Silencing, Censoring, Hosting, Choosing

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An opinion piece by J.J. Goldberg appears in the Forward under the headline, ***Silencing of the Liberal American Jew***. Reacting to a synagogue's cancellation of a speech by Congresswoman Debbie Wasserman Schultz, Goldberg writes, among other things:

> *Determined campaigns by noisy minorities or threats by a handful of major donors regularly* ***silence*** *voices deemed controversial...*
>
> *The disinviting of Wasserman Schultz takes* ***the stifling of free discourse*** *into a new and alarming realm...*
>
> *[Jews] have long been an important voice for justice. It's a pity that they let their voice be* ***hijacked, diverted or cut off*** *from allies by an unrepresentative minority.*
>
> [Emphasis is mine.]

A few weeks ago, when **the 14th St Y canceled a Jewish youth group's planned event** to discuss a partial boycott of Israel, a leader of the group said:

> *"This is consistent with other issues we have seen in Jewish institutional spaces, when Jews who have tried to express opinions that are not of the status quo about Israel are* ***censored****"*. (Emphasis is mine.)

There are two questions here which must remain separate: first, how broad is the discourse that the Jewish community chooses to host, encourage, and/or facilitate? And, second, is failing to host, encourage, and facilitate a discussion the same thing as censoring it?

It seems to me that broader discourse is usually good. Politics matter and carry both moral and religious weight, so both liberal and conservative voices should be heard in our shuls. The Jewish community includes a large spectrum of opinion about Zionism,

so a strong case can be made that Jewish communal institutions should welcome a broader spectrum of discourse about Israel than they currently do.

At the same time, I would ask all those who use these terms like *censorship*, *silencing*, *stifling*, etc.: is it really the case that choosing not to host, encourage or facilitate every kind of conversation is censorship? Isn't it within any institution's right to choose its own boundaries and norms? Is it really the case that the membership of an institution is being somehow denied the chance to take part in the discussion, when any member can, at any time they wish, join or attend another institution at which the discussion does take place? Did the 14th St Y somehow lock Young, Jewish and Proud out of the city of New York entirely, preventing them from holding an event at any other venue? Did they lock the doors of anyone's radio station or smash anyone's printing press? Is Rep. Debbie Wasserman Schultz of the United States Congress now suddenly lost in the wilderness, bereft of microphones, now that the mighty Temple Israel of Miami has slammed its doors to her humble plea to speak her mind?

We're not talking about anyone facing any actual sanction, danger, penalty, or obstacle for voicing an opinion -- we're talking about institutions making choices about whom they will give a platform for voicing which opinions. Those choices are important, and they merit a real debate, one from which I certainly would not ask Mr. Goldberg, nor Jewish Voices for Peace and its youth affiliate, to back down. I would only ask: isn't it possible to make a strong argument for broadening the discourse within Jewish communal institutions without resorting to spurious (and therefore counterproductive) accusations of censorship?

(Browse BJPA for **Discourse and Dialogue**.)

UPDATE (June 25, 2012): **Right-wingers can play this game too.**