

Sigi Ziering Ethics

This year our Sigi Ziering column will focus on the ethics of silence. Each month an esteemed guest columnist will wrestle with questions concerning silence and its impact on Jewish life and the world around us. The column is sponsored by Bruce Whizin and Marilyn Ziering in honor of Marilyn's husband, Sigi Ziering, of blessed memory. Visit shma.com to view the series of columns with responses.

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Taking Hillel and History to Heart

Abraham H. Foxman

Why did you make that statement? How did you arrive at that position? Is it in the best interest of the Jewish community to speak publicly on that issue? Should you have criticized that person? Should you have defended that person? Why not just be silent?

As National Director of the Anti-Defamation League for more than 20 years, I am often asked questions like these. As I look back at some of the issues for which questions like these were raised, I believe we said and did the right thing at the right time.

For me, speaking out against anti-Semitism, racism, bigotry, and hate whenever, wherever, and from whomever they emanate, as well as speaking up for respect and understanding, is a must — a mandate of the ADL and a result of my personal experience as a hidden child during the Holocaust. With 94 years of credibility backing me up, I do believe we are heard and can make a difference.

When the issue of restitution for Holocaust survivors came to the fore at the end of the 1990s, my position diverged from most other Jewish leaders. Yes, Holocaust survivors and their heirs were due what was rightly theirs. But suddenly the discussion revolved around how much compensation for stolen and lost Jewish gold and art. My fear was that the sound bite of the last century would be “Jews were murdered by Hitler because they had gold and Monets,” when in fact they were murdered because they were Jews. I am certain the 1.5 million Jewish children who died at the hands of the Nazis did not own Monets.

When Black churches were burning in the

south and ethnic cleansing was occurring in Bosnia, I spoke out. Some said it was not a Jewish issue because Jews were not targeted. But I realized that if someone had spoken out on Kristallnacht or when Hitler announced his Final Solution, perhaps Jews might have been saved. It was the right thing to do.

The issue of Mel Gibson and his film, “The Passion of the Christ,” was one of the most controversial and misinterpreted issues with which I have been involved. No matter how hard we tried to explain that we had reached out to him, that we wanted to work with him, that we were a coalition of Jews and Catholics, it fell on deaf ears, and I was accused of calling him an antisemite and of being responsible for the runaway success of his film. Beside the point was that he was a celebrity garnering great media attention, that he said he was being accused of being an antisemite, that he set a precedent for marketing his film among Christian Evangelicals. No matter — I would do it again. And, while I didn't label him an antisemite then, he proved to the world all by himself that he was one when he lashed out at Jews during his arrest for driving under the influence.

Given the history of the Jewish people, I strongly believe we do not have the luxury to be silent when Jews are in jeopardy, when the State of Israel is threatened, when our democratic values and institutions are attacked, and when others are in peril, simply because they are “others.” As Hillel said, “If I am not for myself, who will be? If I am only for myself, what am I? And if not now, when?”



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