

Responding to the Terrorist Attacks in Paris

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Ten days ago, two Parisian brothers, Chérif and Saïd Kouachi, radical Islamic terrorists, burst into a newspaper office in Paris firing their weapons and shouting "Allahu Akbar" – "Allah is great." They killed twelve people. They were carrying out previous Muslim threats against the cartoonists and editors of the newspaper.

Hours later a third radical Islamic terrorist, Amedy Coulibaly, working in concert with the Kouachi brothers, shot a man who was out jogging. The next day he shot and killed a Paris police officer. On Friday afternoon, two days after the attack on the offices of Charlie Hebdo, Coulibaly entered a kosher supermarket as Jews were shopping for Shabbat. He held shoppers and workers hostage, then killed four Jews.

Seventeen people murdered in three days, in coordinated terrorist attacks that have been called the 9/11 of Paris.

When I learn such terrible news, I find it helpful to turn to experts in the news, thoughtful commentators whose views help me to make sense out of chaos. This morning I summarize the columns of two such thinkers: New York Times columnists David Brooks and Thomas Friedman.

First, David Brooks. His column appeared in the New York Times on January 8, the day after the first attack. By then many people were wearing signs saying "Je suis Charlie" – "I am Charlie" – in support of the newspaper. Brooks titled his column, "I Am Not Charlie Hebdo."

Brooks recognized in his column that it was right to celebrate the journalists at Charlie Hebdo as martyrs on behalf of freedom of expression. He said also, however, that in our own country we are often intolerant of the kind of satirical expression that so angered Muslim critics of that newspaper. On American college campuses, for example, that sort of satire might have been banned under codes that prohibit so-called hate speech.

He cited four examples.

The University of Illinois fired a professor who taught the Roman Catholic view on homosexuality.

The University of Kansas suspended a professor for writing a harsh tweet against the National Rifle Association.

Vanderbilt University derecognized a Christian group that insisted that it be led by Christians.

American colleges, including Brandeis, have faced opposition when Ayaan Hirsi Ali is invited to campus.

Brooks wrote that, because we are horrified by the slaughter of the writers and editors in Paris, we should find a less hypocritical approach to our own controversial figures and satirists.

He also said that we are not really Charlie. Most of us don't engage in that brand of deliberately offensive humor. Most of us instead move toward more complicated views of reality and more forgiving views of others. We usually try to open conversations with listening rather than insult.

Yet, at the same time, most of us know that provocateurs and other outlandish figures serve useful public roles. Satirists and ridiculers expose our weakness and vanity when we are feeling proud. They puncture the self-puffery of the successful. They level social inequality by bringing the mighty low.

Moreover, he said, ridiculers expose the stupidity of fundamentalists. Fundamentalists take everything literally. They cannot tolerate multiple viewpoints. Satirists expose those who cannot laugh at themselves.

In short, in thinking about provocateurs and insulters, we want to maintain standards of civility and respect while at the same time allowing room for those creative and challenging folks who are uninhibited by good manners and taste.

If you try to pull off this delicate balance with laws or with speech codes, you'll end up with crude censorship and a strangled conversation. It's almost always wrong to try to suppress speech by law or establish speech codes.

Fortunately, social manners are more malleable than laws and codes. Most societies maintain standards of civility and respect while keeping open avenues for those who are funny, uncivil and offensive.

Healthy societies do not suppress speech, but they do grant different standing to different sorts of people. Wise and considerate scholars are heard with high respect. Satirists are heard with bemused semi-respect. Racists and anti-Semites are heard, if at all, through a filter of opprobrium and disrespect. People who want to be heard attentively have to earn it through their conduct.

David Brooks concluded his column with these words: "The massacre at Charlie Hebdo should be an occasion to end speech codes. And it should remind us to be legally tolerant toward offensive voices, even as we are socially discriminating."

Recent developments at Brandeis confirm this wisdom of David Brooks. As he mentioned, Brandeis last year informed Ayaan Hirsi Ali that she would receive an honorary degree and would speak at commencement. Responding to criticism from some students and from the Council on American-Islamic Relations, Brandeis changed its mind, preventing her from speaking.

This week further news appeared in the letters column of the Jewish Advocate concerning Daniel Mael. He is the student who criticized another student for her tweets that expressed hatred for police just after the two New York police officers were murdered. For this he was targeted by the campus left, with calls for him to be expelled from school. Thankfully, Mael is a determined young man and was able to deflect this attack. A petition supporting him gathered 2800 signatures.

But there's more to the story. Mael is a pro-Israel activist and an honor roll student. According to the Wall Street Journal, he was called into the Dean's office, threatened with possible expulsion, and ordered not to use social media.

Why? Because, after Mael debated a J Street student leader in the school's cafeteria, the student told officials that he felt "intimidated" by Mael. As a result, authorities at Brandeis told Mael he had two days to prepare his "defense." The Dean then refused to give Mael a copy of the "charges" against him.

Mael got a lawyer. Brandeis cravenly backed off, with no apologies or explanations.

Nor was this Mael's first encounter with Brandeis's administrators. Previously, he exposed a secret faculty email group that featured horrible anti- Israel rants.

We should be grateful for champions of Israel as courageous as young Daniel Mael. His case confirms the dangers that David Brooks identified.

The second New York Times columnist on whom I often rely, Thomas Friedman, wrote on January 13 a column titled "We Need Another Giant Protest." Commenting on the marches in Paris and across France that drew millions of people, Friedman asked, "What would have made us feel that the jihadist threat was being seriously confronted?" His answer: a million-person march against the jihadists across the Arab-Muslim world. A march organized by Arabs and Muslims for Arabs and Muslims. A march that occurred without anyone in the West asking for it. A march to protest not only what happened in Paris but also to protest because the dozens, the scores, even the thousands of Muslims and others murdered by jihadists in Pakistan, Yemen, Iraq, Libya, Nigeria and Syria.

Friedman quoted Abdul Rahman al-Rashed, one of the most respected Arab journalists. In a recent column Al-Rashed said: "Protests against the recent terrorist attacks in France should have been held in Muslim capitals because it is Muslims who are involved in this crisis and stand accused." He said further, "The story of extremism begins in Muslim societies, and it is with their support and silence that extremism has grown into terrorism that is harming people. What is required is for Muslim communities to disown the Paris crime and Islamic extremism in general."

Friedman believes that Muslims feel a great deal of ambivalence toward the jihadist phenomenon. That ambivalence is felt in the Arab-Muslim world, in Europe and in America. There is a deep cleavage among Muslims over what constitutes authentic Islam today. Islam has no Vatican, no single source of religious authority. There are many Islams. The puritanical Wahhabi/Salafi/jihadist strain is one of them, and it enjoys a significant level of support.

A primary source of support for the Wahhabi/Salafi/jihadist strain in Islam is America's own ally, Saudi Arabia. In 1979, jihadists took over Islam's holiest shrine in Mecca in 1979, proclaiming that Saudi Arabia's rulers were not pious enough. Since then, Saudi Arabia has redoubled its commitment to Wahhabi or Salafist Islam. That is the most puritanical, anti-pluralistic and anti-women version of Islam. Saudi Arabia has used its enormous oil revenues to build Wahhabi-inspired mosques, websites and madrassas across the Muslim world. All of this has tilted the entire Sunni community to the right.

The Presidents of the United States never confront Saudi Arabia about this, perhaps partly because of our oil addiction. Some say that the Saudi government actually opposes the jihadists. Unfortunately, though, it's a very short step from Wahhabi Islam to the violent jihadism practiced by the Al Qaeda and ISIS.

Friedman concludes, "The French terrorists were born in France. But they were marinated in Wahhabi-Salafi thought, through the web and local mosques."

Having heard from Brooks and Friedman, we are left with the question of action: what are we here in America and particularly here in Braintree supposed to do about all this?

A good friend of mine, David Brodsky, sent me a message yesterday about the recent vitriolic exchanges between Turkey and Israel. Turkey's Prime Minister compared Israeli Prime Minister Benjamin Netanyahu to the Paris terrorists and said both were guilty of crimes against humanity. Turkey's President Recep Erdogan had already criticized Netanyahu for participating in the march of world leaders in Paris. Erdogan accused Israel of "waging state terror" in Gaza.

David wrote to me, "I fear we are seeing the beginning of a Second Dark Ages. What is the remedy for this increase in violence, disregard for the objective truth, and general intolerance that seems to metastasize daily? I've never been so discouraged by the trend of our times. What's the answer, O Wise One?"

I provided two answers to David. They are the same ones I have recommended here to you: join AIPAC and join CAMERA.

Last Rosh Hashanah I spoke about defending Israel. I recommended then joining AIPAC, the American Israel Public Affairs Committee. More than just joining, please come with Alice and me to the annual AIPAC policy conference in Washington. This year it's being held March first through fourth. The conference provides an opportunity to join thousands of supporters of Israel, connect with our elected officials and advocate for Israel.

In November I spoke here about CAMERA, the Committee for Accuracy in Middle East Reporting in America. In addition to joining CAMERA and helping to refute false reports about Israel, work with CAMERA to combat anti-Zionism and anti-Semitism on our college campuses and the intimidation of pro-Israel students there. Check out what is happening at colleges we attended and the colleges of our children and grandchildren. Look them up on the web. Talk to alumni. Ask children and grandchildren what is going on. You may be appalled by what you find. If you are, please take action. Demand that the college be a safe place for Jewish students and for Zionists.

My dear friends, Jews and Israel are under attack. More than that, rationality and civil discourse are under attack. Each of us must do all we can to defend the values that matter so deeply to us.

We are all descended from Adam. The moral consequence of that idea appears both in our Talmud and in Surah 5 of Islam's Qu'ran: anyone who murders a single human will be accounted as though having murdered all of humanity, but anyone who saves a life will be accounted as though having saved the lives of all humanity. We ask for divine help to preserve humane values and preserve our humanity.

For this let us say, Amen.