

## HAITIAN DIASPORA UNITY CONGRESS

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### THE TEN COMMANDMENTS OF DIASPORA COMMUNITY BUILDING

**David M. Elcott**, The Henry and Marilyn Taub Professor of Practice in Public Service and Leadership, New York University, david.elcott@nyu.edu

Welcome. An honor to be a guest, present to see and hear women and men who are dedicated to strengthen the ties of the citizens of the Republic of Haiti to Haitians and their descendants wherever they are in the world. This is no easy task in the 21st century, even for a community that is as historically strong as the Jewish community that I have served for many years. My role today is not only to welcome you on behalf of a sister community, but offer perspectives learned that may assist you in your work.

So here are the Nine Commandments of ethnic community building which I have learned:

1. We live in an age of choice, the freedom to choose, alter and discard identities at will. I can change my hair color, my place of residence, my religion and even my gender – and there is no one who has the right or ability to stop me. In an age of choice, then, identities compete with each other. It is unlikely that anyone will retain her identity – as a Jew, as a Haitian, as a Christian, as straight or gay, as American – simply out of guilt for the past. Identities need to be affirmative, not coerced, and they compete on an open market. So the First Commandment is: Avoid guilt that causes people to flee your attempts at coercion, especially when you are working with a Diaspora community that already has run away from home.

2. American democracy has historically been dependent on voluntary associations – groups that come together and not just around election time. PTA's, Kiwanas, Masons, the church sewing circle and bowling night, Elks, Lions. But there is strong evidence that such voluntary associations are rapidly dying in America. And the ones that continue, like AARP or the NRA, are membership advocacy organizations and not places where people come together. The collapse of voluntary associations in the United States poses great dangers for minority communities because we need such groups to stay alive as a community. If I want to sustain the Jewish community or the Haitian community or the Italian community, then I am bucking the trend of America—I am counter-culture. So I need to find something to affirm, an identity that is an affirmation. I must make people feel unique, treasured and respected. I must give them voice and not impose myself on them. I must create an inviting community. So the Second Commandment is: Be counter-culture, offering something unique to compete with the larger American culture that beckons. I will return to this point shortly.

3. Voice is very important. In America, everyone has an opinion, everyone thinks that he or she is an expert. My Russian friend tells a joke that the great cellist Rostropovich meets an American teenager who tells him how much she enjoyed his cello playing. He asks. "Oh, do you play cello" and she responds: "I don't know, I have not tried yet." Americans think that they can do anything. They like to be heard. It is unlikely that you will be able to create a one voice Diaspora community. Jews have tried it for a century and have failed, wonderfully in my opinion, because while we share an identity, we do not share views about all matters, even the most precious ones. In the Jewish community, a Jew builds two synagogues: the one he attends, and the one he would not

step into. There are Jewish groups that love Israel and lobby Congress to let Israel hold on to the Jewish settlements and all of Jerusalem and other Jewish groups that love Israel and want a Palestinian state. There are Jewish groups that support faith based funding and those that oppose it. Republicans and Democrats. Fundamentalists and progressives. The only minimum standard is a rejection of violence. A successful Diaspora community must allow for many voices and foster conversations that allow for disagreement, even if that makes us uncomfortable, even if it means that participants in the Haitian Diaspora Unity Conference would disagree with policies of the present Government of Haiti. So the Third Commandment is: Cherish and nurture Pluralism, multiple voices, and a place at the table for all those who identify as Haitian as long as they do not promote violence.

4. As I mentioned, America is an inviting, open society that eventually welcomes immigrants because we are all immigrants, even the Native Americans who migrated across the Bering Straits from Asia 12,000 years ago. Now America also has a racist history, one that plagues us today, as we just saw in the arrest of Professor Gates in his own home by a white policeman. It is still complicated and often dangerous to be a person of color in America, and that is even truer for immigrants. The issue of race is a complicated one for Haitians as well and one that you, as leaders and as a community, will need to address. Certainly, though, some of your children may well be absorbed into the African-American community just as Barack Obama, the son of a Kenyan, identifies as African-American even though he has absolutely no family history as an American black man. So this is a challenge, to think about how Haitians will be affected by the ways race plays out in America. What racial identities will Haitians take on? How will you view Haitians born in the United States who identify with African-Americans? Will your grandchildren want to see themselves as people of color and therefore, in their lifetimes, part of the majority? Will the community become divided over racial identities rather than fortify a Haitian identity? The Jewish community faces this every day – most of the original Jewish families that came to America before 1860 do not have Jewish descendants. They assimilated into the white Christian majority. Other Jews who come from Ethiopia or Yemen often feel torn by color and religious identity. Fourth Commandment: Teach your children to honor their unique past and find ways to reinforce that past. Yes, we may reflect a range of color, but for us, we are Haitian and we are part of a unique history and culture with a unique story to tell.

5. That is easier said than done because, as I noted, there are many compelling, competing messages available to you and to your children and grandchildren. If you are to sustain a Haitian identity, then you need an educated population. In a recent study of Jews, East Asians and Caribbean Blacks who have succeeded, the variable of greatest significance in explaining the success of these three communities is education. Literacy promoted by the family, within the family, at school, ends up being a key stimulant for success. Now the literacy rate in Haiti is about 65%. That is not nearly sufficient for success in the United States. But here we have an interesting comparison. The literacy rate in India is about the same – 65% -- but Indians in America have a 100% literacy rate, send their kids to top colleges, and have succeeded incredibly well in this country. The Indian Diaspora community, a group with which I have worked, is now a vital asset for the mother country and has created a meaningful community in America. The Haitian Diaspora can become the model of Haitian success through education. The Fifth Commandment then is: Promote education, get your kids an education, demand quality – and provide adult learning opportunities as well.

6. Now it gets trickier and perhaps more painful. Living in the U.S. is not the same as living in Haiti. In fact, I would assume that the Haitian Diaspora community is composed of individuals who fled Haiti, wanted out of the

life there and are in some ways rejecting their Haitian past. You need to consider what of Haitian culture is critical to sustain in the Diaspora and what should be let go. Language – should Haitian children learn Creole? French? Can you sustain the community in English? Is the Catholic Church a crucial element of identity? If so, should Haitians attend separate Haitian Catholic churches? What is the role of Vodun in the beliefs of American Haitians? Is food critical and not just a stop along Thai, Chinese, sushi and pizza? Are there national holidays that Haitians in the Diaspora should celebrate? Do your children read Edwidge Danticat and Joanne Hyppolite as Jews read Phillip Roth and Bernard Malamud or Irish read Frank McCourt? What of Haitian culture is precious to sustain, distinct and valuable in America? What can – or should – be discarded? The Sixth Commandment: Nurture Haitian identity through a culture that will be seen as unique and valuable that can thrive in America. Don't be afraid to let go of negative elements in Haitian culture that will not or should not play well in America.

7. This means that you need to think deeply about why Haitians left and are continuing to leave Haiti? Why you left Haiti? Immigrant communities generally have a very complicated nostalgia. Nostalgia comes from the Greek: nostos, a return to home and algia, pain. Nostalgia is literally homesickness, but it also is sick from or sick of home. Italian immigrants sang songs of the old country, of the vineyards of Naples and the sheep in Sicily, but for the young folk, it was primitive and impoverished. Jews may have sung Yiddish folksongs about their little village, but fled for their lives to America. I assume that most Haitians who have left Haiti fled – from fear and terror, from hunger and pain, and a sense of hopelessness. For many, fond memories are overwhelmed by disdain and a desire to leave that life behind them. If past immigrant experience provides us with indicators for you, then there is no repatriation – ethnic identity does not lead to a return to one's homeland. Even Jews, whose love of Israel is confirmed by countless surveys, successful fundraising and fierce advocacy in Washington, may visit, but seldom leave America to become citizens of Israel. So you need to look long and hard at the Haitian Diaspora community, listen to the hearts of the immigrants, hear their passions, their fears and anxieties, and especially their needs. The Seventh Commandment: Build a Haitian Diaspora community, not a community of Haitians, by listening carefully and then providing for their needs and aspirations in the countries in which they now live.

8. The immigrant experience, on the whole, is not a pretty one. Most immigrants flee their homelands seeking a better life, but that better life may only come for their children or grandchildren. When the large immigration of Jews came to the United States, the result was poverty, sickness and ghetto life. The majority of Jewish families fell apart – divorce, children abandoned, children running away, violence and abuse. There were Jewish gangs, prostitution, and all sorts of cheats and embezzlers. It was not a pretty sight. But there were wealthier Jews who accepted the Jewish principle of tzedakah, an obligation to care for their community. Tzedakah is not Christian caritas, which we translate as charity. Tzedakah means justice, setting things straight. It is an obligation, not a choice. So Jews built hospitals and orphanages, soup kitchens and after school programs, summer camps and community centers where the elderly, adults and children could be fed, spend leisure time, and – as important – be inducted into Jewish identity. Now these institutions also provide services for the whole community, for all Americans. Today, we often rely on government programs and the services of religious or civic institutions. But the Jewish community still sustains its institutions with programs that help sustain Jewish identity and foster allegiance and a sense of obligation to the Jewish community.. So the Eighth Commandment should focus you on grass roots, community building – creating settings and programs that serve the Haitian community. There is a surge of public service, all forms of volunteering, in

America today. Take advantage of that spirit – create after school tutorial programs for kids, offer sports activities, arts opportunities, social settings for teenagers. Teach about love, monogamy, safe sex and family. Provide your own literacy programs taught by Haitian volunteers, job banks and food banks, all prominently connected to Haitian community organizations. National organizations are very important, but in the end, what happens on the ground, grass roots, is what matters – nurture the obligation to give time, energy and/or money and the result will be greater allegiance and fidelity.

9. When I was fourteen years old, I went to live on a youth aliyah village in Israel as part of a program bringing young American Jews to Israel. There were immigrants there from Europe whose parents were killed in Nazi death camps. There were refugees from Arab countries – their homes were in bad shape so they came to this residence school. We got up in the morning early and worked. I cleaned the chicken coops – there is nothing more disgusting than shoveling out the chicken coops. But I did not feel disgusted. I felt brave. I felt as if my hands were God's hands working to make the world better, to make Israel a better place. It felt like holy work. Today, we offer a free program called Birthright that brings Jewish college students for a ten day trip to Israel. Hundreds of thousands of young Jews have experienced Israel this way.

Today, young people feel like commodities or, better, like markets – people want their money, want them to buy things. To be a teenager may mean that your parents love you, but you do not have to accomplish anything, to work – you may be loved, but you are not a necessary, productive contributor to the world. My experience working at the youth village made me feel worthy—I was part of something important. Imagine an American born son or daughter of Haiti, perhaps your child or grandchild, who goes to spend a summer in Haiti working at a summer camp or building a pre-school center or helping at a program for seniors. Imagine their sense of worthiness, not a fabricated one they watch on T.V. or when playing a video game, but something real – they are contributing to the homeland of their family, they are sweating, they are doing good.

This Ninth Commandment is paradoxical – by making your kids sweat and live in some form of deprivation compared to their lives in the Diaspora, you give them meaning and a sense of self-worth that is real and not artificial. Create programs where they can do good in Haiti, let them work with other young Haitians so that they create relationships – kids love to meet others, to explore new worlds that way, so you do not need to program the interactions between local and Diaspora Haitians teenagers. Let your kids build Haiti, accomplish real tasks, and the bonds they create will do more to sustain a relationship with Haiti than all of your words.

10. There is a secret to building a Diaspora ethnic and national community that sustains allegiance both to the mother country and to similar others around the world. That secret is storytelling, creating a master narrative. No doubt one reason that I was asked to be here is that my community sustained its Diaspora for thousands of years, even when the mother state was destroyed. We did not do this through military might or by separating ourselves from the world. Rather, Jews became master story tellers. We tell each other that God promised that the descendants of Abraham and Sarah would become a great nation and a blessing to the world – and our kids learn that they are the heirs of Abraham and Sarah. We were slaves and we were liberated to stand as a free people at Mt. Sinai. Jewish traditions then created ceremonies for us to feel as if we are standing at Mt. Sinai once again. After the Temple in Jerusalem and the Jewish state were destroyed, we commemorate that day by fasting and mourning – but we also built a portable Temple called the home and the synagogue and the school. According to Jewish tradition, the home is called the small sanctuary and all those inside are priests and

we are taught that God is present whenever we study the Bible together. And from the prophets we were trained to fight for justice and become God's agent in perfecting the world. That is the Jewish story that we lovingly convey.

There has to be a grand story to tell and you who are sitting in this room must become the compelling and captivating storytellers. Ironically, from where I stand outside your community, this should be an easy task. Haitians fought for freedom and against slavery before America became independent – and continued to fight against the evil of slavery year after year. While blacks in the U.S. waited until 1865 to be liberated by soldiers of the North, Haitians had been giving their lives in defense of liberty, equality and human rights for one hundred years. The children of African slaves founded the first black republic in Haiti and the first independent republic in the America after the U.S. Simon Bolivar was protected in Haiti during his fight to liberate South America, so Haiti was a home for freedom fighters. For that matter, even in the 20th century, Haiti rebelled against colonialism of any form, even that of the United States.

Like you, I am well aware that Haiti has not lived up to the promise of freedom, liberty and equality. Yet it seems that such an awareness only heightens the need for an articulate, passionate and deeply connected Haitian Diaspora community committed to support the mother country in becoming the beacon of promise that remains at its core. There is work to be done by the sons and daughters of Haiti, even those who are born abroad, speak the language of the country in which they live, and surf the net as global citizens. The best way to be a global citizen is to be rooted in your own identity, your unique culture, part of a story telling family and community that remembers that once they were slaves and now they are free. So the Ninth and Final Commandment is: Become great story tellers. Not someone else, not the Prime Minister or President, not the gifted authors and poets alone, but each one of you must know your story and find multiple thrilling ways to transmit that story to your children, your grandchildren and all those who you can reach. That is the key, the secret of sustained identity: Your story, the ongoing quest for freedom and dignity, humanity and equality, is at the core of Haitian identity. It will only remain alive and vital if you tell that story. The Ninth Commandment: Become great story tellers. Haiti needs you, your children need you to tell their story and a world in which equality and freedom seem so far away needs to hear your story.

There is great work yet to be done and I am grateful to join you in celebrating your commitment to build a better Haiti, a vital Diaspora community and a more just and kind world.