

## Loss Of Civility

The San Francisco Jewish community seems to be rapidly losing its civility.

Anonymous documents are being mailed around town, presumably by Jews, attacking Jewish institutions and Jewish individuals. Private meetings are being invaded, sometimes disrupted. Jews—not just institutions but individuals—are being held up to public insult by other Jews. Jewish individuals and institutions are being mau-maued.

Anger is often a first reaction to such displays of bad manners. But one hopefully pulls back from this first reaction to ask some questions: How important, after all, is the civility of good manners? There are more important values, certainly. Politeness often favors the *status quo*. The elected officials and civil servants (bureaucrats, if you will) of the organized Jewish community are often too comfortable and too slow to accept change. If that change is necessary, if the “establishment” and the bureaucrats obstruct the orderly process by which change can be made, then some disorderly process is called for. Prophets have been known to make rude noises. And they have not always been known for their humility.



Raab

**There is one man here now who says, “I have come to San Francisco to save 70 thousand Jewish souls.” Well, that fairly takes one’s breath away. There are a few people around town who feel that they are anointed to save the Jewish people in one way or another, whether the Jewish people like it or not. In periods of ferment and transition such as this, the Jewish community has always produced a number of false messiahs, and false prophets. But, on the other hand, it has also produced some genuine prophets. And these were generally non-conformists, without much popular support to begin with, and usually held up to ridicule by the establishment of their time.**

So, one cannot absolutely rule out the possibility that we have some genuine revealed-truth prophets in San Francisco. But the odds against it are kind of high, and there are certain hazards attached to self-appointed saviors. Thus, the man in San Francisco who says that if he can save “just one Jewish soul,” he will do anything necessary, regardless of other consequences. That’s reminiscent of the small radical groups of the 1960’s who said they would accomplish their aims “by any means whatsoever.”

And that’s the point at which “civility” becomes more than a matter of good etiquette. We’re back at the fundamental point of deciding when it is legitimate for a small group to impose its will on a larger community—by disorderly, disruptive mau-mau means—because the small group believes that it alone has the “real truth”.

And here an important distinction must be made. If some small group cannot get access to, say, the San Francisco Jewish community or its institutions, in order to present its point of view—with civility—and in order to be persuasive about its point of view, then presumably it must use uncivil means. But if it is uncivil to begin with—or if it *does* have reasonable access to the community and its institutions, and is only frustrated because it has failed to be persuasive, or to win its point, that’s another matter.

**In that case, lack of civility bespeaks some real contempt for people... some idolatrous adulation of an abstract idea rather than of the divine humanity in every person...some Torquemadist, Stalinist belief that all those with differing viewpoints must be treated as either fools or knaves. No one can finally save The People who does not himself have wide-ranging respect for people. And no one can finally save The Jew who does not himself have wide-ranging respect for Jews.**

Under those conditions, lack of civility is something more than irrelevant external behavior. Anav, a synagogue poet of the 13th century said: “Good manners is thoughtfulness of God and of men.”