

### **Chaos on Campus**

I think it goes without saying that life on campus last year was as tumultuous as it has ever been, except for during the Vietnam War years. When I think about my time at the University of Wisconsin in the mid-1990's, the only large gathering I recall was the annual Cannabis Harvest Festival. I never experienced what some of our children endured last year and what some of them might face this year. I know that I never took note of the nearest exit in lecture halls. I was never concerned that a professor would say something anti-Semitic or offensive against Israel. I was never asked if I was a Zionist on my way through Library Mall. And I never feared walking to Hillel or to my Jewish fraternity.

As you know very well, college campuses have been a hotbed for anti-Semitism, especially since October 7. Personally, I heard chants calling for all Zionists to leave campus. (Make no mistake, this is a pejorative term for Jews. This is a call for a Jew-free campus whether they understand this or not.) I sat in on a lecture where faculty spewed outright lies about Israel and Judaism. And I helped facilitate a buddy system where congregants could sign up to walk with Jewish students around campus for protection. (How nuts is that?)

All around the country there were protests that involved anti-Semitic chants, outward support for Hamas, and in some cases, violence towards Jewish students. I was appalled at the lack of response from so many universities. There seem to be consequences when some groups are targeted, but not all. In fact, beginning this Monday, on October 7, anti-Israel student groups on Western's campus will be holding a "Week of Action" commemorating "1 Year of Genocide." There will be demonstrations, teach-ins, and a fundraising benefit. These groups won't let the Jewish students mourn on the yahrzeit of the worst pogrom since World War II. The Israeli retaliation didn't even happen for days after the 7th.

This moment in time concerns me, especially for our students who are back at their colleges for the fall term.

It's concerning to see how criticism of Israel is all the rage on campuses. Being critical of Israel does not necessarily make a person anti-Semitic, although if one is only critical of Israel then I would say there's a strong argument to be made. Some of my former Confirmation students have heard me speak critically of Israel over the past 13 years. In class we learn how non-Orthodox Jews live with more challenges and discrimination than the Haredi. We watch how members of Women of the Wall are treated when they just want to read Torah at the Kotel. And we discuss how many Palestinians living in the West Bank, or Judea and Samaria, feel like second class citizens. Speaking out about injustices, from a place of love, is a sacred duty. We want Israel, and America for that matter, to live up to their ideals.

However, the majority of voices we hear these days have no love or respect for the Jewish state. Their criticism is rooted in ignorance and hate. Israel, with all her faults, is the only Jewish country in the world. For the last year it has been fighting a war for its own survival against a multi-pronged psychopathic death cult that has contributed to the dismal environment that we are all in. One of their goals is to create global mayhem and turn people against Jews. College students are some of their primary targets due to their persuadability and need for acceptance among their peers. These anti-Semites are hoping to get a whole generation to turn on the Jewish people and even convert Jews themselves to their cause. They are currently winning this front of the war. I'm aware this sounds like a conspiracy theory. I wish it were.

In my many years of learning about the conflict, I realized that I never helped prepare our students for this mess that they are now in. I guess I didn't think it would get this bad. For this, I am truly sorry. I should have done more and for what it's worth, Leah Bordman and I have created an Israel curriculum that will be part of Keshet's 7th grade year for years to come with the 8th grade focusing on the Shoah.

I have learned so much in this past year alone and I owe a lot of this newfound knowledge to Dr. Einat Wilf. Her books and lectures have been invaluable to me. She is a former member of the Israeli Knesset, a social liberal, and a leading thinker on Israel and Zionism. She speaks with clarity and common sense. Wilf discusses two issues that I think are relevant to the situation on campuses right now.

Years ago she coined a term called, “The Placard Strategy.” On the posters that people carry with them at every anti-Israel or pro-Palestinian rally, you will almost certainly read the words “Israel” and/or “Zionism” after which will be an equation sign. On the other side of the equals sign are written one, or several, of the following: racism, settler- colonialism, imperialism, apartheid, ethnic cleansing, white supremacy, Nazism, and genocide. These words are chosen, not because they have any connection to reality, but because of what they all symbolize, and that is evil. Thus, people are exposed to this repetition that Israel is evil and there is no better action than to root out evil.

Many of these posters have slogans you’ve all heard. Wilf teaches that this works like a repetitive nursery rhyme. It’s all quite catchy. For instance, the slogan, “From the river to the sea, Palestine will be free” has a much more sinister Arabic translation that reads, “from water to water, Palestine will be Arab.” I’ve heard this chanted in Arabic at Western. No proud Jew or decent ally can possibly support such anti-Semitic vileness.

This sinister strategy works. Most people know that they would never be respected by spewing outright anti-Semitic rhetoric, yet, they will be taken seriously if they focus their hatred towards Israel. Look at how many people and organizations revile Israel. There is no other country on earth that has as many detractors. Influential powers with deep pockets are at play in this scheme to get people to turn on Israel and a major focus of this strategy is to convert college students to their cause. It’s a sad but true fact that college-age students are extremely impressionable. And if Jews get hooked, all the better.

This is where Wilf’s other theory comes into focus. She calls it the “Pound of Flesh” theory. According to this theory, young Jews are bullied into being less Jewish in order to be accepted, or at least tolerated, by their host communities. She writes, “Sometimes it involves severing elements of Jewish identity such as denying Jewish solidarity or the interconnection between Judaism and the Land of Israel.”<sup>1</sup> The problem with this is that our bullies are relentless. They will keep insisting that we shed one more

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<sup>1</sup> Wilf, Einat. *We Should All Be Zionists: Essays on the Jewish State and the Path to Peace*. Edited by Samuel Hyde, Einat Wilf, 2022.p. 4

layer of our Jewish identity. Nothing will ever be sufficient and they will never be satisfied until we don't exist.

To be accepted, a liberal Jew not only has to condemn Israel, but they need to join groups like If Not Now, Jewish Voice for Peace, or Students for Justice in Palestine. They have to support the BDS movement. They can't ever be seen participating at Hillel. They need to pressure their Jewish professors to sign letters condemning the "genocide" in Gaza. No matter how many pounds of flesh they give, it will never be enough.

Both the Placard Strategy and the The Pound of Flesh dynamic are manifestations of the same evil: anti-Semitism. This is not your grandparents' anti-Semitism. It is much more shifty. These strategies are successful because they prey on Jews who are young, susceptible to peer pressure, or just not confident about their Judaism. They also prey on the shame that young Jews have when it comes to Israel's actions in Gaza and against the Palestinians. It preys on a lack of pride Jews have in the miracle of Israel. It preys on people who want to be accepted. "Anti-Zionist bullying," Wilf writes, "takes an emotional toll...The only effective response then is to resist it with confidence and pride and thus rob it of its power to prey. It is difficult to bully confident and proud people."<sup>2</sup>

I know what some college students might be thinking at this point. I just don't get it. I'm too pro-Israel. I'm old. I will admit that I am of a certain age, generation, and sensibility where support for Israel is of great importance to my identity as a Jew. To not support Israel at this time, especially when she is facing a life or death crisis, would be tantamount to renouncing my birthright. There is no way I could remain ambivalent or even worse, join the ranks of Jewish Voice for Peace, If Not Now, the BDS movement, or any other anti-Israel organization that wants to take Israel down. And it stings when I see young Jews join these camps. Luckily, there is hope for them, although I can't say the same for the adult Jews in leadership roles of these organizations.

College students have grown up into a world where Jews and Israel have power. With the Jewish nation so strong, there was never an immediacy to supporting it. Thus, many of their priorities to help others led them to many

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<sup>2</sup> *ibid.* p. 8

other causes. They have also only known Benjamin Netanyahu as the Prime Minister. During their entire lives, Israel has been a formidable nation thriving in every area one can imagine while nearly each of its neighbors live in substandard conditions. In their lifetime, Israel is the all-powerful Goliath. In my life, this calculus is flipped. I still see Israel more like David as I zoom out and look at the dangerous landscape.

Through no fault of our own, we view Israel through different lenses. I don't blame them for what they see. I get it. But they also don't share my experiences or yours. I grew up in the aftermath of the Six Day War and the Yom Kippur War. The Shoah was still fresh in people's minds. Holocaust survivors were part of our community. I was college-aged when the peace process was a real possibility, or so we thought. Two states for two peoples. I remember Rabin's assassination like it was yesterday. Then Ehud Barak was Prime Minister and offered to the PLO a Palestinian state, ending Israel's military presence in the West Bank and Gaza. Settlements were going to be dissolved and a capital in East Jerusalem would be established. Not long after, the Second Intifada broke out and the conflict escalated with countless suicide bombers terrorizing Israelis on buses and in cafés. During my first year of rabbinical school I lived in Jerusalem during the disengagement from Gaza. It was all we talked about in Hebrew class. All of these events shaped my own understanding of Israel just like contemporary events shape their relationship. We simply have different frames of reference.

Regardless of our differing lived experiences, I know that we can still have good-faith conversations about the Jewish homeland so long as no one walks away. I know we can engage with each other and even respectfully challenge one-another's positions. This kind of dialogue is what the rabbis call *makhloket l'shem shamayim*, or for the sake of heaven. It means that the goal isn't to denigrate the other or destroy one's perspective, but to listen, learn, gently push, and consider different points of view. I know we can engage in this and I hope this is a model our students can bring to the table when they speak with their loved ones and peers. Unfortunately, I don't think this model of dialogue will have any effect on the very loud chorus of Israel haters on campus.

I want to address our students in the community. No matter where you stand on the issue of Israel, the bottom line is that you are Jewish and

hopefully very proud of this heritage that has been passed down to you through the generations. I hope we can all affirm that the long term health of Israel is important for the Jewish people. One can advocate for Palestinian rights and simultaneously support Israel's right to exist and live without fear of destruction. In addition, a Jewish identity that is entirely contingent on a Jewish nation state is not a solid identity and conversely, neither is one that advocates for its demise.

You might feel alone and unwelcome on your campus. But know this: you are not. There are other Jews experiencing the same thing you are. They too are struggling. Find each other and create positive points of Jewish identification. Your Jewishness does not need to be defined by others. Reach out to Jewish faculty. They are regular people who were once in your shoes. Find the campus rabbi or Hillel director. I promise Hillel is not an evil empire. Have shabbat meals with your friends. Check out the local synagogue. Teach Sunday school. Find Jewish groups that will give you the emotional and social support you need. Consider spending a semester abroad in Israel. Stay connected with your home congregation and rabbi. And remember, the best kind of resistance is confidence and pride in who you are. Be that Jew!

What I most wish for you in this new year is that you simply have a wonderful and typical college experience, free from all of this stress. You should be enjoying living on your own, going to parties and football games, taking interesting classes, and making friends from all walks of life. Instead, you've been thrust into the epicenter of a global anti-Semitic campaign. None of us asked for this but it's happening. You will persevere. I know it.

I want to leave you and everyone here with the parting words Moses said to Joshua right before the Israelites entered the Land of Israel after 40 years wandering in the wilderness. Just before he dies Moses says in front of the whole community, "Be strong and courageous...God will be with you—and will not fail you or abandon you. Fear not!"<sup>3</sup> *Hazak v'ematz!*

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<sup>3</sup> Deuteronomy 31:7-8