A Study in Hate

A number of distressing incidents over the past few months have made it painfully clear that the campuses of some of the Western world's leading universities have become places where Israelis, and to a certain degree Jews at large, can no longer feel comfortable. The commotion that accompanied an address by Israeli Deputy Minister of Foreign Affairs Danny Ayalon at the Oxford Student Union on February 8 is a case in point. A large group of demonstrators, Palestinian flags in hand, interrupted his speech and shouted that they would not allow a "war criminal" to speak. In the midst of the cacophony of screams and chants that drowned out Ayalon's voice, one Arab protester went so far as to yell, "*Itbah al-yahud!*" ("Slaughter the Jews!")—a battle cry that Jewish collective memory associates with pogroms, not academic events.

On the same day, Israeli Ambassador to the United States Michael Oren was treated to a similar display of hospitality during his visit to the University of California, Irvine. Invited to deliver a lecture on American-Israeli relations, Oren was repeatedly cut short by anti-Israel activists who hurled abuse at him and at the country he represents. Neither the efforts of university authorities to regain control nor the eventual intervention of the police—resulting in the arrest of a dozen protesters—could prevent the embarrassment suffered by speaker and hosts alike.

A short while later, at the beginning of March, universities around the world marked the start of the sixth annual "Israel Apartheid Week," a flagrantly anti-Zionist event devoted to a condemnation of the Jewish state

as a racist, barbaric country. Scores of campuses from Canada to South Africa played host to a series of symposia, demonstrations, and protest performances, bringing together radical academics, Muslim extremists, and anti-Zionist Israeli activists. This coalition was made possible by a common abhorrence of the Zionist entity and everything for which it stands.

So unrestrained was this bacchanal of invective that even those who generally have no qualms about criticizing Israel felt distinctly uneasy. Michael Ignatieff, a world-renowned intellectual and leader of Canada's Liberal Party, expressed his apprehension in a poignant public statement on March 1. "The activities planned for the week will single out Jewish and Israeli students. They will be made to feel ostracized and even physically threatened in the very place where freedom should be paramount—on a university campus," he exclaimed.

The threat pointed out by Ignatieff was the subject of a lengthy letter sent to U.S. Secretary of Education Arne Duncan by the Anti-Defamation League and a dozen other Jewish organizations two weeks later. The letter called upon the secretary to use his authority to protect Jewish students subjected to harassment and intimidation on American campuses. These students, the signatories maintained, are often held responsible for Israel's actions, solely because of their "ethnic identity" or "national origin"; moreover, in the absence of proper legal protection, they are forced to endure a "hostile academic environment" that hinders both their studies and their daily lives.

It is a sad state of affairs when North American Jewish leaders must seek the help of the authorities to prevent, or at the very least check, outbursts of hatred directed against their sons and daughters. This situation is indeed lamentable—and yet, lamenting it is not enough. If Jewish students cannot walk the halls of a San Francisco or Toronto campus without fear, if they are scared to don a skullcap or wear a Star of David, then it is incumbent upon them and their communities to ask themselves a few difficult questions about the price of obtaining a higher education in institutions of this kind. It is also incumbent upon them to formulate appropriate, effective strategies to deal with the situation they face.

The obvious and perhaps most common response to political, religious, or ethnic discrimination is to lodge a complaint. In the Western world, at least, this is still a fairly effective course of action. For the most part, the authorities (including academic institutions) entrusted with the protection of tolerance and pluralism are sensitive to the plight of persecuted minorities. Grievances raised against groups or individuals for intimidating Israeli and Jewish students do not usually fall on deaf ears. Even universities with a distinctly radical record will not tolerate instances of blatant antisemitism on their grounds.

Nevertheless, it is precisely because academia perceives itself as a bastion of freedom of expression that it frequently has trouble setting limits to the volatile political discourse raging within its walls. Such was the case, for example, with Joseph Massad, an associate professor of modern Arab politics and intellectual history at Columbia University. Massad, who is of Palestinian descent, devotes a large part of his writings and lectures to harsh criticism of Israel and the United States, which he presents as racist, imperialist regimes arrayed against the Muslim and Arab world. A 2004 documentary, *Columbia Unbecoming*, accused Massad of intimidating Jewish students in his classes. An ad hoc Grievance Committee appointed by the university to investigate these charges dismissed most of them as baseless, a ruling that, in turn, was slammed by the accusers as a blatant attempt at whitewash (particularly since some of the committee's members were themselves known for their radical sympathies). The public controversy that ensued set those who protested the exploitation of academic freedom in the service of political (i.e., anti-Israel and anti-Western) agendas against those who pointed out the "slippery slope" dangers of persecuting professors and intellectuals for their views.

There is, one must admit, some truth to both arguments. An academic institution should not lend its podium to hateful speech, yet neither should its freedom of expression be restricted. Ideally, a line ought to be drawn between legitimate political criticism and incitement. Such a line, however,

is not always clear, and it is better to err on the side of liberty; excessive tolerance is still preferable to censorship. In this context, one cannot but agree with Noam Chomsky's remark that "If we don't believe in freedom of expression for people we despise, we don't believe in it at all."

This, however, is not the only problem with the proliferation of complaints about maltreatment of Israelis and Jews on Western campuses. Justified though they may be, such grievances ultimately contribute to the pervasive "culture of complaint" that has corrupted public discourse, turning many a democratic society, including Israel, into wrestling grounds for different subgroups competing for the title of "most victimized." Of all people, Jews—who have known the true taste of cruelty and oppression—should stay clear of this contemptible contest. Having pulled themselves up to great heights from the bottom rung of the social ladder in America and Europe, Jews must not now resort to the degradation of begging the authorities for protection. The Jewish people is no longer the powerless subordinate. It ought to find other, more dignified ways to hold its own.

Imposing a boycott is one such way, although it, too, is not without its disadvantages. The merits—or lack thereof—of a boycott were the subject of a recent and heated debate within the American Jewish community following the UC Irvine affair. In response to the disruption of Oren's speech and the ongoing inability of university authorities to clamp down on Islamic extremism on campus, the Zionist Organization of America (ZOA) called upon donors to withhold contributions from the university and urged Jewish students to seek an education elsewhere. Yet rather than catalyze a general boycott, as it had intended, ZOA was severely criticized for its defeatism. Jewish student organizations at UC, along with the Anti-Defamation League, condemned the move as causing more harm than good. Rather than abandon the campus to fanatics, they argued, the Jewish community should strive to increase the presence of those who are able and willing to fight them on their own turf.

It is not difficult to see why the call for a boycott would raise such objections, even among those whom it is meant to protect. It is, after all, a powerful weapon, which should be used only in extreme situations. A boycott of a university not only will leave the arena open to Israel's enemies, but is also likely to engender resentment among the more moderate elements on campus. A university—even one overrun by demagogues—is an institution that provides an invaluable service to society. Any attempt to coerce or punish it, regardless of the legitimacy of one's motivation, may be seen as an act of bullying—and will almost certainly win no friends for its cause. In recent years, Israeli academia has itself become a target of boycotts by foreign organizations swayed by an anti-Zionist agenda; though the temptation to retaliate in kind is great, it behooves us to resist.

Direct confrontation seems, at first glance, a more worthy response. The willingness of Jewish and Zionist activists to stand up to students and professors who attack them and malign their country (be it Israel or the United States) is, no doubt, commendable. Nevertheless, it comes at a cost. It is on account of just such confrontations that campuses are becoming more and more like battlefields, where acrimonious disputes—sometimes escalating into outright violence—take the place of rational debate. Indeed, in an environment so saturated with contempt and self-righteousness, academia is hard-pressed to serve as a place where young people can broaden their intellectual horizons and cultivate their character. True, supporters of Israel do not actively seek confrontation, but rather are forced into it. Still, we must ask ourselves whether the cost of fighting these battles is not, in the end, too high, and whether many students—obliged as they are to champion Israel's cause—are not thereby prevented from attaining that for which they enrolled in university in the first place: a quality education.

We have thus far examined three possible responses, none of them ideal, to the anti-Zionist—and at times purely antisemitic—climate in a growing number of academic centers today. Yet the standing and resources of contemporary Jewry provide it with another option. Though not new, this option, in light of recent events, may prove more relevant than ever.

On April 1, 1925, at the inauguration ceremony for the Hebrew University of Jerusalem, the poet Haim Nahman Bialik stood before a crowd of thousands, including former British Prime Minister Lord Balfour and representatives of other European countries, to extol the establishment of the first university in the Jewish homeland:

> I prefer one small university, my very own and under my own authority, erected by my own hands from the foundation onto the coping stone, rather than thousands of temples of knowledge where my share of the work of erection is not recognized. Let my victuals be as scant and as bitter as herbs, but let me for once savor the sweet taste of the fruits of my own labor.
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> This is why we fled to this land. We did not come seeking riches, or power, or greatness. This small, humble land—what could it give us of those? We seek nothing but our own plot of land for the work of our minds and the sweat of our brows. We have not yet accomplished much, not yet washed our feet from the dust of our many wanderings, not yet changed our nomadic robes. It will, no doubt, be many years, years of toil and hardship, before we cure this desolate land of the leprosy of its wilderness and the decay of its swamps. For now, all we have is a modest foundation, but even during this early hour we must strive to erect a home for the work of our nation's spirit.

There is nothing uniquely Jewish or Zionist about the sentiment Bialik so eloquently expressed. It is a universal desire: man's longing for a land of his own, where he may enjoy the fruits of his labor and be beholden to no other. This wish for independence is a salient part of all spheres of human

existence, including—and perhaps especially—intellectual life. It is this aspiration that prompted Zionist pioneers and patrons to found a Hebrew university in the Land of Israel, just as it moved Jews throughout history to create their own schools and yeshivot, where they were free to nurture the spiritual and moral development of their people according to their own vision, in keeping with their own heritage, and—no less important—without interference from outsiders.

The Hebrew University—like the Zionist project in general—has come a long way since Bialik spoke those words. Israeli academia has grown, gaining international prestige and training generations of scholars of the highest order. Yet its current state leaves much to be desired. Major budgetary cuts are compromising the quality of local research and jeopardizing the future of entire disciplines, chiefly within the humanities. And as if that were not enough, certain circles on Israeli campuses have enthusiastically embraced the anti-Zionist *zeitgeist* of their counterparts abroad, using their academic privileges to voice vociferous opposition to the Jewish state. Bialik's dream of "a modest foundation" and a "home for the work of our nation's spirit" is dissipating before our very eyes.

The Jewish people must revive this dream once again, and not just for the sake of Israeli students, whose educational system is on the verge of collapse. The situation is no less acute for Jewish students in the diaspora, who are tired of exchanging verbal blows with radical preachers and antisemitic agitators. Both in Israel and abroad, Jews deserve better. They deserve sanctuaries of learning and inquiry. They need institutions in which they can enjoy the peace and quiet so necessary, not only for the acquisition of knowledge, but also for the development of personal and collective identity.

Unfortunately, the majority of academic centers, both in the Jewish state and worldwide, no longer provide these conditions. True, they impart intellectual skills, but neglect to cultivate moral virtues; they focus on analyzing and deconstructing cultural traditions, but do not bother to build anything in their stead; they zealously protect freedom of speech, but make no attempt to safeguard its quality; and they boast of their graduates' academic

achievements, but do not display similar regard for their ethical conduct. If we wish to provide a real alternative to the problematic norms that have tainted public discourse on campus, we must first establish institutions that will honor these basic commitments.

Of course, the Jewish world cannot afford to exclude itself from such illustrious establishments as Harvard, Yale, Princeton, or Oxford—nor should we wish to do so. Gone are the days when the gates of such places were closed to our people, and it would be a mistake for us now to slam their doors behind us. Certainly we should drink deeply from their wellsprings of knowledge. Confining ourselves to intellectual ghettos, as certain groups of ultra-Orthodox Jews have done, is not a viable solution: If Jews should choose to ensconce themselves in their own centers of learning, it must be with the purpose of one day going out into the world with minds sufficiently broad and hearts sufficiently open to cope with any political, moral, and cultural challenges that come their way. Such self-reliance is not an escape from hardship, but an expression of determination and fortitude. It has proved its efficacy time and again in our history. Indeed, the chronicles of the Jewish nation teach us that sometimes, as the saying goes, the best place to find a helping hand is at the end of your own arm.

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