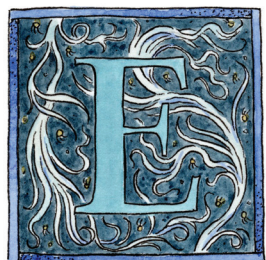


Can the Academy Be Saved from Anti-Zionism?



LITE UNIVERSITIES are sites of seduction. Grassy quads, the vaulted architecture of stone and brick, the library with its oak tables and little desk lamps, all suggest that modern-day America has been left behind. So do the universities' mottos: "Veritas," "Lux et Veritas," "Disci-

plina in Civitatem," "Truth even unto its innermost parts."

For many who spend time on elite American campuses, however, the cognitive dissonance between image and reality is profound. Far from being a haven for free inquiry and intellectual growth—the pursuit of truth and light, as well as an education for citizenship—the 21st-century American university is dominated by political agendas, litmus tests, and demands that students commit to a narrow set of worldviews and opinions. The institutions that promise parents they will equip their children with the intellectual

tools to grapple with society's most challenging questions have instead become toxic, politicized environments, indoctrinating more than they educate. And truth be told, non-elite universities are often no better.

Lamentably but predictably, Israel is central to this crisis, chiefly in the shape of attitudes to Zionism. The State of Israel is an obsession of today's university, a linchpin around which an extraordinary volume of discourse, pedagogy, and politics revolves.

This essay sets out the intellectual developments that underpin the current discourse on Israel and goes on to suggest solutions. Most of these solutions are designed for Jews on campus. But we need to work to change non-Jewish minds, too. After all, some of these students will in 20 years be shaping foreign and domestic policy, some will be rising to the top of our now-woke corporations—and the rest will probably be voting. Allowing wave after wave of unreflectingly anti-Zionist students out into American society only aggravates a situation that gets worse for Israel with each commencement.

As it happens, changing non-Jewish minds is important for these students themselves, too. The incessant anti-Israel rhetoric is in many ways just the front line of the larger assault on critical thinking that has taken hold in our universities. Every student exposed to the idea that there is *another way of looking at Israel* is being given a gift—an opportunity to exercise and strengthen his or her mental faculties.



Tendentious discourse about Israel has been a part of the American university since the late 1960s and early 1970s—sometimes overtly, sometimes beneath the surface—but never absent. Several intellectual factors govern this discourse—most prominently, post-colonialism, postmodernism, and post-nationalism. There's nothing a priori wrong with examining the world through

any of these lenses. But when one is used not as an experimental way of looking but imposed as the primary or only lens through which a topic is refracted — and when, further, one is instructed in advance as to what one will see when one looks through the lens — then critical thinking is short-circuited, and the neural wiring is weakened.

To understand post-colonialism and how it concerns Israel, we must consult Edward Said's 1978 book, *Orientalism*, which maintains that Westerners cannot understand, explain, or even usefully study the East. As Said's ideas have come down to us today, only members of an indigenous ethnicity can understand their own condition — only they, that is, possess the authentic “lived experience” to speak with authority. As a practical matter, this means that the post-colonialist thinker lauds all things indigenous while dehumanizing the West.

In this post-colonial narrative, Israel is a wealthy, powerful, and foreign — colonialist — enterprise implanted in the middle of a poor, oppressed, weak native society. Nineteen hundred years of Jewish history are ignored, as are any complicating factors in the Arab past or present.

Post-colonialist discourse also bleeds into post-nationalism, which blames the nation-state for all the ills in the world and celebrates an ill-defined internationalism and indigenous self-governance (ironically, in the form of nationalism). In this context, Israel is doubly anachronistic as a Jewish (i.e., non-indigenous) nation-state and ought to terminate its identity or suffer its own termination as a moral imperative, in order to become a “state of all its citizens” (another unacknowledged irony). This includes not merely Israeli Arabs — who are already citizens — but all the Palestinians in the West Bank and Gaza, too. No other nation-state is subject to this kind of demand, but that doesn't trouble the critics: To point out any inconsistencies in their critique is, they say, to engage in “whataboutism,” another tool of the oppressor.

Finally, the crucial postmodern contribution to the attack on

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Israel is its insistence that what is at stake in the search for truth is not actually truth, but merely *competing narratives* that — in theory, at least — are all equally valid. It follows that those who insist on the value of seeking objective truth based on provable facts are to be regarded as merely pushing their favored narrative — a narrative that inevitably favors the strong over the weak, the wealthy over the poor, and the West over the rest. And so, claim the post-modernists, this narrative must be resisted, and replaced with narratives that have historically been ignored — or worse, “silenced.” This process exchanges the search for a shared truth for a Marxist framework in which wealth and power are inherently evil, the poor and weak are inherently moral, and it therefore becomes the moral obligation of the intellectual to wield the new narrative as a weapon to strengthen the weak by weakening the strong. Suddenly, it turns out, as Orwell would have put it, that all narratives are equal, but some are more equal than others.

There are real differences between postmodernism and post-colonialism. But they certainly agree on one thing: Israel's right to exist is merely the narrative that a wealthy, powerful entity imposes upon a poor and oppressed one; it must accordingly be resisted. The Jewish past — not exactly an unbroken history of wealth and power — is either ignored or explained away.

To any committed critical thinker, it should be clear that the

21st-century university is a house built of intellectual matchsticks glued together by master narratives of good and evil, oppression and power, that have nothing to do with reality. In such an environment, in which the modern State of Israel, born in sin, is irredeemable, it is impossible to conduct an honest exploration of the facts of the matter.



About 20 years ago, a group of individuals of which I was one began to say and write that ignoring the ways in which higher education was framing Israel would have long-term implications for the view of Israel beyond the ivory tower. It's easy to see that we were right; but we were also unpopular, and so we were ignored.

Unfortunately, as the university became ever more focused on identity issues as part of postmodern, post-colonial developments, Jewish faculty steered clear of conversations about Jewish identity or engagement. They were happy to leave it to the student-life professionals at Hillel, or the rabbi running the university's Chabad House.

But young Jews on our campuses are seeking intellectual role models to whom they can turn as they think about their own identity and how their identity intersects with their intellectual passions and curiosities, and most will not find their way to Hillel or Chabad. Jewish and avowedly Zionist intellectuals and faculty cannot cede this role to those who fail to comprehend—never mind embrace—the complicated relationship between universalism and particularism embodied in the Jewish experience.

Is it possible to change anti-Zionist ways of thinking in at least those institutions of higher education that claim to welcome critical thinking and value a true liberal arts approach? I believe so. But it will require faculty who have the moral courage to question the received wisdom, and senior administrators who believe that the university ought to be a marketplace of ideas rather than a place where students imbibe the “truths” of an anti-Western, anti-Zionist

monoculture. The greatest challenge of all will be to cultivate within students not only the critical thinking skills that will allow them to arrive at their own conclusions, but also the courage to risk the implication of those conclusions—the willingness *not* to fit in with the conventional wisdom, which is unsightly backed up by a small but powerful cadre of students and faculty whose beliefs dominate university discourse today.

This vision is utterly countercultural, so execution will demand patience. But an intervention must be staged. Jewish faculty obviously owe this to Jewish students—but all those interested must see that they also owe it to all those being educated to become responsible, valuable citizens. This will be a very long intellectual and sometimes bureaucratic struggle, but we must persevere. And because the additional solutions below are directed only to Jews, we cannot give up on this effort, for the sake of the non-Jewish majority on campus.



At the same time, however, we must recognize that success is not remotely guaranteed: Existing institutions may not have the capacity to reform. Even those newly committed to free speech face serious obstacles. Board governance, activist professors and student groups, the entrenched political culture of most institutions, their prevailing intellectual orthodoxies and their sacred cows—all leave little room for optimism.

Certainly, we should try, and every green shoot should be watered. But it may also be time to set aside our outdated sentimentality about elite, legacy academic institutions, and build anew. That way, we will not be back at square one should an effort to change things on our existing campuses fail.

What would an effort outside our current campuses look like? Here I address our Jewish students.

We need educational organizations outside the university that have two foci: 1) engagement with ideas without any predetermined

end goal, to strengthen critical thinking in general among Jewish students; and 2) the empowerment of educators and faculty who care about Israel to engage in conversations about Jewish identity outside the lecture halls. Both efforts carry risk for those who would undertake them, because identity is the shibboleth of modern society. But the long-term risk of not trying is greater.

One option is to establish one or ideally several new, small colleges that combine a classical liberal arts education with an education in Jewish civilization: a 21st-century curriculum that hones critical thinking skills, avoids hyper-politicization of ideas, and pursues *emet*—the Jewish idea of truth. Insofar as these succeed, the model can be extended.

A second option is for more Israeli universities to adopt the model of the English-language undergraduate degrees offered by Reichman University (formerly the Interdisciplinary Center in Herzliya). These degrees offer a solution for American Jewish students who seek a Zionist as well as a liberal arts education. It is transformational for students to spend a substantial amount of time in Israel, living, studying, immersed in Israeli life, engaging at a formative period of their development with the larger questions that animate our societies.

The third option, to which I believe we should devote our greatest effort, is K–12 Jewish education, where we must build a cadre of subsidized institutions that will invest in educators who shun trendy ideologies, who are committed to the ideals of a classical liberal education, who will encourage courageous conversations in the classroom, and who will emphasize critical thinking skills, Israel education, Hebrew language immersion, and Jewish literacy.

These new K–12 institutions must engage the whole family: Many parents need—and crave—similar educational content, and schools can be hubs for community-building in an era of disaffiliation. Obviously, this kind of prioritization of Jewish and Zionist education within the Jewish community will also require Jewish communal leaders from the agencies to the pulpits and

everything in between to articulate the case for cultivating “Jewish operating systems” in the next generation of Jewish youth—so that young Jews arrive on our college campuses Jewishly educated and moderately fluent in Hebrew—forearmed rather than merely forewarned. And when they find the university culture overwhelming, as many will, a visit home will recharge them to return ready to resist the postmodern tide.



One way or another, Jewish faculty and intellectuals must sit with students Jewish and non-Jewish who are open to examining their thoughts and feelings about Israel and about Zionism as a movement that changed the trajectory of Jewish history—and the world—for the better. We must reimagine and transform our institutions inside and outside the university to support students and faculty in the pursuit of *emet*—for all. *