

AN OPEN LETTER TO ALL JEWISH COMMUNITIES

Warning!!! We members of the San Francisco Bay Area Jewish community are sorry to inform you that our usually liberal community has set a dangerous precedent that may affect the range of American Jewish voices on issues concerning the Israeli-Palestinian conflict. The San Francisco Jewish Community Federation recently approved new guidelines on “Israel-Related Programming” that limit debate, threaten dissent, and establish for the first time a litmus test for loyalty to Israel as a condition for funding the organizations it currently supports and others it would consider supporting (<http://sfjcf.wordpress.com/2010/02/18/policy/>).

Are these guidelines coming to your community? Specifically, the guidelines curtail freedom of speech and artistic expression by declaring certain opinions and organizations out of bounds. This policy does grave damage to the vibrancy of the American Jewish community. The language that describes excluded organizations is vague and open-ended—those that “advocate for or endorse undermining the legitimacy of Israel as a democratic Jewish state.”

More egregiously, the guidelines also exclude grantee organizations that co-sponsor or co-present programs on the Middle East with organizations or individuals “who undermine the legitimacy of the State of Israel.” Inevitably, the organizations the Federation excludes under these very vague guidelines will be determined by the politics of the person or persons charged with making the decision.

Despite the guidelines’ repeatedly stated commitment to the values of free and open discussion and diversity, they will have a chilling effect on the entire spectrum of community institutions, including educational, service, social justice and arts organizations. They will also limit American Jewish exposure to the range of art, literature, scholarship, and political discourse that exists in Israel. The guidelines will encourage self-censorship. Organizations will fear losing their funding; individuals will fear losing their jobs.

In the interest of human rights and civil liberties for all people, we strongly advocate for unfettered freedom of speech, open-minded public education, respectful discussion, and willingness to engage in that time-honored Jewish tradition of fruitful debate and meaningful dialogue. The Jewish community is riven by a fateful debate over the future of Israeli democracy and the occupation of Palestinian lands. Attempting to curtail that debate will only drive it into the shadows, where it will become ever more extreme.

The remedy for controversial speech is not silencing. The remedy is more speech.

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We who have signed this Open Letter represent a very broad spectrum of opinions on the Israeli-Palestinian conflict, but we all agree on the vital importance of freedom of expression and open discourse in the Jewish community.