

Israel Studies Has an Israel Problem



AT THE HEIGHT of the latest round of conflict between Israel and Gaza last year, some 200 Israel and Jewish Studies scholars signed an open letter condemning Israel's conduct. The letter denounced Israel's "ethnonationalist ideologies" as well as its "settler colonial paradigm"—fancy language for calling Israelis fascists and insisting that Israelis have no more place in "Palestine" than the British in India or the Dutch and their descendants who imposed apartheid in South Africa.

What about the other major participant in the conflict, Hamas? The letter mentions the terrorist group just once, finding fewer than 30 words in over 900 to recognize the "pain, fear, and anger of Israeli Jews and Palestinian citizens of Israel who have lost loved ones and homes to unjustifiable and indiscriminate Hamas rockets"—unable

even here to avoid suggesting that Palestinians are somehow as much the victims of Hamas as Israel is.

There was no recognition that the beginning, middle, and end of the conflict were all controlled by Hamas. There was no mention, either, of the conflict's real sources—Hamas's genocidal charter, the continuous diversion of humanitarian aid to fund the building of military assets, its Holocaust denialism, and its prolongation of the conflict via antisemitic and eliminationist education, including the publication of a glossy children's magazine glorifying suicide bombings and terrorism. These were nonissues for these progressive scholars, more appalled by Jews who pray at our religion's holiest site than by Hamas's long history of murdering Jews.

To add insult to injury, the letter condemned the "unjust, enduring, and unsustainable systems of Jewish supremacy," a term popularized by white supremacist David Duke. Bear in mind that this all came amid skyrocketing antisemitism that witnessed Jews chased and beaten, taunted and kicked, targeted and vilified, across North America and Europe.

The open letter's signatories included faculty at Barnard, Brandeis, Cornell, Chicago, Dartmouth, Duke, Emory, Fordham, Georgetown, Johns Hopkins, Michigan, NYU, Oxford, Penn State, Princeton, Stanford, and Temple, to mention just some of the more prominent institutions. Jewish and Israel Studies programs, it is now sadly clear, have an Israel problem.

It's hardly news that Middle Eastern departments on college and university campuses have long been vehemently hostile to the Jewish state. It's a hostility that shaped—and soured—my own time at university.

When I was a graduate student at the University of Toronto a few years ago, I considered becoming an academic specializing in Israel and Palestine. I loved the subject and had already completed

two master's degrees. I had traveled to the region for four of the previous five summers, finding any program that would fund me. I began to look for a supervisor.

When I contacted one of the few subject-matter experts on campus, a highly regarded Middle Eastern Studies and Mediterranean-history professor, he accused me in an email of being an Israeli agent. I had, he wrote, been “sent to North American campuses on behalf of the World Union of Jewish Students, now under the auspices of the new Israeli Ministry of Strategic Affairs and Public Diplomacy,” to combat anti-Israel criticism. What, in reality, had I done? I had attended an Aish HaTorah–sponsored Hasbara trip. I was living with my parents in Toronto at the time, surely making me among the worst paid and least effective Israeli agents in history.

I wrote about my experience for the online magazine *Quillette* and gave up on my academic project. But the truly telling fact—the one that revealed more about the university than it did about this one professor—was that, despite a muted statement of reproach for his behavior, the administration suffered no loss of faith in his ability to teach about Israel and Palestine impartially. No other professor publicly condemned him or stood by my side. The protocol appeared to be “keep your head down, and don't rock the boat.”

My abortive foray into this field surely wasn't unique. In a decade on three Canadian campuses, I did not meet a single unwavering faculty supporter of Israel. The rare graduate student who starts out that way quickly finds himself isolated and ostracized. Often bereft of funding and moral support, faced with the catastrophic prospect of a bad relationship with a faculty supervisor, and confronted by the near-certainty that Israel-friendly views will kill whatever chances he might have of getting a teaching job, to say nothing of tenure, he quickly changes tack—or leaves.

But what about Israel Studies? Aside from its narrower focus, Israel Studies is also supposed to offer students a chance to study Israel in a dispassionate, nuanced, nonideological—perhaps even

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sympathetic!—way. And there are places where that is just how it works, including Emory University, academic home of Biden's special envoy on antisemitism Deborah Lipstadt, and the University of Indiana-Bloomington, home of the Institute for the Study of Contemporary Antisemitism, with the rare academic press willing to give space to issues concerning mainstream American Jews.

These honorable exceptions cannot, however, obscure the overall trend. A particularly vivid instance came to light in February, when the future of the University of Washington's Israel Studies program was called into question after its principal benefactor, the Seattle philanthropist Rebecca Benaroya, objected that the head of the program, Liora Halperin (holder of an endowed chair named for Benaroya and her late husband), had signed the open letter denouncing Israel. Nor was it just Halperin who had signed it. So had Devin Naar, the chairman of the university's Sephardic Studies department, along with Jewish Studies professor Sasha Senderovich. After months of meetings between the philanthropist and the professor, the University returned Benaroya's money.

An even bigger hint of the scale of the problem came with the publication of the “Jerusalem Declaration on Antisemitism,” a March 2021 statement signed by some 350 academics. The declaration was intended as a rebuttal to the International Holocaust

Remembrance Alliance’s widely accepted definition of antisemitism, which stresses that “denying the Jewish people their right to self-determination” is one form in which anti-Jewish bigotry is often expressed.

The purpose of the declaration was the opposite: namely, to put a kosher seal on anti-Zionism—including BDS campaigns and “opposing Zionism as a form of nationalism”—by explicitly denying the link between such positions and antisemitism. “Even if contentious,” the declaration insisted, “it is not antisemitic, in and of itself, to compare Israel with other historical cases, including settler-colonialism or apartheid.” The most charitable interpretation of the statement was that it was a badly misguided attempt to uphold free speech. But the real practical import was to give some of the most virulent forms of Israel-hatred a certificate of moral health from a largely Jewish professoriate.

Among the signatories: Lila Corwin Berman, professor of American Jewish history, Temple University; Alon Confino, director of the Institute for Holocaust, Genocide, and Memory Studies, University of Massachusetts, Amherst; Arie Dubnov, chairman of Israel Studies and director of Judaic Studies at George Washington University; Lior Libman, associate director of the Center for Israel Studies at SUNY Binghamton; Riv-Ellen Prell, former director for the Center for Jewish Studies at the University of Minnesota; Dov Waxman, chairman in Israel Studies at UCLA.

I cite these names and titles lest there be any doubt about the scale of the problem. As for the ideological purpose of the declaration, the *Jewish Chronicle*’s David Hirsh got to the heart of the matter. “The Jewish Studies profs decided to pick a lane,” he wrote.

The lane they’ve decided to pick is the broad left. And the political concession they have offered it is formidable. And perhaps they imagine that the broad left will be grateful that the Jews have stayed with it, and have offered protection against the “right wing” charge of antisemitism.

But the cost is also formidable. The cost is that in an effort to stay with the mainstream movement against Trump and Netanyahu, against racism and against the danger of right wing antisemitism, they have agreed to call a truce with left wing antisemitism in the interests of unity against the right.

Jarrold Tanny, a professor of history at the University of North Carolina, Wilmington, also dissected the bias demonstrated by the Israel and Jewish Studies academics. “The left only cares about attacks against Jews when it comes from white supremacists,” Tanny noted in *The Times of Israel*. “If the assailants are brown, if they are wearing Palestinian *keffiyehs*, or if they are holding BLM signs, they get a pass. Jews in America and Europe are fair game, because in the hierarchy of ‘structural racism’ we ‘white Jews’ are the oppressors.”

What is going on here? As Einat Wilf has thoughtfully explained, students and professors are trying to graft their own domestic political obsessions—particularly those concerned with race—onto Israel in “an act of blatant neocolonialism,” no matter how misplaced the comparisons might be. What, for instance, is the “racial” difference between an Arab-Israeli and a Mizrahi-Israeli?

The larger fact is that Israel and Jewish Studies, like nearly every other academic department, are being swept up and swallowed whole in the powerful ideological tide of modern academia. On most American campuses, Jewish students, academics, and administrators feel enormous pressure to align themselves directly against the interests of the Jewish state and its Israeli citizens. This is why Jewish Studies and Israel Studies scholars increasingly adopt a position deeply sympathetic to the uncritically pro-Palestinian position taken by the Middle East Studies Association and seven other regional-specialty university associations affiliated with it. Instead of serving as a bulwark (or at least a shelter) against such thinking, Israel Studies is becoming an adjunct to it.

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I wish I could suggest one simple and easy step toward reforming Israel and Jewish Studies. But the timorousness that afflicts so many Israel and Jewish Studies professors is hard to cure, as is the ideological fellow-traveling and dogmatism of their more radical colleagues. These academics may be great at teaching Yiddish or Ladino, but they are terrible at standing up for Jews. The University of Toronto's Antisemitism Taskforce explicitly voted *against* adopting the International Holocaust Remembrance Alliance definition of antisemitism adopted by the Canadian government.

That leaves two choices.

The first is hinted at in a 2015 report from Brandeis's Cohen Center for Modern Jewish Studies. It notes that "one of the strongest predictors of perceiving a hostile climate toward Israel and Jews is the presence of an active Students for Justice in Palestine (SJP) group on campus." Faculty, students, and staff on any campus should do everything possible to challenge the activities of this group whenever they can, because small activist groups have an outsize effect on the overall climate.

This may seem quixotic. It is worth noting, therefore, that Fordham University successfully refused an application from a group of students in 2016 to form an SJP chapter, and it prevailed in the long court battle that followed; that the University of California, Irvine, issued a written warning to its SJP student group at around the same time for violation of the UCI Code

of Conduct's provision prohibiting "obstruction or disruption of teaching, research, administration, disciplinary procedures, or other University activities"; and that Northeastern University suspended its SJP chapter for one academic year, from 2014 to 2015, after it slipped 600 mock eviction notices under dorm-room doors to symbolize what the chapter considered arbitrary evictions of Arab residents in Israel. SJP's extremism, designed to enforce the idea that only its view is acceptable, leads it into activities that make it vulnerable to official complaint.

The second choice is for Jews to start voting with their feet.

If you are a supporter of Israel, what are you doing at an institution that routinely demonizes it? The Brandeis research suggests that there are universities where a Zionist student can get a fair shake and enjoy a solid education. Give Columbia and Harvard a pass. At the University of Miami, Washington University, Syracuse University, and other schools mentioned in the Brandeis report, antisemitism and hostility to Israel are negligible. These sorts of environments aren't just good for pro-Israel students. They can also be better homes to Israel and Jewish Studies professors who don't have to risk their careers in order to advance their own scholarship.

These schools may not always have the same prestige of some of their more celebrated peers. Then again, prestige usually catches up with those who pursue truth for its own sake—just as truth catches up with those who pursue prestige for its own sake. Those who want to save Israel Studies, even from itself, will choose the former path. *