

When Campus Protests Suppress Free Speech

By Wayne L. Firestone

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In recent days, we have witnessed several different forms and focal points of protest on campuses regarding Israel and Israeli speakers, each of which raises compelling communal issues. At the University of California, Irvine, Israeli Ambassador Michael Oren was forced to stop his address repeatedly while being interrupted by protesters yelling "propagating murder is not an expression of free speech." Nine students were arrested after refusing to refrain from disrupting the ambassador's speech. On the same evening a short distance away at the University of California, Los Angeles, a senior Israeli Foreign Ministry official, Daniel Taub, was similarly shouted down.

A week earlier at the University of Pittsburgh, while former Knesset member Effi Eitam was speaking in the Hillel building, protesters outside yelled from a bullhorn, "A fascist is speaking here tonight on behalf of Hillel. That's why we are here demanding to stop hate speech." Hillel professionals invited the protesters inside the building to listen and to ask pointed questions, if they would allow Eitam to speak. Some continued to be disruptive inside the hall, however, and were required to leave. Of note, in this incident several individuals within the Jewish community were directly involved in organizing this protest.

Such protests are not exercises of free speech rights -- they are systematic, premeditated, and deliberate attempts to suppress speech. It is not that the protesters wanted their voices heard -- those who protested outside, or asked pointed questions inside, did have their voices heard -- but rather, that the protesters inside the halls aimed to silence an important voice. That has nothing to do with free speech, and everything to do with the very suppression of speech and opinion that our democratic system was created to prevent.

Ironically, while Israel's detractors were organizing their protests on campus, considerable attention and resources of the pro-Israel community were directed toward an event in Philadelphia organized by J Street. The event engendered much heated discussion within the Jewish community. The fact that Hillel at the University of Pennsylvania simply rented space to the group -- without endorsing the content of the program -- made Hillel a target. A cut-and-paste e-mail campaign asked writers to share their "anger" even where they knew nothing about Hillel's pro-Israel work at Penn or any other campus.

Hillel is strongly pro-Israel and pro-civility. We do not believe that there is any contradiction between these positions. In fact, we believe that you cannot have one without the other. Making it happen on campus is both an art and a science.

Hillel's commitment to pro-Israel advocacy and education on campus is deeply rooted in strengthening Jewish life and the opportunity to create meaningful Jewish experiences for students. We educate the campus about Israel because it is the right thing to do -- the Jewish thing to do -- and as a means to engage Jewish students in a discussion about their own Jewish identity, their role in the global Jewish community, and their relationship to the Jewish homeland. We give students the tools and resources to advocate for Israel by sending thousands



of students each year to Israel through Taglit-Birthright Israel, by partnering with the Jewish Agency to place full-time Israel Fellows on campuses around the country to lead Israel-related campus programming, and by working with over 30 national Jewish organizations in the Israel on Campus Coalition, which we co-founded with the Charles and Lynn Schusterman Foundation eight years ago.

But we cannot fulfill our mission without ground rules. Hillel therefore created an international policy eight years ago that guides our pro-Israel work: “Hillel is steadfastly committed to the support of Israel as a Jewish and democratic state with secure and recognized borders and as a member of the family of free nations.” Students who do not subscribe to this policy are welcome to worship with us, celebrate with us and learn with us, but they will not be given Hillel resources to propound anti-Israel views.

Indeed, controversy often flares within the Jewish community, reflecting the time-honored Jewish tradition of internal dissent, not to mention the ideological divisions represented in the Israeli Knesset. Some division is beneficial and other can be destructive, if not fatal. We remember the arguments between the schools of Hillel and Shammai that the Talmud describes as *“leshem shamayim,”* for the sake of Heaven. And we remember the fratricidal hatred, the *“sinat chinam,”* that divided Jews and enabled the Romans to sack and burn Jerusalem.

Just as we have established guidelines for Hillel's pro-Israel work, Hillel is simultaneously working with universities to create campuses of civility for all students. Hillel professionals work with university officials to ensure the freedom of religion, to strengthen freedom of expression and to advance the academic enterprise.

In 2008, Hillel hosted a “Summit of the University and the Jewish Community” that focused on promoting civility on college campuses.

In developing such strategies for Millennial generation students, we need to avoid turning them off by demagoguery and ideological zealotry. If we truly want to engage every Jewish student on campus – those who have strong Jewish backgrounds and those with none – we cannot allow divisiveness from off campus to distract us from our educational goal. When demonstrators call Israeli officials “a fascist” or “a murderer,” it is not time to be squandering Jewish community resources by attacking one another. When we must create a broad coalition to oppose a nuclear Iran, the Jewish community cannot appear disunited to students or to the campus at large. At this critical moment we must put aside partisan and parochial interests and come together, allowing strong, diverse voices to support Israel, measured by their deeds and actions and not merely slogans.

When our internecine strife spills onto the campus we adopt Jonathan Swift’s “Modest Proposal:” We eat our children and sacrifice our future. Let’s instead adopt another recommendation from Swift: “quitting our animosities and factions... [and stop acting] like the Jews, who were murdering one another at the very moment their city was taken.”

Let’s do it, for Heaven’s sake

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