

Imagining a Civil University: Its Necessity and Insufficiency

The Hillel Foundation, the national organization for Jewish campus life, organized a conference in Washington, DC during March 24-26, 2008, entitled "Imagining a More Civil Society: The University and the Jewish Community". I was invited to speak as a panelist on the subject "Preserving a Civil Society on Campus"; my comments follow below.

I'd like to thank the Hillel Foundation for inviting me.

As chair of the Brandeis Faculty Senate from 2005 to 2007, I was involved in addressing issues raised by the university administration's censorship of an exhibit of drawings by Palestinian teenagers (called "Voices of Palestine"), and in bringing President Jimmy Carter to Brandeis to discuss his book, "Palestine: Peace Not Apartheid". These linked public events dramatized the currently precarious function of universities as venues for public and civil discourse.

Civility is a necessary but insufficient condition for the real work of the university to take place. The mere maintenance of civility---through silence or self-censorship---risks doing away with significant discussion. (By analogy, imagine an oncologist who eliminated cancer by doing away with his patient.)

Yet without civility, communicating difficult and sometimes painful things becomes impossible. And despite the pejorative sense of the word "hurtful", heard too often in political discussion, many necessary, important observations are painful. Civility underlines that such observations are made in good faith.

Some brief history: During the spring of 2006, an Israeli undergraduate named Lior Halperin, as a course project, exhibited drawings by teenagers from a Palestinian refugee camp, depicting the tragedy and squalor of their lives, together with descriptions of their all too human hobbies and career aspirations. The exhibit was removed by the administration, saying that it lacked "context".

Criticisms were made that the exhibit wasn't Art, that it lacked appropriate curatorship, that it was agitprop. These missed the point: the exhibit had political content that made Israelis, and by extension Jews, look bad---true no matter what your politics are. There are ways at a university to respond to what we don't agree with, but censorship isn't among them. (Censorship in the Internet age ensured that thousands of people saw the exhibit online.)

Many faculty signed a public letter that this removal was mistaken. After discussion with the Faculty Senate, the administration appointed a faculty committee to report on this matter. The committee concurred with their colleagues' public letter of judgment. The administration did not respond substantively to the committee's findings, emphasizing instead the need to move on.

I believed that my university had the responsibility and capacity to deal with these painful political issues, and that the academic integrity of the university, compromised by censorship, needed repair. I thought of several speakers who could address with civility the difficult political content of "Voices of Palestine", including Jimmy Carter. None were at the questionable extremes of free speech. Recognize that even when we're defending often-objectionable free speech boundaries, what we're really protecting is important, mainstream iconoclasm that exists well within those boundaries.

My attempts to interest the administration in such a speaker were deflected, disparaged, and dismissed. One senior colleague, to whom I was directed, and contacted in my official capacity, emailed me that I made him sick to his stomach---uncollegial and uncivil---and later called me the "campus Ahmadinejad". When I objected to his lack of derech erez (good manners and respect), he told me I had a communication problem. A not particularly veiled threat was made that I could be fired. A clear message was sent to the Senate that no response to the "Voices of Palestine" crisis was planned, nor was there a timeline for considering one. It was then---on Justice Brandeis's 150th birthday---that I wrote to President Carter, asking if it would be possible for him to come discuss his controversial book.

As my private inquiry to President Carter was made public---and nothing appears in a newspaper unless someone wants it there---the public denunciation of him was reaching a crescendo. The Jewish Telegraphic Agency, among other news sources, carried articles identifying him as an anti-Semite, Nazi sympathizer, and Holocaust denier. He was called a coward, a hypocrite, a bully; he was accused of religious delusion, marital infidelity, and political perfidy. These comments were, in one word, uncivil. Faculty colleagues who organized President Carter's visit to Brandeis were attacked during public remarks in front of university supporters, as "tenured professors who are ruining the university". The clear implication was that without tenure, we were dispensable.

During President Carter's visit, I experienced the university I've always wanted to work for. Leftist students heard what they say, often to deaf ears, spoken with

authority. Conservative students asked the appropriate pointed questions. As I told the Chronicle of Higher Education, "no one could question President Carter's civility": he was treated with respect by thousands of Brandeis undergraduates, and the university got publicity that cannot be bought---on the front pages of national newspapers, and others across the world. We showed everyone that the incendiary political issues surrounding "Voices of Palestine" could be addressed with intellectuality, civility, and respect.

If there is one message I want to communicate to this audience, it's this: what took place is what universities like mine are really supposed to do. We're not hospitals, or community centers, or synagogues, or political action committees. We're not think tanks, action centers, nor do we advance ideological allegiances and agendas. Democracy works best through compelling political advocacy, but universities don't exist to advocate. We're there to teach students to think for themselves, to develop their analytical tools and critical skills. What students do with those tools and skills is theirs to determine, not ours.

When universities become political or parochial advocates, the universality of their service to the greater community is lost. "The whole purpose," as Justice Brandeis said of his Supreme Court judgments, "is to educate the country."

Like other universities represented at this conference, Brandeis University is a nonsectarian institution with an official mission statement that explains what we really want to do. It proclaims "a center of open inquiry and teaching, cherishing its independence from any doctrine or government." There are no exceptions in the statement for Israel, or Zionism, or Palestinian nationalism, even though people in the institution have profound views on these and other subjects.

Recall Ronald Reagan's joke to the doctors who operated on him after he was shot: "Please assure me that you are all Republicans!" In effect, he was saying, "I know you are here for something that's more important than politics", and a surgeon answered, "Today, we are all good Republicans." At a hospital, preserving life, not politics, is paramount. At a university, our job is to preserve the life of the mind.

I come by these opinions naturally. Years ago, my parents heard Malcolm X speak at the Ford Hall Forum in Boston, and not because they wanted to join the Nation of Islam. As an undergraduate, I heard Roy Cohn speak on campus; I challenged him about his role in the Rosenberg trial. Neither speaker had an immediate respondent with a reassuring "other side". Each was worth listening to. Even if you don't agree with what a speaker is saying, you should feel

comfortable that everyone gets their turn.

I like listening to people speak who express opinions about important subjects. I'm committed to supporting anyone who wants to question them honestly, no matter how "hurtful" it is to those who do not share the opinions of the speaker or the questioner. And I want the university to strengthen the foundation that makes that civil encounter possible. To paraphrase Rabbi Hillel: If not us, who? If not now, when?

I've made tentative inquiries to senior colleagues about inviting Steve Walt and John Mearsheimer of "The Israel Lobby" to Brandeis, without any takers. A neocon colleague of mine said he'd never invite Rashid Khalidi or "those Columbia types" to speak, because he isn't invited to their place. It's time for some of these walls, on all sides, to come tumbling down. Go listen to William Buckley and Noam Chomsky from "Firing Line" circa 1970 (it's on YouTube) if you want to hear some real intellectual engagement. They knew something that we need to relearn. And Justice Brandeis knew it too: he wrote, "Men feared witches and burnt women. It is the function of speech to free men from the bondage of irrational fears."

In conclusion, consider your relationship with a university like one with a teenager---something I'm grappling with at the moment---and observe that both images have something of eternal youth about them. You can't tell either what to do or think. What you hope is that your affection and support will encourage them to understand the world in terms of their own making. You hope that their varied experiences will teach them to think for themselves.

Brandeis University's role in the Jewish community is rooted in history and heritage. This nation accepted our grandparents as immigrants with the full rights of citizenship; so Brandeis embodies, says our mission statement, the gratitude of the American Jewish community to our country, through the traditional Jewish commitment to education. Many university presidents are at this conference, and they seek a modus vivendi between the Jewish community, and the institutions whose intellectual goals they passionately represent. And they watch the relationship of my institution and this community. I wish that my university could be a model for them.

The university is the ultimate locus of civil discourse. As Yale's Kingman Brewster said, "Universities should be safe havens, where ruthless examination of realities will not be distorted by the aim to please, or inhibited by the risk of displeasure."