

# Coping with COPIA's strong-arm tactics

Questions of communal free speech are always tested on the periphery. Last week, such a test played out in the suburbs of Washington, D.C., where Hasia Diner, an authority on American Jewish history, was invited by the Foundation for Jewish Studies to give a lecture on Jewish immigration to America. The intended venue was the Bender Jewish Community Center of Greater

Law of Return, which guarantees the right of Jews to automatic Israeli citizenship. And she wrote that she feels “a sense of repulsion when I enter a synagogue in front of which the congregation has planted a sign reading, ‘We Stand With Israel.’”

This outraged members of COPIA, a hardline D.C.-area pro-Israel group that seeks to police the limits of

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Washington in Rockville.

Diner, who is Jewish, holds some extreme views on Israel, which she outlined in Haaretz in 2016: “The exponential growth of far-right political parties and the increasing haredization of Israel makes it a place that I abhor visiting, and to which I will contribute no money, whose products I will not buy, nor will I expend my limited but still to me, meaningful, political clout to support it,” she wrote.

She also criticized as “racist” Israel's

acceptable speech about Israel. COPIA determined that Diner was “one of the world's leading Jewish anti-Semites and Israel haters,” criticized both the JCC and the sponsoring foundation for scheduling the lecture, and urged those on its email list to not “give this poisonous anti-Israel ideologue the attention she craves.”

Under COPIA pressure, the Bender JCC told the Foundation for Jewish Studies that it couldn't bring Diner into the JCC building as she stands outside the

“big tent” of the Jewish community. Adat Shalom Reconstructionist Congregation, a generally liberal Zionist community, stepped in to host the Diner lecture on Monday.

We abhor Diner's views about Israel and Zionism. But COPIA's vigilante tactics do not help Israel or the Jewish community. The group's obsessive and unrelenting drive to crush what it judges to be Israel's enemies by strong-arming the rest of the Jewish community is narrow-minded and divisive. In its pursuit of purity, COPIA has attacked mainstream and respected Jewish communal organizations, and targeted several individual communal leaders who disagree with COPIA's scorched earth, unforgiving tactics.

COPIA's stated goal of protecting the Jewish state against its enemies is unquestionably a worthwhile objective. Israel needs all the friends it can get, and efforts to hold critics accountable for what they say is fair game. But COPIA crosses the line when it seeks to ban legitimate speech and orchestrates boycotts and sanctions of its own against Jewish organizations and communal leaders who don't adopt the group's intolerant and uncompromising stances.

We have long advocated the defense of abhorrent speech through engagement and more persuasive argument. We urge COPIA and organizations like it to abandon their bullying tactics. ■

## Letters

### Problems on the Republican side

A recent letter to the editor amounts to a diatribe against the “far-left,” former President Barack Obama and the Democratic Party (“Democrats following path of British Labour,” Aug. 16).

But as a practical matter, we have only two viable political parties in this country, and today's Republican Party is morally bankrupt and fiscally irresponsible. It is led by President Donald Trump, a serial liar, supreme egotist and embarrassment to us and to our children. The president lacks curiosity, humility and empathy. He has staked his presidency on dividing the country, and this cannot be good for the United States or for Israel.

Nor can it be comforting that David Duke, the white supremacist and Holocaust denier, admires him and supports his leadership of Republicans. Further, the Anti-Defamation League has reported that the number of anti-Semitic incidents in the United States was nearly 60 percent higher in 2017 than in 2016, the largest single-year increase on record.

The misguided letter states that “fake news” is not a figment of Trump's imagination, but is “stark reality.” That's meshugah. “Fake news” is a label, a construct, used by the president to deflect attention from his misrepresentations and lies, and to describe any news unflattering of him.

Trump is for Trump, not reliably for the American people, the Jewish people or for Israel.

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### JCC well within its rights

The Bender Jewish Community Center of Jewish Washington was absolutely within its rights to cancel the event featuring Hasia Diner (“Bender JCC disinvites professor over remarks,” Aug. 30). The article shows bias by characterizing the JCC's decision as withdrawing “a commitment” to host her.

I am willing to bet that not all material facts regarding Diner were disclosed to the JCC at the time that the event was scheduled. Diner's statement — “I feel a sense of repulsion when I enter a synagogue in front of which the congregation has planted a sign reading, ‘We Stand With Israel.’” — is appalling.

# Welcoming 5779

As we prepare to welcome the Jewish New Year, beginning at sundown on Sunday, we can't help but wonder what the coming year will bring. We have survived a year of instability and uncertainty both here and in Israel, and there are disquieting projections for the future. But there is hope.

There is hope despite President Trump's recent prediction that if the Democrats recapture the House of Representatives in November's midterm elections, “they will overturn everything that we've done and they will do it quickly and violently. And violently. There is violence.”

While we refuse to attach too much meaning to the president's off-the-cuff remarks — or his questionable tweets — we do see the recurring confrontational and threatening rhetoric as a sign of a fractious political landscape, one that is unlikely to get less divisive in the year to come.

To endure such disorder, we support adopting our community's approach to Rosh Hashanah itself. It is a time for renewal, introspection and self-evaluation — all designed to provide an opportunity to examine, reset and recalibrate our priorities.

The sideshow of American politics is largely just that — a sideshow. Far more threatening is the danger faced by our brothers and sisters in Israel, staring down the proverbial gun barrel of Palestinian terror. Far more concerning is the identity crisis faced by the American Jewish community and a cohort of youth who have turned away from organized religion. And far more compelling is the recurring and disturbing need of our poor and aging citizens for food, clothing, shelter and health care. Those are the things we should be focused on as we usher in the New Year.

The saving grace in these turbulent times is the many people of goodwill —

Jews and gentiles alike, and many of the social service and religion-based organizations that represent them — who have spoken up, marched, volunteered and donated money to advance the American ideal and the Jewish value that every person is created in the image of God. That's the spirit that will ultimately keep our children engaged even when they're not sitting in a synagogue's pew. That's the motivator for the care and concern that will keep our community strong and resilient even as the political winds threaten to tear it apart.

While we are very much aware of the storm clouds brewing, we know that the promise of the High Holidays is a tomorrow that is better than today. We look forward to it, and wish our readers and community a happy, healthy and rewarding New Year. May our actions merit being written into the Book of Life. ■