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## Seeking civility on campusHillel summit addresses topic

by Eric Fingerhut

Staff Writer

Even a discussion on "Fostering a More Civil Society" can be interrupted by a protester.

That happened Monday afternoon at a District hotel, when Rabbi Shmuel Herzfeld walked onstage uninvited at the opening session of Hillel's three-day summit, "Imagining a More Civil Society: The University and the Jewish Community."

The rabbi of the District's Ohav Sholom-the National Synagogue commandeered a podium microphone that was quickly cut off; he then handed his letter of protest to the panelists and left the stage. The discussion among five university presidents and professors continued as if nothing had happened -- except for University of Miami president Donna Shalala's quip, "That makes me feel at home."

The summit was an opportunity for leaders of academia to deliberate on a critical issue facing the university community and share best practices in dealing with it, according to Hillel leaders.

It is "advancing a broader vision of what the contributions of Jewish life are to American society [and] to higher education," Hillel president Wayne Firestone said.

Among the more than 650 participants, according to organizers, were 15 university presidents and chancellors, 125 administrators, 80 graduate and undergraduate students, and a variety of Jewish professionals and lay leaders.

The conference engendered controversy even before it began, with its invitation to University of California, Irvine, chancellor Michael Drake to sit on the opening panel. Some Jewish and pro-Israel students at that school say they have been verbally and physically harassed by other students for their beliefs, and that university administrators have not sufficiently responded to their complaints.

After sending a letter to Firestone, a group of current and former Irvine students had an hour-long conference call with him last Friday to detail their concerns about the Drake invitation.

During Monday's question-and-answer session, Zionist Organization of America national president Morton Klein, noting that recent speakers and programs at the Irvine campus had referred to Israel as the "Fourth Reich" and compared Gaza and Auschwitz, questioned Drake on the atmosphere at his school.

"I absolutely deplore and reject hate speech in every way it occurs," the college president responded. "I find it repugnant. ... I reject anti-Semitism."

Asked again by Klein after the speech whether he would specifically denounce some of the anti-Jewish statements made on campus, Drake instead repeated his blanket condemnation of hate speech and said he wouldn't condemn David Duke specifically by name if he were to speak on campus.

"We are advised to be content neutral," he said. "As a public space, we are there to protect the speech."

Reut Cohen, who graduated early from Irvine last September and was one of the students on the Firestone call, said Drake's failure to address specifics was nothing new.

"I've heard it all before," said Cohen, noting that Drake has said there was no evidence of anti-Semitism on campus. She said she never objected to controversial speakers on campus, but simply wants the school's administration to speak out when they make extreme statements about Israel and Jews.

Firestone believes that putting Drake on the record as condemning hate speech and anti-Semitism was significant and creates "more accountability."

"I believe a public accounting by senior university officials is exactly the way to address hate speech," he told reporters following the opening discussion. "Allowing for direct confrontational questions, but in a civil manner, is something that the Jewish community has fought for and has built as a fundamental principle."

Herzfeld said in an interview that he was upset that Hillel has not worked with his organization, the Coalition of Jewish Concerns-Amcha, and other groups that take a more forceful stand in advocating for Israel on campus, and that no representatives of such groups were asked to speak at the summit.

"They're not inviting people who disagree with them," said the District rabbi. "It's complete hypocrisy," he added, saying the Hillel motto should be "Do as I say, not as I do."

The conference agenda did not include any discussion specifically devoted to Israel on campus, instead sticking to framing the issue of a "civil society" in a larger context.

In the opening discussion, Harvard University public policy professor Robert Putnam laid out the challenge ahead for building civility in an increasingly diverse society. Best known as the author of *Bowling Alone: The Collapse and Revival of American Community*, Putnam said that the current generation of young adults has broken with a decades-long American trend and has increased its social connections in such areas as volunteering and voting -- a trend he said might be a reaction to the Sept. 11 attacks. On the other hand, he said that while the U.S. is better off overall with a more "ethnically diverse" society, social connections are less likely to take place in diverse neighborhoods. This means that Americans need to think more about "bridging" social networks, or connecting people of differing backgrounds.

Other panelists discussed ways they have tried to build a civil environment on campus. Shalala said she requires anyone who speaks on campus to answer audience questions.

"Students have to be able to challenge" speakers, she said.

Participants in the conference said they appreciated Hillel's desire to bring the university community together to discuss an issue that goes beyond Jewish life on campus.

"It shows we're interested not just in Jewish life, but Jewish values" such as social justice, said Shannon Sarna of the Samuel Bronfman Foundation.

"I see Hillel as an NGO [nongovernmental organization] of the university," said Pamela Nadell, a history professor and director of the Jewish studies program at American University, as well as a member of the summit planning committee. "Hillel has a great deal to say not just about the learning experience, but the environment of the campus."

Hillel also announced this week a \$10.7 million, five-year grant from the Jim Joseph Foundation to expand two engagement efforts on campus. The largest grant in Hillel's history will be used to expand its Experiential Educator Exemplar program -- piloted for the past two years at the University of California at Los Angeles -- to 10 more to-be-announced campuses. The program places Jewish educators at colleges and universities to offer in-depth Jewish educational content.

The grant also will go toward expanding the Campus Entrepreneurs Initiative, students who reach out to peers to engage them in Jewish life.

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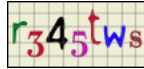
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