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Arguments for the Sake of Collegiate Heaven

*New centers of inquiry are the first step to restoring
campus ideals*



AMONG THE MANY ethical precepts coined by the Jewish sages, one of the most revolutionary and instructive was “argument for the sake of heaven.” For the sages, the greatest example of such an argument was that between the study halls of Hillel and the study halls of Shammai. Two academies, each steeped in erudition, engaged in debates over matters great and small, but in pursuit of a shared goal: to serve God. By praising, as they do, the nature of the debate between the schools of Hillel and Shammai, the sages exalt the process of learning above truth itself. It is the *spirit of inquiry*, rather than the passage of judgment, that makes a place of learning heavenly.

Anyone who has engaged in the act of teaching knows this to be

true, though the labor of inquiry is often imperfect and unassured. This is why leaders of any education system find it challenging to foster environments of productive and respectful disagreement. The sages sanctified this cultivation, and we in the academy would do well to follow in their footsteps.

Universities are meant to treasure reason, dialogue, and open-mindedness, to embrace argument over proclamation. At their best, they are halls of intellectual engagement built on reason and warmth. No wonder Jews have thrived at universities.

But lately this spirit has slipped. An ideological shift has reduced universities from havens of inquiry to places increasingly characterized by incivility and rancor. It happens that many of those harmed by this shift are Jews.



Last spring, the University of Maryland announced a set of guest speakers for its annual Social Justice Alliance Symposium. The event, held in collaboration with Bowie State University, is an effort to memorialize 1st Lt. Richard W. Collins III, a black Bowie State student who was murdered in a racist attack on Maryland's campus in 2017.

The murder of Collins appalled our community because it was not only a hate crime (the murder led to strengthened hate-crime legislation in the State of Maryland), but a crime against the university. Physical peril on a college campus is a grave institutional failure—especially if it's rooted in one's identity.

Reform was needed, and the university took measures to broaden the range of perspectives in our classrooms and lecture halls, especially those perspectives that may have been historically underrepresented. We supported these efforts. But one aspect of the university's response, however well-intentioned, has led it to interfere with its own mission.

The joint symposium was founded as part of “an unprecedented alliance to promote social justice.” One reason it is “unprecedented”: It exceeds the role of the institutions that house it. Universities have little business weighing in on public opinion and policy.

This year, our university threw its weight behind Amanda Seales, giving her a platform at the symposium as part of its effort to advance social justice. Seales is an actress who last fall doubled down on her claims that Israel is a white-supremacist state and on her unwillingness to condemn Hamas. Among other things, she claimed, “They’re trying to say that Hamas, as a culture, is of terrorism, it is of bad apples. And I think that from what we’re seeing, that simply is just not a fair assessment. And even if there were a Hamasian that were a bad apple, that doesn’t speak to the whole organization.... Ultimately, Hamas has been presented as like ‘big, bad wolf.’”

In a letter we wrote to the administration, we questioned their decision to invite her on the university’s platform. We were invited to meet with university leaders, including President Darryll Pines, Chancellor Jay Perman, and the university’s general counsel. In our conversation, they expressed confidence in the direction of the symposium.

The same day as that meeting, Representative Jamie Raskin, a Maryland Democrat who is Jewish, visited campus to deliver an annual endowed lecture within the physics department. His remarks were titled “Democracy, Autocracy, and the Threat to Reason in the 21st Century.” He would not deliver them. Shortly after he began to speak, anti-Zionist student protesters shouted him down, chanting that he was “complicit in genocide.”

Raskin attempted to reason with the protesters. He tried to engage them in dialogue. But they were uninterested in an exchange of ideas; they wanted only to drown out his voice. Pines eventually stepped in to end the event. He observed afterward: “What you

saw play out actually was democracy and free speech and academic freedom. From our perspective as a university, these are the difficult conversations that we should be having.”

But what happened cannot be called a conversation. As leading free-speech organizations have clarified, a “heckler’s veto” is not free speech; it’s a violation of it. Worse, Raskin was not shouted down because of what the hecklers feared he might say, but because of who he is: like almost all Jews, a Zionist. His identity disqualified him from delivering any message.



For the sages, closing off inquiry came at the expense of heaven. For the university, it forsakes truth.

The pursuit of truth demands more than just the inclusion of diverse perspectives, though that is an essential ingredient. It requires an environment in which those perspectives can engage in good faith and on equal footing. If the university begins to exclude voices based on identity, it strays from its essential mission. So, too, if the university grants a featured platform to a certain ideology at the expense of others. When it does so, the university distances itself from its foundation as a place of inquiry. Some facts will remain uncovered, some interpretations will not be considered. Only by embracing multiple perspectives fairly can the university uphold its role as a space where ideas are tested, challenged, refined, and proven — not merely proclaimed or silenced.

Two weeks after Raskin’s lecture and our meeting with administration leadership, we sat in the audience at the Social Justice Alliance Symposium. As we listened to Amanda Seales, we were struck by an irony: We were there listening to the voice of someone who likely would not tolerate our own. It is not necessarily a sin of

the university for Seales and her beliefs to be granted stage time on our campus. But it is wrong for her voice to be legitimized by the official endorsement of its “justice,” especially when her statements are demonstrably intolerant and untrue. Far from a heavenly argument, hers is the kind that needs to be brought down to earth and rooted in facts.

We are fortunate that our department within the business school is a living exercise in the spirit of inquiry. We had taken these values for granted, but now we see that we need to assert them. Our group is ideologically and religiously diverse, but we agree on the importance of rigorous empirical methods. Our disagreements are spirited but bound by friendship and our scholarly ideals.

Together with several faculty members from our school, we are working to help our university broadly refocus on scholarship, inquiry, and liberal democratic values through the establishment of a new home for them: Programs of Excellence for Fact-Based Open Debate and Inquiry. Our goals are expansive. For the university to fulfill its role in society, every member of its community (faculty, student, and staff) must understand the foundational values of inquiry: reason, dialogue, and open-mindedness. We believe that refocusing the university on its core mission will require rolling up our sleeves to work within our community. Business schools, which prepare future leaders with the tools of reasoned and pragmatic decision-making in competitive environments, are natural footholds for evidence-based inquiry on campus.

Our strategy has two pillars. It draws from successful programs to establish centers of inquiry on campuses around the country, including those led by the Foundation for Excellence in Higher Education and similar initiatives at public universities, such as Arizona State, UT Austin, and others. Through course offerings, fellowships, lectures, and other programming, centers like these

nurture campus communities rooted in the values, habits, and practices of scholarship that used to define the university. At their best, they offer an ideal image against which the broader university can be redrawn.

The first pillar of our strategy is to broaden our coalition, which starts in the business school. Our tactics include courses, colloquia, conferences, and pedagogical training. We are engaged in a series of efforts to identify like-minded scholars on campus, including by founding a Heterodox Academy chapter at the University of Maryland and organizing lunches and other gatherings for interested faculty and staff on campus. Ultimately, we will support faculty committed to these fundamental values through grants for course development and relevant research. In addition, we are planning a conference to generate dialogue on the grounding principles of open debate and inquiry in the coming year. To build support in the broader Maryland community, we are organizing a series of salon dinners and webinars, as the university must hear from its donors and alumni on the necessity of this work.

The second pillar is to lead through example by instilling these values in the next generation of business leaders. Our classroom role as faculty members is to teach students to practice, hone, and master critical inquiry.

Another member of our coalition is teaching a course to help students learn to engage in rational and respectful discourse. The course combines the basics of social psychology with practical guidance on fact-based open discourse. Sessions are structured around a debate; students prepare for both sides and are randomly assigned a position just prior to the debate itself. In this way, we compel the students to understand each side. The class then debriefs together, with a focus on elements of critical thinking, challenging assumptions, and future solutions. The class does not shy from emotionally

charged issues. The class met on October 7, 2024, and the session began by providing background on the conflict, emphasizing the contradiction between, on the one hand, the foundational university principles of reason, dialogue, and open-mindedness and, on the other, the silencing of voices through slaughter. The students were then tasked with generating new recommendations to combat hate on campus, specifically how to approach this problem from different positions. Half were to take the perspective of university administration, and half the perspective of students.

We've organized a series of other events to reach a broader range of students, including the screening of a film that spotlights efforts to bring together in conversation people who disagree on flashpoint issues, a conversation about the Israeli–Palestinian conflict, and a panel examining the impact of social media on the promotion of extremism and zero-sum mindsets.

Our efforts are a model for faculty at other universities to refocus on fact-based discourse. We believe there is a silent majority of scholars that wants to return to debate on the facts that a speaker presents, not the identity of the speaker. Standing up, speaking out, and arguing for the sake of heaven, these are the values we seek to instill in the university and the young leaders who will represent them beyond our walls.

By upholding the principles of academic freedom and diversity of thought, we can ensure that the university remains a trusted institution that serves the public interest. *