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Israel Studies Can Redeem Academia

My address to Stanford's new program

What follows is the text of the inaugural keynote address for the launch of the Jan Koum Israel Studies Program at Stanford University, November 17, 2025.



OLFGANG PAULI, the great physicist, delivered what must be the most devastating academic put-down ever. Asked about an egregiously bad paper, Pauli replied, “That is not even wrong.” *Das is nicht einmal falsch.*

What does it mean to be “not even wrong”? If a parent asks a child to add 2 and 2, and the child answers 5, that’s wrong. If the child says “banana,” it’s not even wrong. It doesn’t rise to the level of mere error. It fails to engage the proper category of analysis or discussion. It’s nonresponsive to the problem that must be addressed or solved.

I'm sure we can think of other examples of being not even wrong. For this evening's purposes, I'd like to start by discussing the ways in which so much of what passes for commentary about Israel, in the media and the academy, is not even wrong.

It is not even wrong to describe Israel as a settler-colonial state.

The United States is a settler-colonial state. So is Argentina. And Australia. And Brazil. And Canada. Except for a small minority of indigenous people, those of us who live in these countries are descendants or beneficiaries of settler colonialism. We speak European languages. We practice religions imported, in the main, from Europe. We are heirs to philosophical, cultural, and technological traditions born in Europe. We live on land that was seized by force from others and declared sovereign by ourselves. Very few of us can trace our ancestry on this land more than a few generations back.

We can choose to be ashamed of this, or not; we can serve up performative land-acknowledgment statements, or not. But these are self-evident facts.

Israel suffers none of these embarrassments. Israelis speak and write a modern version of the same language spoken by King David. They live in the same general place and practice substantially the same religion. At no point ever over the last 3,000 years was the Land of Israel without Jews; at no point did Hebrew cease to be the sacred language of Jews; at no point was Jerusalem not the site of Jewish communal and spiritual longing. What is now called Zionism is, in fact, only the latest iteration of Jewish resistance, often militant, to colonial rule by Babylonians, Greeks, Romans, Byzantines, Mamluks, Ottomans, and the British. This is not mythology. It's amply documented in the historical record.

For Americans to denounce Israel as a settler-colonialist

state, therefore, amounts to a kind of triple idiocy. It's false. It's hypocritical. And it's the opposite of a consistent position. In short: not even wrong.

It is not even wrong to accuse Israel of committing genocide in Gaza.

Last summer, an organization called the International Association of Genocide Scholars, or IAGS, endorsed a resolution claiming that Israel was committing genocide in Gaza. It made headlines worldwide. What did not make headlines was that only 128 of the association's 500 members voted, or that membership is open to anyone for a \$30 fee, or that there was no open debate on the resolution, or that at least 80 members of IAGS hailed from Iraq, not a country previously known for scrupulous genocide scholarship. *

The farce of a resolution was emblematic of the farcicality of the charge. Genocide does not mean "too much death and destruction," such as what occurred during the Allied bombardments of Germany and Japan in World War II. It does not even mean the targeting of civilians, deliberate or inadvertent. It is, as the UN Genocide Convention puts it, the "intent to destroy, in whole or in part, a national, ethnical, racial or religious group, as such." Underscore the words *as such*: Genocide means killing a category of people for no other reason than that they belong to that category. Jews *as* Jews in the Shoah; Tutsis *as* Tutsis during the Rwandan genocide; Yazidis *as* Yazidis under the Islamic State.

Where is the evidence that Israel is doing this? Why, if Israel's intention was genocide, did it routinely warn Gazan civilians to evacuate places it intended to attack? Why did it put thousands of its own soldiers at risk in Gaza? Why did it facilitate the distribution of polio vaccines to Gazans? Why, given its immense combat

power, did it not kill 10 times as many Gazans? Why has Israel not also killed tens of thousands of Palestinians in the West Bank? Why do genocide scholars, such as Brown University's Omer Bartov, rely on the supposed authority of UN officials, including the antisemitic Francesca Albanese, to make their case against Israel? And why was Israel being accused of genocide only days after October 7, when the blood from that massacre wasn't yet even dry?

An argument from authority is a notorious logical fallacy; arguments from prejudiced authorities compound illogic with bigotry; arguments from prejudiced authorities who decree guilt first and look for evidence later turn illogic and bigotry into injustice. Again: not even wrong.

It is not even wrong to pretend that anti-Zionism has nothing to do with antisemitism.

It is true that, traced as a Venn diagram, antisemitism and anti-Zionism—that is, objection to the existence of a Jewish state rather than to its policies—do not perfectly overlap. Prior to 1948, there were arguments within the Jewish community about the wisdom of a Jewish state. There are some Jews today, including strictly observant Jews, who continue to oppose Jewish statehood on theological or ethical grounds. And there are sincere people, Jewish or not, who, whether out of idealism or naïveté, champion a binational state for Jews and Palestinians alike as a better alternative to the status quo or to a two-state solution.

But if the circles of antisemitism and anti-Zionism don't fully overlap, it shouldn't blind us to the fact that they often do. It is not anti-Zionism, but antisemitism, for pro-Palestinian protesters to lay siege to a Paris synagogue. It is not anti-Zionism, but antisemitism, when Sally Rooney refuses to have her novels translated into Hebrew, ostensibly on account of her objections to Israel. It is not anti-Zion-

ism, but antisemitism, when Barnard students raid a class on the history of Israel and distribute flyers in which a jackboot stomps on a Star of David. It is not anti-Zionism, but antisemitism, when the Jewish director of the Brooklyn Museum of Art has her home spray-painted with pro-Hamas graffiti.

And it is antisemitism, not anti-Zionism, when the charges leveled at Israel invariably replicate classic antisemitic tropes of bloodlust and manipulation; and when the same humanitarians who are so conspicuous in their denunciations of Israel are utterly silent when it comes to Turkey's depredations against the Kurds or the genocide—the real genocide—currently unfolding at scale and speed in Sudan; and when Tucker Carlson decides to make his distaste for Israel known by inviting Nick Fuentes to discuss the subject on his podcast; and when university administrators shut down political conversations deemed offensive to some minorities but raise the banner of free speech when it comes to speech that appalls and frightens most Jews.

The list goes on. And it's no accident that there's so much overlap, in part because antisemites find anti-Zionism to be such a convenient cover for their bigotry, in part because hating Jews as a collective—whether as citizens of a state or members of a people or adherents of a faith—is the essential element of all Jew-hatred, even if the bigot is willing to offer exemptions or dispensations to selected individuals for good behavior. To doubt this point and willfully or ignorantly set aside millennia of Jewish experience with bigotry ranks, once again, as a case of not even wrong.



I have given you some examples of what is not even wrong. I have not talked about what I think is merely wrong: for instance, the accusation that Israel is becoming an apartheid state; or that Israel might have

long ago made peace with its neighbors had it only had the will to do so; or that there was no justification for Israel fighting in Gaza in the way that it did for as long as it did. Wide latitude in the academy and media needs to be given to all sorts of views, including many with which I'd vehemently disagree. That's because I believe in Thomas Jefferson's dictum that "error of opinion may be tolerated where reason is free to combat it."

But I would like to suggest a corollary: Reason cannot win where reason does not rule.

If rigorous standards of logic and evidence and factual accuracy and intellectual integrity and scientific reproducibility and fair and open debate don't govern academic life; if the people in charge won't enforce those standards or if they enforce them only selectively; if views aren't subjected to serious scrutiny and virtually any opinion can become valid merely by virtue of it being commonly held or politically expedient — if these conditions don't hold, then reason doesn't stand a chance.

The enterprise of reason is demanding and unforgiving and often downright hurtful to those who don't measure up. Just ask your high school classmates who *didn't* get into Stanford.

That's what great universities are supposed to be about. Great newspapers, too, I might add. Argument within the walls of reason; ideas atop the floorboards of facts; experimentation under the roof of experience — in sum, the palace of thoughtful minds. Especially these days, many of us inside academia or the news media don't get enough credit for doing our work squarely and conscientiously within that palace.

But many of us also know that, if we aren't getting enough credit for the good work we do, there's a reason for it — and the fault does not lie in our stars.

I know there are various ideas about the reasons for the sharp decline in confidence in higher education, from the effect of new

technologies to the crisis of affordability. My own view is that the source of the affliction is the ideological capture — by all too many faculty, staff, and students — of institutions that are supposed to be *truth-seeking* enterprises but instead have become *truth-asserting* enterprises.

They have done this, for the most part, by embracing Audre Lorde’s famous insight that “the master’s tools will never dismantle the master’s house.” In place of robust debate, they want speech codes and cancellations. In place of engagement, they want encampments. In place of facts, they want narratives. In place of ideas, they want identity. In place of curiosity, they want certitude. In place of pedagogy, they want indoctrination. In place of process, they want results. In place of skepticism, they want slogans. In place of independence, they want reliability. In place of reason, they want unreason. In place of citizens, they want cadres.

I don’t want to affect an expertise I don’t have, and I know I’m painting with a very broad brush — perhaps too broad for some of you. But my impression is that these tendencies are especially pronounced in academic fields that have the word *studies* attached to them — ethnic studies, for instance, or Middle Eastern studies. When I told a friend the other day that I was coming to Stanford to give a speech for the launch of the Israel studies program, he said: “Just pray that it doesn’t fast become the ‘anti-Israel studies’ program.” I’ve read enough about the trajectory of other Israel studies programs to know that the fear isn’t entirely unfounded.

My larger point is this: If we want to understand the proliferation of “not even wrong” views, particularly in university settings, and particularly about Israel, the places to look are the trends described above. These trends are not new: We have seen similar things happen before, to varying intensities, from Heidelberg in the 1930s to Peking in the 1960s. They are invariably symptoms, or perhaps har-

bingers, of something darker: an exit from the palace of reason, a bid for the raw exercise of power.

This is what we saw during the post–October 7 campus protests. It wasn't so much the views that I found appalling. It was the mindset and the tactics—the repetitive and thought-terminating clichés; the refusal to engage with critics; the refusal to abide by rules and the confidence that they could get away with their rule-breaking without consequence; the Manichaeian demonization of *all* Israelis and Zionists and the beatification of *all* Palestinians. And what I found just as appalling was this: These kids were *admitted*. For every 10 or 50 campus Maoists, there was an admissions officer somewhere who thought they had the right stuff. And the thought applies equally to all the tenure or tenure-track faculty who egged on the junior totalitarians.

These are serious failures. And the question that remains to be answered is whether institutional leaders will draw the appropriate lessons, act, lead, take unpopular stands—or just wait for the storm to blow over and return to business as usual.



The question now is what role an Israel studies program can play in this kind of institutional moment. Broadly speaking, I suspect three things could happen to a program like this over the next five or 10 years.

You can be captured.

You can be tokenized.

Or you can become an example of scholarly seriousness, an engine for academic renewal and transformation, and a relevant actor beyond the quads.

I hope you are aware of the risk of capture. My admittedly limited acquaintance with the world of academic Israel scholarship is that it

tends to lean from the Left to the far-Left in its political orientation, just like the rest of academia. I would never suggest that there can be no value in those perspectives.

But there's always a problem when ideological homogeneity leads, as it usually does, to groupthink, politicization, and narrowness of vision. What I have in mind, for example, was the open letter signed in 2021 by 200 Israel and Jewish studies professors scoring Israel for its "settler-colonial paradigm," or the scholars who signed up the same year for the "Jerusalem Declaration on Antisemitism," whose purpose was to deny the connection between anti-Zionism and antisemitism. When scholars, Jewish or not, volunteer to provide their seal of approval for the demonization of their own subject matter, they do worse than turn themselves into versions of Lenin's "useful idiots." They make themselves irrelevant. As I've written in *SAPIR*, "There is no shortage of discomfiting and intelligent debates to be had in good faith regarding Israel and its future. Proposing that Israel should have no future isn't one of them."

The answer to the problem of capture is to refuse to get captured. Perhaps that means recruiting people whose credentials don't include the letters P, H, and D. Perhaps it means insisting that the purpose of an Israel studies program is scholarship, not advocacy. Perhaps something else.

But my advice to those of you who will help lead and shape this program is this: The fox is right outside the henhouse. Please have the good sense not to let him in.

Then there is tokenization, a subject I know something about, having served as the token conservative and the token pro-Israel voice on more panels and in more places than I care to think about. There is—I don't want to say at Stanford, but at lesser institutions—a belief that the best way to address complaints that conservative or pro-Israel voices are underrepresented and under attack is...to invite Bret Stephens to

give a speech. I hope that's not the case here! If not that, it's to set up a program or an institute on campus that is supposed to advance the cause of viewpoint diversity but also risks turning you into a kind of ghetto for a handful of students and faculty who operate in a state of permanent dissent from the rest of the institution and can do relatively little to influence it.

Tokenization does not mean you can't do exceptional work and help transform the lives of your students. But it limits your impact and your potential to help save the great universities, above all from themselves. I think you can do more, and better, than that. The question is how.

Let me close by offering an overarching thought.

The modern State of Israel is not a state like, say, Denmark — that is, sovereign and distinct but enmeshed in and secured by a broader cultural and political identity. Nor is it like Russia, grimly asserting its distinctiveness but with increasingly little to contribute beyond itself. Nor is it like Pakistan, defined largely by what it is not.

Nor is Israel just a political project. It's also an astounding civilizational and philosophical one.

Astounding civilizationally for what it represents in the long arc of Jewish history; for what it shows about the role of memory in the creation of the future; for what it teaches us about the frequently tense but often fruitful synthesis of the two. A picture for you to ponder: An ultra-Orthodox Jew zipping through Tel Aviv on an electrified scooter reaches the intersection of Ahad Ha'am and Herzl Streets. If you can appreciate the incongruity of this image, its near absurdity, but also its beauty and its wonderful ordinariness, then you can understand what I mean.

And astonishing philosophically because of the ways it challenges so many of the assumptions, cherished or unexamined, of West and East alike. What is the place of personal autonomy and freedom in the constitution of human happiness? What does a good citizen owe his state and

what does a good state owe its citizens? What are the prudent boundaries of pluralism and tribalization, religious or otherwise? How does a hyper-technological society reconcile itself with primordial attachments to God and traditional land and history? When do diversity, tolerance, live-and-let-live, and the other nostrums that define social decency in the West become self-endangering? When should a country observe a “decent respect for the opinions of mankind” (to borrow a phrase), and when must it ignore them? What does a state owe its neighbors, and can those obligations be honored if they aren’t honored reciprocally?

These are genuinely significant, difficult, and transcendent questions — ones that Israelis grapple with daily, with varying degrees of success, under conditions of peril and stress. They are worth thinking about, and not just in the usual sociological, ethnographic, political, or geopolitical categories in which they are typically examined. Think hard about Israel, and the deeper dimensions of our own conundrums in the West come more sharply into focus.

What I’m saying here is that the intelligent study of the Jewish state — study that gets away from the typically cartoonish and invidious and not-even-wrong attention that Israel usually gets — should matter to everyone, at least everyone at a university like Stanford. The study of Israel, I’d go as far as to say, is not just a study of a piece of humanity, but a Humanity, capital-H, unto itself. And an Israel studies program, done confidently and correctly, can do something, even a lot, to help rescue the humanities from their own depressing decline into politicization, solipsism, and irrelevance.

That, at any rate, is my hope for you. It’s been an honor to deliver your inaugural keynote address.

Thank you. *

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