

August 14, 2009

Shabbat Shalom!

When will a national discussion on a serious issue not turn into a battle of good and evil? This is the question that remains in my mind as the discourse on health care legislation turns towards the extremes. Name-calling and distortion of facts will not bring the best solution to this challenge of offering Americans affordable health insurance. There may be good reasons for citizens to be anxious, and even angry, at this time of economic downturn. Nevertheless, posters that add a Hitlerian moustache to a photograph of President Barack Obama and other comparisons to Nazi Germany are not going to bring our country closer to a workable compromise on this issue. Such expressions could prevent the civil conversation we need that will allow decisions to be made based on listening with intelligence and compassion to real-life concerns.

The beginning of this week's Torah reading, R' eih, noted that after the Israelites entered the land of Canaan, they were called upon to engage in a ritual of declaring the blessings that would come to the people if they followed divine teachings, and the curses that would befall them if they went astray from the path that Moses had taught them. It was not as much about punishment as it was about remaining on a path that would keep the community together, even at times of internal disagreement. Caring about each other as members of a holy community was their primary concern.

Some voices that came to the surface over the last week called for a "return to the Constitution and what our nation's founders intended." The founders of our nation set us on a path that they hoped would lead us to engage in a lively, perhaps vociferous, yet ultimately civil debate on the most controversial issues we face. The rhetoric of conflicting opinions has, at times, divided our country. We know, however, that even when we are not of the same mind, we can still join together to declare that our freedom to say what we think is a blessing, not a curse. Let us remember that listening to the views of others, along with speaking our own mind, is an integral part of that blessing of freedom that we have inherited and that we are now called upon to preserve. May the concern for the common good that many people share in our country – and throughout the world – prevail for us now and in the future.

-- L'shalom, Rabbi Larry K.