, and the loss of underdog status, that accounts for the surge in name-calling—along with Palestinian mastery in spreading the mantel of victimhood.

Some of us, perhaps many, are comfortable in our old role as victims, but at this moment it no longer fits. I, too, am of the school that says every Jew who claims any degree of wisdom always has a pair of sturdy shoes and a heavy coat at the ready. But for the moment, while the whole world is staking out their share of victimhood, we are strong, and our best defense against those who would make us victims again is to shake off their efforts as what they are—indications of their insecurity, not ours.

I am not suggesting that what is will always be or that we should puff out our chests when we have positions of strength and power. But we shouldn't waste the moment either. We should instead use this long-awaited period of merited justice to further our mission of Tikkun Olam. Part of that is to project that we will not be counted as victims again.

Dennis Lerner is a retired attorney and third generation Syracusan who is well known for his pies and scones.

Zer0 Tolerance for Antisemitism

by Neil Bronstein

Since the horrific October 7th attack, I have grappled daily with weighing the horrendous details of that day against what the appropriate Israeli response should be. Furthermore, I have read and seen how over the last number of years, antisemitism has steadily grown. We get the statistics regularly from organizations such as the ADL of how Jewish hate crimes are increasing exponentially. The reasons for it are many but a common theme is that when there are times of strife throughout history, antisemitism growth goes hand in hand.

Not too long ago, I was invited to attend a presentation sponsored by SAMED which is a local group of Arab-Americans and American Jews who meet regularly to pursue open dialogue. It is a group that I applaud, as open discussion is one of the best ways to resolve differences. I can only imagine the tightrope both sides must walk balancing their own ideals while finding ways to a middle ground.

The guest speaker that night was a visiting professor from Notre Dame University, an expert on the Middle East. A question was asked of the professor, "What was his definition of antisemitism?" The answer that he gave was that BDS, the movement to boycott Israel, clearly defines antisemitism as it singles out one country when there are many other countries throughout the world with far worse human rights violations. If one is so concerned about human rights, why not boycott those other countries? I argue the same holds true by singling out Israel now with what has grown into a massive outpouring of demonstrations on our college campuses. And, as a result, Jewish students are being harassed and abused.

Too many of us watch the talking heads on nightly television and turn a blind eye. I refer to the continual bashing and false narratives on FOX about Zelensky, Adam Schiff and most notably their favorite whipping boy, George Soros, all of whom happen to be Jewish. Ever since October 7th, there has been repeated nightly bashing of Israel on MSNBC with little or no counterbalance. The misinformation on social media is massive and further enflames the growing inferno.

If we have learned anything throughout history of the oppression of Jews is that when antisemitism begins to rise, there must be zero tolerance. I close with one of my favorite quotes written long ago, but timeless, penned by George Santayana, "Those who forget history are condemned to repeat it."

Neil Bronstein is the Immediate past chair of the Jewish Community Foundation and a retired business owner.