



PERSPECTIVES

THE BEGIN-SADAT CENTER FOR STRATEGIC STUDIES

The True Nature of Tolerance

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BESA Center Perspectives Paper No. 1,899, January 22, 2021

EXECUTIVE SUMMARY: As we observed during the US presidential election of 2020, the presumption that tolerance and pluralism connote openness and acceptance is false. American Jews in particular have once again been forced to choose between their “pluralistic” tolerance and their Jewish identity.

Leo Strauss writes in his book *Natural Right and History* that there is an inevitable

tension between the respect for diversity or individuality and the recognition of natural right. When liberals became impatient of the absolute limits to diversity or individuality that are imposed even by the most liberal version of natural right, they had to make a choice between natural right and the uninhibited cultivation of individuality. They chose the latter. Once this step was taken, tolerance appeared as one value or ideal among many, and not intrinsically superior to its opposite. In other words, intolerance appeared as a value equal in dignity to tolerance.

But, as Strauss goes on to note,

it is practically impossible to leave it at the equality of all preferences or choices. If the unequal rank of choices cannot be traced to the unequal rank of their objectives, it must be traced to the unequal rank of the acts of choosing; and this means eventually that genuine choice, as distinguished from spurious or despicable choice, is nothing but resolute or deadly serious decision. Such a decision, however, is akin to intolerance rather than to tolerance. Liberal relativism has its roots in the natural right tradition of tolerance or in the notion that everyone has a natural right to the pursuit of happiness as he understands happiness; but in itself it is a seminary of intolerance.

Strauss's observations are extremely telling with regard to contemporary American politics, where the left wing calls for intolerance precisely in the name of toleration. We are hearing voices that are anti-American in the name of America—voices that call for the end of both *Pax Americana* and the American Experiment.

Historically, American politics has long been drawn toward the center, but identity politics, overreaction to Donald Trump, and the rise of American socialists may have short-circuited that corrective impulse. To many Democrats, nationalism and indeed the idea of the nation itself are increasingly anathema. The idea of a people with sovereignty defies the fluid, borderless world they wish to see. Antipathy toward traditional religion is similarly expressed.

This landscape has revealed biases among American Jews against other Jews and prompted moves that directly contradict broader communal self-interest. As we saw during the 2020 election, many vocal American Jews supported Joe Biden and the Democratic Party notwithstanding the professed socialism of many of the party's candidates, their antipathy toward Israel, and the empowering effects on left-wing antisemitism. Biden was to be preferred simply because he was not President Donald Trump.

Individuals like Peter Beinart have been name-calling and "outing" anyone to the right of their views. This includes just about all of Israeli society, which Beinart believes is "more and more racist"; and the American Jewish community, which in his view rudely "inhabits an insular cocoon" with no compassion for the Palestinians. In June 2017, groups like Jewish Voice for Peace (JVP) launched the "[Deadly Exchange](#)" campaign, which aims to "end police exchange programs between the US and Israel." JVP claims that American Jewish organizations and programs are to blame for police violence against minorities in the US.

Generally speaking, American Jews have long viewed their political and religious diversity as a source of both strength and weakness. It is now a source of intolerance regarding the kind of Jew who should be accepted and showcased. Consequently, the Jewish community is filled with ignorance and apathy regarding Israel and subject to class-based pressure to be seen as "woke."

In a broad cultural sense, the Jewish idea of tolerance (or lack thereof) has been skewed in its interpretation. Jews felt "safe" when they were tolerated by ruling Christians and Muslims, seeing that toleration as a sign of acceptance. In fact, they were only semi-tolerated and were not necessarily seen as equals. Uniquely, America has afforded Jews the acceptance and equality they desire. Jews are now making decisions about what kinds of Jews should speak on behalf of the community, decisions that are based on political persuasion. It is true that no group is completely monolithic in its politics, but American Jews are willing to put their

theological belief system aside in the name of a perceived pluralism that generates intolerance.

Interestingly, even individuals like Herbert Marcuse, who was celebrated in the media as the “father of the New Left,” identified what he called “repressive tolerance,” which is

the practice of discriminating tolerance in an inverse direction, as a means of shifting the balance between Right and Left by restraining the liberty of the Right, thus counteracting the pervasive inequality of freedom (unequal opportunity of access to the means of democratic persuasion) and strengthening the oppressed against the oppressed. Tolerance would be restricted with respect to movements of a demonstrably aggressive or destructive character (destructive of the prospects for peace, justice, and freedom for all). Such discrimination would also be applied to movements opposing the extension of social legislation to the poor, weak, disabled. As against the virulent denunciations that such a policy would do away with the sacred liberalistic principle of equality for “the other side,” I maintain that there are issues where either there is no “other side” in any more than a formalistic sense, or where “the other side” is demonstrably “regressive” and impedes possible improvement of the human condition. To tolerate propaganda for inhumanity vitiates the goals not only of liberalism but of every progressive political philosophy.

Throughout the US presidential campaign and in the weeks following the election, President-elect Joe Biden continued to repeat that he will be a president for all Americans and not just his constituents. Democrats and leftist Jews are breathing a sigh of relief that he was elected, but we are still far from the center.

Far-left icon Noam Chomsky has called Biden “an empty vessel. I don’t think he has any firm principles. He’s up against the DNC [Democratic National Committee], which runs the party and is basically the Wall Street wing. And if he tries anything progressive, the Supreme Court is there to block it. Trump and McConnell are responsible for staffing the entire judiciary, bottom to top, with far-right justices who can block almost anything progressive that comes along.”

America’s civic nationalism is rarely defended or articulated, even by its advocates, against such selective and cynical rejection of the very idea of the nation as expressed by Women’s March co-organizer Tamika Mallory in her answer to the question of whether Jews are “natives” to their land and whether Israel “has a right to exist.” “I just don't feel that everyone has a right to exist at the disposal of another group,” she said. Malapropism aside, while “no human being is illegal,” Jews are to be stateless. A telling statement about how tolerated Jews really are.

Strauss's point that "intolerance appeared as a value equal in dignity to tolerance" is exactly the trend we are observing in the American Jewish community. Some views are perceived as somehow equal to Jewish values, and others are marginalized in the name of so-called tolerance.

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