



Temple Beth Sholom

A JEWISH CENTER OF LIFE, LEARNING, AND CONNECTIONS

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Rabbi Cohen Sermon Archive

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So Many Opinions, But Only One Matters...Doesn't It?

I came to the office on Sunday for a meeting. I pulled into my parking spot but noticed that something was just not right. My sign! Someone took my sign! Who would take a "Rabbi Reserved" sign? Who knew that it was worth something that someone would actually want to steal it? Or was this an act of anti-Semitism? Was I going to find the sign thrown through a synagogue window? Was there going to be graffiti around the temple grounds? What was this all about?

Turns out, it was some kind of college prank since we've got the student on video as he went through the whole campus making sure that no one was here and then took off with the sign with someone else in their black SUV. Just as a side note, this is not an invitation for anyone to park in my spot.

But there has been a lot of concern over the past couple of weeks regarding anti-Semitic and anti-Israel activities here in Southern California. On February 8, there was the Ambassador Michael Oren program at UCI and this weekend West Borough Baptist Church is in Long Beach protesting around the Jewish community.

Israeli Ambassador, Michael Oren was scheduled to speak and then open a discussion with Jewish community leaders, students, faculty and the community at UCI on February 8. As most of you know, Ambassador Oren got up to speak and within the first few moments was interrupted by a student claiming Israel to be guilty of oppressing the Palestinians. The student then walked to the end of his aisle where he was calmly escorted out of the hall. Within a few more moments, another student stood up and shouted at Ambassador Oren. Chairman Mark Petracca yelled out to the participants, "Shame on you!" Here was a dignitary who came to talk about the issues facing Israel and the Palestinian people. Ambassador Oren was hoping to engage in dialogue through a question and answer session, but because of the disruptions, this was canceled.

Ambassador Oren had to leave the stage for 20 minutes and then agreed to return and conclude his speech. He said, "I've spent most of my life living in and studying the Middle East and one of the great and eternal cultural facets of the Middle East is hospitality...even if you do not agree with them, even if they're ostensibly your enemy. I'm your guest here and I'm asking for the Middle Eastern hospitality for your guest, I've come into your house."

By the end of the evening, 11 students were arrested, released and are awaiting arraignment for possible misdemeanors and a decision from the University as to how to punish these UCI and UC Riverside students.

There have been calls from some that we should boycott the University. However, Abe Foxman, the National Director of the Anti-Defamation League says that this kind of boycott is counterproductive. He wrote that Chancellor Drake's effort to maintain civility has not worked on the campus over the past couple of years. He calls on the Chancellor to take a stronger stand against the disruptive actions of the Muslim Student Union and anyone else who engages in hate speech. He is even asking that the University finally produce the findings of an investigation into allegations that a speaker invited by the MSU, British Member of Parliament, George Calloway, may have violated material support provisions of federal anti-terrorism legislation by raising money for Hamas. Still there has been no word from Chancellor Drake about this investigation.

But Chancellor Drake continues to commit himself to ensuring that the University maintains a safe, respectful atmosphere that is free from intimidation and harassment. However, this has been extremely unsuccessful. When Chancellor Drake commented on the actions of the Muslim Student Union he said that it was, "intolerable" and "those who attempt to suppress the rights of others violate core principles that are the foundation of any learning community."

There is a need for more forceful moral leadership on the campus of UCI as those in the MSU are making a mockery of these very values.

Yesterday, Erwin Chemerinsky, the Dean of the UCI Law School wrote an Op-Ed piece in the

Los Angeles Times in which he reminds us that college campuses are where ideas should be expressed and debated. He notes that the University had some knowledge that the MSU would hold a protest during which their goal was to disrupt Ambassador Oren's speech. But when confronted, the MSU denied any of the information as to how they were going to do this. The information provided to the University was accurate down to the manner in which each student would stand, shout their protest, make their way to the aisle and then be escorted away.

Now there are signs around the campus calling for the dismissal of all charges of the "Irvine 11" explaining that they were just engaging in free speech.

Chemerinsky reminds us that Justice Oliver Wendell Holmes explained that there was no right to falsely shout "fire!" in a crowded theater. Free speech does not mean that the University or government officials can't stipulate a time, place and manner restrictions on the speech. The government has a right to prevent hecklers from shouting in order to silence a speaker.

There were other options for those who disagree with Ambassador Oren to express their views. They could have silently stood with signs in the hall. They could have passed out leaflets to participants. They could have engaged in a conversation at the microphone during the question and answer time that Ambassador Oren was hoping he would be able to participate in. Instead, this group chose to disrupt and disrespect not only the Ambassador but the institution. These students have made a mockery of the very education they are pursuing.

This weekend, there will be another protest, this time with signs and without confrontation, yet very hurtful all the same.

West Borough Baptist Church is in Long Beach this weekend picketing the Alpert Jewish Community Center, Temple Israel of Long Beach, and Temple Beth David.

This Topeka, Kansas based church considers itself an "old school (or primitive) Baptist Church." Started by Fred Phelps in November, 1955 and is primarily made up of the Phelps family from children to grandchildren of Fred Phelps. It is estimated that they spend about \$250,000 year on traveling to picket around the country and spread their message of hate.

The church protests schools whom they deem to be accepting of homosexuality along with Catholic, Lutheran, and other Christian denominations that the church feels are heretical. In 2005, they started to target funerals of those murdered or killed in accidents like plane crashes and for American soldiers killed in Iraq and Afghanistan. They believe that all Americans and American Institutions are sinful and that "God's hatred is one of His holy attributes."

Jewish organizations became the major focus for the church in April 2009. From Israeli Consulates to synagogues and Jewish community centers, the WBC pass out fliers and send dozens upon dozens of faxes to announce that they will be around to picket the organization. These faxes and emails contain anti-Semitic and anti-gay messages directed toward institutions and individuals.

For the WBC, their picketing is a form of preaching and spreading their message. They hope to spread their message while garnering publicity by grabbing media attention.

As with UCI, the First Amendment limits the rights of government bodies and officials to restrict speech, no matter how distasteful and offensive. People are legally allowed to protest on public lands. Yes, there can be limits on time, place and manner, but not on the content. And the government cannot criminalize the sending of an offensive fax.

What are we to do? How far is too far when it comes to free speech? How far are individuals and groups allowed to go in protesting and speaking their personal views, no matter how hateful they are? What can we do and how should we react to such events like UCI and the protests of Westborough Baptist Church?

There are creative ways, such as was seen in San Francisco when Westborough Baptist Church picketed outside the Twitter offices. You can imagine what those signs looked like - as long as they were only 140 characters. There was: "I have a sign"; "God hates kittens"; "Silly hats only!"; "God hates FLAGS!"; "I'm tired!"; "Build Prison's on the moon,"; "Where's Waldo"; "I was promised donuts"; "God never gonna let you down"; "God hates retweets" and "God hates signs!"

For this weekend, the ADL has suggested that we don't confront WBC picketers. They suggested that any faxes sent to the institutions should be copied, cut up and then made into a creative art project that promotes tolerance and respect.

Temple Israel of Long Beach has moved their Torah study time to an earlier time of the morning to avoid the picketers. The 7th grade program that was scheduled to be on-site has been moved to a private home. And Temple Israel has invited local churches to join them in a Shabbat

morning service celebrating diversity and respect for all.

The antidote to hate speech is good speech. Hateful speech can only poison a community and instead, we should be spreading the message of tolerance and respect for all.

In respect to UCI, we need to continue a dialogue with the University, that while they believe in free speech, there needs to be established guidelines that allow for participation in programming and not bullying of students, faculty or administrators. Free speech is not about intimidation and coercion. It is about how we listen to one another, allow opinions to be expressed and disagreements to be voiced. It is not about silencing the voice of the other.

Chancellor Drake has his work cut out for him and true, boycotting the University is not the answer. Rather, calling for change and tolerance is an absolute must! It is our responsibility to call out to the University and demand that they address these issues. It is an embarrassment for even us who do not attend or work at the University, because it is here in our backyard. It is a reflection of our community, and I would hope that each of us want our community to shine in the brightest light possible.

Write the University, support the Hillel and Jewish student unions, attend events sponsored by Jewish students and organizations on campus. Allow our voices to rise up in support of our students and the University.

And finally, spread messages of understanding and tolerance. Yes, protests like the one that is this weekend with Westborough Baptist Church is disconcerting. However, we should feel proud that the community rallies together and joins in interfaith worship celebrating tolerance and acceptance.

Sometimes, we might feel like there is much hatred or anti-Semitism in the world, but I believe that there are many more stories of love, compassion and understanding that drown out the voices of hate. We must sing out for peace. Let us do it with others and not only for ourselves. Because, if not now, when?

Oh and, I still want my sign back!

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