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*Less Yelling*

We read a fascinating book some time back by author Stephen Fried entitled, The New Rabbi. An especially good story which Fried tells in his book concerns a small Jewish high school that didn't have much in the way of resources to support an athletic program. They concluded, however, that they could probably raise the money to purchase a shell and find eleven students to row. So the shell was purchased and the kids recruited. The new rowing team practiced and practiced and practiced, and finally entered into their first season of competition. But, sadly, they lost every single race ... dead last. Baffled, the rabbi of the school conferred with the coach. "What are we doing wrong" he asked, "that we can't win a single event? You've got to find out what the problem is!" So off the coach went to find the premier rowing team. He scouted the Harvard team, and finally returned declaring that he had learned their secret. 'We've had it mixed up,' The coach reported. "You see, at Harvard ten men row and only one yells!"

What a wise and telling observation! And as an observer of international events and especially the role of religion in them, doesn't it seem to you that it's time for more rowing and less yelling?

Religion has been making a lot of noise in recent years, some of it pretty disturbing. Remember the outlawed Japanese religious group, Aum, that yelled its bizarre predictions and then released homemade sarin nerve gas in Tokyo's subways, injuring thousands? Or, consider the shouts of Chechnyan rebels that lead to a grade school's occupation and the death of innocent children. And closer to home, a few years ago the Heaven's Gate religious sect in San Diego ranted about the coming end of the world and then mounted a mass suicide, telling followers they'd surely ride to heaven on the tale of a comet. We have all heard Osama Bin Laden loudly encourage atrocities such as suicide killings. And wild distortion of God's will is something to which our own tradition, Christianity, has certainly succumbed on occasion through history.

Many acts have been justified across the years by religious leaders who claimed that they followed the dictates of their faith. They may even have claimed that their actions, harsh though they appeared to others, were in fact required of them. Frightening prospect, isn't it – faith in God interpreted as a justification for hideous cruelty and the wasting of life? What would it take to calm the storm of noisy self-justification, and encourage listening and cooperation between differing religious groups and others with vastly divergent perspectives?

Maybe it all starts with a little humility. We have a friend who claims that three words are, to him, particularly sacred. The words are: "I don't know." If we could all admit that there is much we still don't know, we might be a little more willing to credit the insights and commitment of others as having some potential value. Perhaps if we talked less and listened more, we'd all eventually find a rhythm we were willing to follow in rowing together in a common direction toward a shared pursuit. Wouldn't that be better than all the yelling?