

From the Executive Director

Don't Be a Hater

Many years ago, I studied abroad in Mexico and would wander through the local markets in Puebla and Cholula, taking in all the sights and smells that were new to me. While the chamomile and mangos always delighted me, I would invariably catch a whiff of something that for me just smelled, and as I later tasted, awful. The stuff in question was the leafy green herb known as "cilantro," and it was a word I quickly memorized simply so that I could tell everyone to keep this horrible stuff away from me! Yes, I'm one of "those people" who thinks that even the slightest bit of cilantro just ruins a dish. No, I don't think cilantro tastes like soap, as many people have asked me, although I've never tasted soap, which I presume still tastes better than cilantro. One thing I have learned, though, is that my aversion to cilantro is not merely some personal preference, but is actually genetic. In other words, I can't not hate it, but at least I can avoid the herb to the best of my abilities.

Other forms of hate or dislike, though, are not genetic and yet can be less easy to control or avoid. In this age of divisive politics, it seems quite easy to hate someone who doesn't share your beliefs or values. I won't lie; I've harbored some strong feelings of dislike myself in these past few years. Where I've been more concerned, though, is how humans have chosen to voice this hate and dislike recently, namely via the platform of social media. Once considered a technology that would unite people, we've seen how a single tweet can destroy lives or a career and how hateful things

that one would barely deign to say to someone's face are casually posted online without the slightest consideration for the person who may be on the receiving end of such vitriol. While I believe that social media itself is not "evil"—it is an agnostic medium—how we decide to use it comes with much weight and responsibility. Following the 2016 election, I personally pulled back from social media. It not only began to feel more and more like an echo chamber of ideas, and sadly, often despair, but a place where I saw behavior that I found troubling. Rather than bringing people together, social media was becoming a place of caustic remarks, blocked users, and flame wars.

What surprised me, though, is that such behavior and even hate can emerge not just from the "other side" but even from within one's presumably own circle of friends and supporters. The AJS sadly has not been immune from this behavior, as members have sometimes taken to social media to attack each other or the organization itself. In an attempt to address this, when the AJS board created a set of core values a few years ago, one of the tenets was around "Good Faith." It states: "The AJS values collaboration and teamwork which in turn require good faith. Good faith is the general presumption that members will deal with each other honestly, fairly, openly, and constructively, with mutual respect and a shared dedication to the common good."

In fairness, the AJS, like any organization, is not perfect; we are very much a work-in-progress.

Warren Hoffman



We constantly attempt to make things better for our members and in recent years through a variety of mechanisms (our website, email blasts, and our own social media) have worked to be more transparent about how things are done at the AJS and how decisions are made. The AJS is also extremely open to new ideas and feedback. Several years, a group of members wrote me and the board a thoughtful letter about the imbalance in conference registration fees for lower-income members. Complete with numbers and a rationale, this letter made a compelling case that the board took up at their next board meeting, which led to the establishment of tiered conference fees, making us one of the first learned societies to implement such a system. While we can't necessarily deliver on every request or idea that is presented to us, the short is, the organization is not only listening, but is eager to make positive change. Recently, we have put the photos of all of our board members online for the first time so that you can easily identify them and contact them with concerns, ideas, or feedback. You can also write

to the executive committee at their new email address: board@associationforjewishstudies.org. And my door, as they says, is always open as well.

As scholars, we know the value of taking our time. Whether it's writing a book, an article, or a dissertation, there's a reason why we typically need more than 280 characters to express what we're thinking. While we of course hope that members engage with the AJS online to share both their concerns and kudos with us, we also hope that social media will be a place not for "hate" or fuming, but for community building and productive change. We look forward to hearing from you. (Just keep the cilantro away from me.)

Warren Hoffman
Association for Jewish Studies



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