



**Yom Kippur 2006**

**On Tolerance**

**Introductory Remarks**  
**Rabbi Peter Schweitzer**

The art of successful relationships is mastering the challenge of constant negotiation, compromise, and reconciliation. This is true between nations and also members of our families. In a good relationship, we not only tolerate each other's quirks, foibles, and idiosyncracies, we become so familiar with them that they even seem adorable at times, when they're not otherwise annoying. In theory, we don't tolerate all sorts of unacceptable behavior, like gambling and cheating and alcoholism, not to mention neglect and abuse. But, in fact, many partnerships and many marriages endure more than a tolerable quota of this kind of treatment.

In the world of global politics, it is no different. Democracies endure more than a tolerable quota of dictatorships that disregard the rights of their citizens, oppress whole classes of people, and think nothing of callous executions.

Meanwhile, back home, in the safety of most of our homes, we go about our daily business without much thought to our own personal preferences and prejudices, albeit, with tamer repercussions. But bias is a human condition. We do take sides. We do take positions. And sometimes we even vocalize our opinions with stridency and impatience toward those who don't think the way we do. Of course, they feel the same way about us. It doesn't exactly encourage mutual respect and understanding.

But is that the goal? Is that what tolerance is all about? Understanding the other person? Or is there more at stake?

A number of years ago (7/7/1999, Daily University of Washington), Kevin Schattenkirk wrote an impassioned article about gay pride and the struggle for gay equality. He was writing in 1999. He could have been writing this past summer in reaction to the NY State Court of Appeals hateful decision to pass the question on to the state legislature of whether gays and lesbians can have legalized marriages in New York.

The gay community, he wrote, "is rising-up and campaigning for acceptance, not tolerance, from a society where homosexuality is still a taboo. Acceptance, not tolerance? It's sickening how that word is tossed around like it's positive. Tolerance is not positive. Tolerance is equivalent to: "OK-fine. You can be here but I don't have to like it or accept you for who you are. I can still oppress you. I don't have to make things any easier for you.

"Acceptance, on the other hand, is when people stop judging each other and agree to disagree. Acceptance is when we acknowledge that difference is OK. Acceptance means...that gay people deserve to be treated as equals."

Now it's one thing to talk about acceptance - at least of people who are different than us - but what about ideas?

Must I be tolerant of all ideas? Is tolerance a matter of: You have your truth. I have mine. And, as Voltaire said, I will defend to the death your right to say it, just don't inflict your ideas on me. But are all beliefs equally valid? Aren't there categorical truths, or what some have referred to as universal human values, that sometimes really are true and really are right? Like pedophilia is bad, and so is terrorism, and apartheid and genocide, and so is any form of abuse, and so is holocaust denial, and so is denying women the right to their own bodies, and so is denying gays and lesbians the right to legal marriage.

I am all for "political correctness" as a linguistic concept - carefully choosing words to avoid derogatory stereotyping or perpetuating gender or racial biases. I am not, however, in favor of political neutrality and passivity when it comes to crucial ideas in our culture. I don't think that all ideas are equal or tolerable. Of course, being a demagogue against demagoguery is something of a contradiction.

As Humanistic Jews, we particularly champion the use of reason and rational scrutiny to address pressing issues of the day. We have a hard time tolerating those who disregard compelling evidence that teaches about global warming and the threat to our environment. Likewise, we don't have much patience for those who oppose scientific inquiry, and stem-cell research in particular, that can offer the hope of life-saving medical discoveries.

Here, at The City Congregation, we describe ourselves as a welcoming, diverse, and multicultural community. That doesn't mean, however, that we all see eye-to-eye on all things. But we do hold to some principles in common. We believe it is up to us to take responsibility for our own lives. We also believe in justice and fairness and making it possible for all people to live lives of dignity and equality. But beyond these key principles, we embrace a range of personal beliefs and politics that run the gamut. No matter the position, we think there is plenty of room in this complicated family of ours to hear each other out respectfully. That doesn't mean we can't have passionate discussions as long as we maintain zero tolerance for hand-to-hand combat.