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What Would Hillel Do?

Imagine for a moment sitting in a theatre at a Jewish film festival and hearing someone yell “sieg heil!” How about hearing a round of applause when a speaker mentions Ahmadinejad or divestment from Israel? It seems ludicrous to think that the moviegoers would do such things. But this happened and it is just one incident in a larger situation that has been on-going in San Francisco since for the past couple years. The Bay Area Jewish community has been brought to its heels with a high stakes, deeply emotional communal issue surrounding the screening of the film “Rachel”. But first, let me tell you another story before coming back to the San Francisco debacle.

Many years ago, two worthy adversaries began a famous dispute that lasted three years. They were as stubborn as they were intelligent and their names were Shammai and Hillel. It’s said that during these three years of arguing back and forth, Shammai would contend that the halakha was in agreement with his views. Not surprisingly, Hillel believed that the halakha was in agreement with his views. People did not know whom to follow until one day the legendary divine voice came forth and said, “the statements of both Shammai and Hillel are the words of the living God, but the halakha is in agreement with the rulings of Hillel.” Shammai was confused. “What entitled Hillel to have the halakha fixed in agreement with his rulings?” We learn the reason for this was that Hillel was both kind and modest and while he studied his own rulings, he also studied the rulings of Shammai.

Rabbi Moti Bar-Or, who runs Kolot, a bridge-building Torah study institution in Israel explains, “The uniqueness of Hillel is that he truly believes there is validity in

Shammai's approach, although he totally disagrees with him." Hillel was able to create an environment of positive and healthy discourse because he was considerate, level headed and didn't let his emotions carry him away. Perhaps we can learn a lot from Hillel's disposition.

Now back to the opening saga in San Francisco...

The film at issue, "Rachel," has produced the largest outpouring of anxiety and criticism towards Israel in years. "Rachel" is about the story of Olympia, Washington native and Evergreen State College alum, Rachel Corrie, a young activist and her controversial death in Gaza in 2003. Corrie went to Israel as part of a delegation of the pro-Palestinian International Solidarity Movement, a group that was protesting in the southern Gaza city of Rafah during the Second Intifada. While protesting the demolition of Palestinian houses in Rafah as a human shield, an Israel Defense Force's bulldozer crushed her. And so, Rachel became a hero, even a martyr. But to other people, Rachel was just another idealistic woman who got was coming.

The festival director, Peter Stein, knew the movie had to be screened in San Francisco the moment he saw it in Berlin. The crisis that developed, however, was not just about the showing of "Rachel." Listen who the official promoters of the film were: *Jewish Voice for Peace* and the *American Friends Service Committee*, both are arguably anti-Israel groups. At the very least, they lean far left of center. JVP's mission statement, for example, reads,

"The United States must stop supporting repressive policies in Israel and elsewhere. U.S. military aid to countries in the Middle East must be based on rigorous enforcement of the Arms Export Control and Foreign Assistance Acts, which mandate that military aid may be

used for only defensive purposes within the recipient country's borders, and that aid may not be delivered to countries that abuse human rights.

“U.S. military aid to Israel must be suspended until the occupation ends, since the occupation itself is in violation of these guidelines. Military aid allows Israel to avoid making serious efforts to resolve the Israeli-Palestinian conflict, as well as conflicts with its other neighbors. It enables the occupation, contributes to the devastation of Palestinian society and fosters the increasing militarization of Israeli society.”

And get this; the festival invited the deceased girls' mother, Cindy to lead a Q and A session after the screening. This crisis was brewing as soon as these three issues at hand came together; the decision to screen the film, the promoters and Cindy's presence.

Immediately following the release about this film, Peter Stein's inbox and voicemail were bombarded with messages. He responded to the concerned lay leaders and Jewish professionals, “If we, as an arts organization, are going to remain relevant in our time, it really is part of our role to catalyze conversation, however uncomfortable it may be.”¹ Stein's no dummy. He didn't need leaders in the Jewish community to warn him about the uproar concerning his decisions, though they certainly did. Rabbi Doug Kahn, Executive Director of the San Francisco Jewish Community Relations Council warned Stein that Cindy's “presence would ‘increase the likelihood that it will become a political forum.’”² Not surprisingly, the San Francisco Israel Counsel General, Akiva Tor shared the same opinion.³

¹ Pazornik, Amanda. *Film Festival Under Fire for Scheduling “Rachel,” Inviting Mom.* J Weekly. July 9, 2009

² Ibid.

³ Ibid.

Daniel Sokatch, the head of the San Francisco Federation at the time was probably in the most difficult position. His job was to appease many different constituents, including mega funders. He had to balance all the forces, which is exactly what conflict resolution is all about!

Stein may have anticipated hearing from those three leaders, but probably not the next. Spokespeople for The Koret and Taube Foundations, big supporters of Israel and the Bay Area Jewish community argued that the event promoted anti-Israel sentiment.

Just when everyone thought tensions had peaked, the plot thickened. Videos surrounding this controversy were put on Youtube.com by popular San Francisco radio talk show host, John Rothmann. They targeted the Federation's financial support of the film festival; practically calling on people to stop giving money to an organization that would stand idly by as anti-Israel groups take over the festival. One friend who worked at the Federation at the time said that people were emailing and calling daily, demanding that they get their 2010 contributions refunded.

So what did Stein and the Board do? They apologized for "underestimating how polarizing this decision would be for many members" of the broad community, "especially in absence of other viewpoints."

The Board realized that inviting Rachel's mother promoted just one view. So they invited Dr. Michael Harris, a founder of the grass roots advocacy group, *San Francisco Voice for Israel* to speak to the audience immediately prior to the second screening. Harris' goal was to talk about what the Israelis go through on a daily basis. During his ten minutes, the audience interrupted him several times with jeers and name-calling. Someone even shouts out "Sieg Heil." What was so incredible about this is that Harris is a pro-Israel advocate who

provided facts that the movie overlooked. He said that Rachel's death should not have happened, but the deaths of many others should not have happened either, such as the death of a young man in Israel farming who was killed by Palestinian gunfire. Turns out that the event's co-sponsors sent out appeals to their members to show up in force.⁴

Can you imagine the rippling effects this all had and continues to have? The reputation of the world's largest Jewish film festival may be marred. Any hope of giving credence and listening to other points of view a la Hillel and Shammai seem unlikely now. Donations coming in to both the festival and those organizations that support it, such as Federation slowed dramatically.

So, friends, what would we do if we were leaders in the San Francisco community? What would we do if this happened here? Would we speak out by writing a public letter to Stein, either in support or opposition to his choices? Would we talk about the movie and screen it for our community? Would we do nothing? Perhaps this movie ought to have been screened at the Israeli (not the Jewish) Film festival.

Israel happens to be one of the touchiest topics. Some of us may already have dealt with divisive social and political issues in a communal setting. Washington State Referendum measure 74 comes to mind as one of these. The film festival presents just one of many contentious communal issues where virtually all people take sides regardless of whether or not we actually have a personal stake in the matter.

What can we learn from the "Rachel" incident?

As Hillel teaches, there must be healthy discourse amongst the parties involved. A situation like this is not just about the polarization of opinions over Israel. That is a whole

⁴ <http://www.bluetruth.net/2009/07/sf-jewish-film-festival-audience-jeers.html>

other sermon. This is about keeping a community together and being respectful of one another, as Hillel was with Shammai. Yet I am not convinced that Jewish communities always heed Hillel's mediation methods. When the stakes are high it seems that argumentation beats out conflict resolution. No wonder why the Los Angeles *Jewish Journal's* David Suissa wrote an article titled, "Can we argue without fighting?"⁵

Soon after the San Francisco episode, I had the pleasure of learning from Rabbi Arthur Gross Schaefer: a lawyer, CPA, ethicist, a renaissance rabbi. He presented numerous case studies that we all hope won't ever enter our community, but probably will. And he gave this advice:

First of all, take an analysis of all the stakeholders. Find out what each party wants and how they might be affected by various outcomes. Then determine what the most important values are in each case. And finally choose a path that is the most utilitarian, one that produces the greatest good and least amount of harm. But, he taught, we as communal leaders should not do all this work by ourselves. It is our job to be a facilitator and what that means is to honor the process. Let the players involved figure out what to do, together. Perhaps in our case study, that would have meant Stein seeking the counsel of other communal leaders before allowing so many controversial issues to arise at once.

Look, one can never truly be prepared for every incident, however, the more we learn about both sides of the coin, the quicker we might be to act in a professional way that encourages civil discourse and dissuades rhetoric that polarizes communities. It does not matter if we think Kahn and Sokatch and Stein did enough to warn or mend their situation. Hindsight is always 20/20 as the saying goes. What matters is that we see how a series of

⁵ Suissa, David. (Oct 14, 2009) *Can We Argue Without Fighting?* The Jewish Journal. Vol 24, num. 34

decisions can snowball and turn into a destructive communal mess when proper modes of listening, consultation and mediation are disregarded.

As an update to the Rachel Corrie story, a couple weeks ago, an Israeli court finally ruled that the IDF and bulldozer operator were not responsible for her death. This decision, shameful, or just, however you see it, has sparked a new debate that can be seen all over the news, blogosphere and twitter. I certainly hope this verdict does not incite violence, as Rachel, deep in her core, was against fighting and division.

We are the people Israel, named after our patriarch Jacob who struggled with his twin brother in the womb and with an angel years later. As Jews, we love a good fight, as long as no one gets hurt, God forbid. Most of our sacred texts illustrate our love for argumentation. Even Hillel was not alien to conflict. I don't know if Hillel could have solved the San Francisco mess, but following his *middot*, his character traits of kindness, modesty, and openness to the opinions of others makes the first steps in creating healthy discourse amongst quarrelling parties that much more civil.

The next time we are confronted with a communal or personal situation that has the potential to divide, or has already crept its way under our skin, let's take a deep breath and ask a similar question that our neighbors ask, "What would Hillel do?"