

Hands and Tongues

Leonard Fein

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.

Leonard Fein, a Boston-based writer, was the founding editor and publisher of Moment magazine, the founder of Mazon: A Jewish Response to Hunger and of the National Jewish Coalition for Literacy. He writes a weekly column in the Forward and a blog for Americans for Peace Now.

There are times we are rendered mute, when silence is both becoming and unavoidable. The most obvious example (though far from the only one) is 9/11. One shakes one's head in disbelief, in respect, in sorrow. At graveside, the only sound that lingers is the first shovelful of earth as it hits the coffin.

And there are times when we are wise to be silent, silence not as the inability to speak but in keeping with the talmudic dictum, "Wise men, be careful in your words." That is an especially hard lesson to internalize for those of us who live by the sweat of our tongue.

But when to speak, meaning when to speak out, and what to say? For example: How to engage with those who claim American Jews who are critical of Israel's policies must keep their criticism "private," that when they speak out they are "washing Israel's dirty linen in public," "giving aid and comfort to the enemy," that they have not the moral standing to speak out: "How dare you, living in safety in Boston, tell us, in Tel Aviv or Nachal Oz, or Rosh Pinah, how to solve our problems?"

These are not always mere ploys designed to discredit the would-be critic. They are often heartfelt responses to the frustrations and anxieties of a suffocating conflict that pounds relentlessly on the Jewish sensibility, on Israelis, and a swath of their supporters outside the Land.

There are, to be sure, standard responses: "Let those who dirty the linen be judged before those who call attention to their poor hygiene." Or: "You cannot ask that we stand silent in the face of policies and actions that seem to us, upon reflection, self-defeating."

Or: "If the only words Diaspora Jews and other Lovers of Zion are entitled to say in response to Israel's actions are 'Hip, hip, hooray!,' we will quickly lose all credibility. We are not and you ought not want us to become cheering automatons."

But there is more (much more than can here be argued) to be said. Words of rebuke can be spoken with spite or with love. They can be spoken arrogantly or diffidently. They can be spoken with glee ("gotcha!") or with pain. And they can be spoken by people who have earned the right to be heard by virtue of their personal history, their ongoing connection to the safety and welfare of the Jewish state, or by those who wish Israel ill.

There's this, as well: The governors of Israel are not the governors of the Jewish people. There have been, are, and will be times when Israel, for whatever its *raisons d'état*, chooses a course of action that is at odds with the considered sentiments of the Jewish people worldwide. We ought listen carefully, even respectfully, to Israel's plea that we stand with them — and then make our own assessment about where the vexing intersection between politics and morality points.

My friend and sometime teacher, Dr. Aryeh Cohen, arguing in these pages last month, asserts that "the prerequisite for intervening when someone else is silent is clean hands." Alas, were that the operative criterion, most of us would be forced to silence. Jimmy Carter, the self-righteous moralist, told us he had "lust in his heart." And we, just about all of us, have dirt of one sort or another on our hands. Clean hands (and a pure heart) are prerequisites for entering heaven, not for participating in earthly affairs. ●

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