

THE WEXNER FOUNDATION

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“I’ve Been Thinking...”

“The Case for Civility” By Wayne L. Firestone

As part of my summer reading, I picked up two books: one old, one new. My father, a retired English professor, found the first at one of my favorite used book shops: *Hillel: The Book Against the Sword*, written in the 1950s by Ely Pilchik, the founding director of University of Maryland Hillel. In this biographical study, Hillel the scholar comes alive with his teachings in narrative form. The second book, *Hillel: If Not Now, When?* written by our esteemed colleague Rabbi Joseph Telushkin, was just published this month by Nextbook. Also a biography, this book applies Hillel’s teachings to the world today, addressing some of the Jewish world’s biggest challenges through a lens of pluralism and inclusiveness. These books are a reminder of the enduring relevance of Hillel and his teachings, not only as the namesake of the organization that fosters Jewish growth on college campuses, but also as a model for how we approach our Jewish future.

Often we think of Hillel and Shammai as the epitome of Jewish argument and disagreement – don’t we hear too often that for every two Jews there are three opinions? I was reminded otherwise when recently watching the historic, silent art film *Salome*, the saga of King Herod and his young stepdaughter, loosely based on Oscar Wilde’s play. Shammai was not actually the foil to Hillel; it was Herod, who was also Jewish, and arguably the largest real estate magnate in the “Holy Land.” Although Hillel and Shammai disagreed, each displayed a fundamental acceptance of the other’s opinion and sincerity. Even as Hillel’s teachings of inclusiveness became more greatly accepted over the years, Hillel did not exile or ignore Shammai. On the contrary, he invited Shammai and his disciples to the table and into the conversation. Maybe they saw each other as strengthening their collective conversation, rather than distracting from “truth.”

We can – and, need to – be modeling this inclusiveness in the present day. We are in a new era of incivility, in Washington, on college campuses, and within Jewish community. In Washington, it is said that partisanship is the worst it has been in generations, and new efforts are being considered to reimagine problem-solving in the public sphere. College campuses are not immune from these influences, which can polarize and divide across parties, along partisan lines, and between religious and ethnic groups. Jewish community is not safe from discord. As *New York Jewish Week* editor Gary Rosenblatt observed in his recent column entitled “When the Dialogue Deteriorates,” “...while communal diversity is a point of pride, the sad reality is that our community is growing ever more divided, on issue after issue, and now is as bitterly polarized as I’ve seen in the last 17 years...”

These daily headlines are not reassuring, as they project voices wanting to burn books and condemn those across the aisle. It is hard to imagine that reason and civility will prevail without modeling and guarding them as sacred values. Our own divisiveness does not occur in a vacuum, and such an environment provides an even stronger imperative for discourse and respect within the Jewish community, at the very least.

This fall, we are witnessing another round of the Israel peace process. Many of us have our doubts, our anxieties and our fears. Recognizing that there are going to be different views within our own community, we can and must approach this process with an open mind and acceptance of a diversity of opinion. None of us holds the only right answer.

Incivility is not merely about poor etiquette. It is a real and tangible challenge, personal for most, if not all of us, and we can address it. Let us honor the teachings and practice of the school of Hillel, which chose not to vanquish the school of Shammai but invited his disciples to come and join a collective discussion, even when they brought disagreements to that discussion. We can do this by not merely responding to crises, but by proactively building communities of understanding, empathy and mutual respect; by guarding each of our tongues; by asking questions rather than defending our own answers; and by approaching disagreements from curiosity rather than fear.

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