

TRIBALISM OR TRUTHS?
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A couple of months ago, a report of a speech at a Kentucky high school graduation caught my attention. Perhaps you read it too. The article began by quoting the class valedictorian who “delivered a graduation speech filled with inspirational quotations that he’d found on Google. One line, in particular, drew boisterous applause from the crowd in this conservative part of country. Here’s what he said: ‘Don’t just get involved. Fight for your seat at the table. Better yet, fight for a seat at the *head* of the table – Donald J. Trump.’” As the people cheered wildly, though, the valedictorian issued a correction: “Just kidding,” he said, “that was Barack Obama!” Right away, the report goes on to say, the applause died down, and a boo could be heard. The identity of the messenger, it was painfully evident, mattered more than the content of the message. And the author of this report continues: “When Americans hear about ‘tribalism,’ they often imagine a faraway land where one ethnic or religious faction mercilessly persecutes another for generations. Only recently have

many in this country begun to realize the extent of the tribalism here at home.

Two things struck me about this report: first, the brilliance of the student for the stunning way in which he or she exposed the stark reality of tribalism and how dramatically the audience was brought to unavoidable self-recognition. And then, how quickly ... and how lamentably ... tribalism has become an acknowledged part of the fabric of our society. No longer in some remote and barbaric land, but right here at home in “enlightened” America.

Now membership in a tribe and the celebration of one’s tribe is a good thing. A tight-knit community gives us identity and strength. Our heroes, our distinctive values, our history with its unique set of signal events provides us a place in the world. We Jews often recognize one another as landsmen and “members of the tribe” and this is a good thing. There is, indeed, nothing wrong with tribes; and there is something wonderful about being a member of one. But “tribalism” is another thing altogether. “Tribalism,” as I define it, smacks of exclusivity, of excluding the value of other tribes. “Tribalism” suggests the claim of ultimacy and the sanctification of my tribe and of my tribe’s values. And it easily moves toward the

denigration of your tribe's values, labeling them mere biases and petty prejudices. "Tribalism" corrupts the legitimate claims of the tribe.

And so, my argument this evening is *not* against tribes but it *is* against tribalism. For example, mine is not an argument against patriotism but against the deification of one's country; it is not against partisanship but against the smug self-congratulation of one's party; it is not against the celebration of one's religion and community but against the elevation of one's community above all others. .

Now the causes of the tribalism into which we have sunk are multiple. But they boil down to the sad fact that we as a society have lost faith in the reality of values that transcend tribe. We tend to scoff at the idea that beyond opinion there is truth, that beyond biases there are real standards. In our time, most of us believe that there are only prejudices and preferences and no standards by which to examine our preferences and no truths through which to question the adequacy of our opinions. Bad behavior is indulged as merely peculiar and outrageous actions are tolerated as simply idiosyncratic. But societies weaken themselves when they lose their nerve, when they lack all conviction, when they fail to stand for things beyond

partisanship and preference, when they lose their capacity for moral outrage and for tough-minded self-criticism, a self-criticism that implies the reality of values with a capital “V.” The poet Emily Dickinson tells us that “the abdication of belief makes the behavior small” (Poem 1551, Johnson edition).

Well, what to do? How can we return to modes of thinking and behaving that are grounded on truths that transcend us? And where might we look for those values? Well, we could turn for guidance to the classics of our civilization, to “the best that has been thought and said.” (Matthew Arnold). That would certainly be rewarding. We could turn to our novelists and seek to see through their eyes what is perennial in the human condition and how struggling humanity has searched for the light. But perhaps it would be more illuminating for our purposes to turn to the lives of exemplary individuals, to the lives of those who have actually struggled to live by the light of values and commitments beyond personal preference, beyond the claims of party or the seductions of the moment. And so I want to turn to testimony from, for me, a quite unexpected source. That is, the testimony of Senator Lindsey Graham in his summary of what the life of John McCain means and what his life might mean to us. I heard

Senator Graham's words on a television talk show that was aired soon after Senator McCain's funeral, a show which featured Senators Graham and Joe Lieberman. At the end of the discussion, the moderator asked Senator Graham to summarize Senator McCain's credo and the life that he lived within its terms. Here's my distillation of what Graham said, what he learned from observing McCain: "Work hard, do your homework, and know what you're talking about. Pick a cause worthy of a good fight, a cause bigger than yourself. Fight hard and be willing to forgive and be ready to ask for forgiveness. Above all else, when you make a mistake, admit it because when you admit mistakes, you show your strength as a person. And remember that, finally, it's not about you. Then ... repeat, repeat, repeat until you die." And on John McCain himself, Graham asked this: "Why do we remember this man? And Graham's answer: Because of the way he conducted his public life."

I must admit that I love this statement because it seeks to articulate how tribes can avoid tribalism. And it shows, through its moral seriousness, why tribalism is a serious error ... and one that is corrosive to society at large. And I also love this statement because it is drawn, not from some set of abstractions, but from the lived life of

a real, flawed and courageous individual ... and a person whom Graham loved.

What does this statement commend? Five things: first, seek to know something beyond your own opinions and work hard at knowing because, though opinions are easy, knowledge is hard. But assume that knowledge exists and that knowing is more durable than opining. Second, believe that there are causes, ideals, projects that transcend ourselves, causes and projects that are bigger than our little lives, causes that we can serve and that are worth fighting for. Believe that such causes and ideals exist and that we become bigger versions of ourselves when we fight to bring them about. And that we intend to serve these ideals through thick and thin because we know that the bringing ideals to reality is hard, takes time, and inevitably faces impediments. Third, know that the struggle inevitably brings us into contact and conflict with other people and with their values and opinions. In the heat of the process, we may exaggerate our claims and misunderstand or misrepresent the views of others. Be big enough to admit your mistakes and ask directly for forgiveness. We do not weaken the struggle nor ourselves by admitting our wrongs. By admitting them we, at the same time, acknowledge the reality of

values and therefore the difference between right and wrong, and that we intend to do better. Thereby do we become more noble versions of ourselves. Fourth, be ready to forgive others when they come to us for forgiveness. They, like we, are fallible. But, we must note, that by coming to us for forgiveness, they acknowledge that they, too, want to do better. Do not lord it over them and do not indulge in harboring resentment or in seeking revenge. Fifth and finally, do not make these efforts a sometimes thing; make it a pattern, a way of living; make it second nature. Repeat it over and over again until it shapes not just what you say or do but also who you are, what you are made of ... in a word, your character. "Character," McCain, thought, "character is destiny." And character will cause you to do it because you simply cannot *not* do it." (Marin Alsop). Or, in the words of the famous, late UCLA basketball coach, John Wooden: "Winning takes talent; but to repeat takes character." This how we begin to transcend tribalism.

And in truth, our Jewish tradition is replete with warnings about tribalism. Twenty-seven hundred years ago the prophet Amos left the comforts of home to travel miles away to tell the Israelites that they may indeed be G-d's people; but that implies, not self-congratulation

and self-satisfaction, but rather a severe call to conscience, the demand that they work for righteousness and justice. Listen to his challenge: “Hear this word, O people of Israel, that the Lord has spoken concerning you, concerning the whole family that I brought up from the land of Egypt: You alone have I singled out of all the families of the earth – that is why I will call you to account for all your iniquities.” (*Amos 3:1-2*). Reflecting on passages like this, Abraham Joshua Heschel claims with powerful irony that the great gift of the biblical prophets is a guilty conscience. A guilty conscience forces us to know that we can do better ... and that there is better to be done. That there are higher tasks that call to us, tasks that prick our consciences when we do not respond to the call.

Or when the prophet Isaiah rebukes the self-satisfaction of the people in their fast on Yom Kippur:

“Is this the fast that I desire, a day for people to starve their bodies?
 Is it bowing the head like a bulrush and lying in sackcloth and ashes?
 No, this is the fast I desire:
 To unlock fetters of wickedness and untie the cords of the yoke;
 To let the oppressed go free’
 It is to share your bread with the hungry
 And to take the wretched poor into your home;

When you see the naked, to clothe him,
And not to ignore your own kin. (*Isaiah 58:5-7*)

Isaiah here demands that the tribe reach beyond their own needs and satisfactions. That they acknowledge that imperatives beyond themselves exist and that they are called to enact these imperatives and bring to realization what those commands demand.

So, what I am calling for is a belief that there are truths beyond opinions. I am calling for a conviction ... a conviction that there are standards and values beyond all the tribes ... the tribes of the Jews and the Christians and the Muslims, the Democrats and the Republicans, the states on the coasts and the states in the interior, the liberals and the conservatives, northeastern Ohioans and southern Ohioans. And by being beyond each tribe, these values and standards have the power to bind us together in spite of our many differences.

But something insidious stands in our way. And that is the noise that takes place all the time all around us. I am referring to the media and especially to the twenty-four hour cable news stations. Now, certainly, there is much that is good and positive in this reality: a free press and freedom of speech are among our civic treasures. We ought to cherish them. A free press can call power to account and

reveal areas of corruption. Former Supreme Court Justice William O. Douglas put it succinctly: "Sunlight is the best antiseptic." And so, let speech and the speech of the media flourish. Moreover, the fact that the media enables the expression of a variety of views is a very good thing. It keeps one point of view from becoming the only view and keeps, in principle at least, all views from becoming rigid and dogma.

Yet ... yet ... think about the net effect of this cacophony of voices ... of claim and counter-claim, of charge and counter-charge. They all tend to cancel each other out. And when they do, we, the viewers, can easily come to feel that there are only opinions and no truths, only preferences and no standards. And this leads to skepticism and relativism: skepticism about the idea that there are truths at all. And a relativism that proclaims that every opinion is true but only to the one who proclaims it. MSNBC proclaims that X is true and Fox News proclaims that X is false. And since that's all we get, we are left with the feeling that neither is true per se and that each simply expresses the bias of that network. At this point, cynicism and growing indifference is just around the corner because the position that seems to prevail is the one represented by the loudest voice or

with the cleverest rhetoric or the one who is full of the most “passionate intensity” (W.B. Yeats, *The Second Coming*).

Well, then, what are we to do? How can we get ourselves out of this mess? First, we must recognize that skepticism is always an option. We can always choose to be skeptical. But skepticism is a cop-out because it amounts to a choice not to choose. It is the choice to hang back and remain non-committal, thus leaving the arena of discourse and decision-making to others, perhaps the most malevolent and self-serving others. Opting for skepticism is a luxury we cannot in our day afford.

But there is another choice that we can and should make. It is a choice that precedes the process of reasoning but, rather, comes about by a sheer act of will. We should simply decide that we are going to be optimistic, that we are going to believe that there are values and standards and worthy goals and that we are going to resist the seductions of skepticism and relativism and an easeful despair. And that we are going to believe that, with these values and goals in mind, we can work toward bringing them down to earth and into our lives and into the lives of our communities. Optimism is a primary commitment from which many things can follow. We must

will this as our starting point and we must stay with it in spite of the noise that is all around us and the frustrations that accompany an optimistic spirit. For, as one sage once put it: “We must assume that we shall succeed; otherwise we shall certainly fail.” (Steven Weinberg, *Dreams of a Final Theory: The Search for the Fundamental Laws of Nature.*)