

Facing New Bias On Campus

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As a member of the first class of Write On For Israel, an advocacy through journalism program for high school students [sponsored by The Jewish Week and funded by the Avi Chai Foundation], I thought I was ready for the challenges of campus life.

After all, I spent my last two years in high school learning how to present a clear and thoughtful defense of Israel, and how to counter the organized anti-Zionist disinformation that seemed to be sweeping our nation's campuses. The test of supporting Israel virtually defined my generation of Jewish American teens heading off to college, and Write On wanted to make sure we would rise to the occasion.

As a freshman at Duke, the campus hosting the recent Palestinian Solidarity Movement's annual conference, I was in the heart of the political storm. I knew that hosting a conference did not indict Duke as an institution as an opponent of Israel — to its credit the university has consistently refused all demands to even consider Israel-related divestment — and I wanted to see firsthand how the Israeli-Palestinian debate translated onto an elite college campus. With the conference having now peacefully come and gone, I do not regret my support for it being held at Duke, but I understand far more clearly now that the Palestinian-Israeli conflict is merely a sideshow to the persistent, if not quite resurgent phenomenon of campus anti-Semitism.

The university's Hillel center, the Freeman Center for Jewish Life, took a constructive approach to the pro-Palestinian conference, choosing to sponsor counter-programming, such as an anti-terrorism concert and speakers rather than mounting counter demonstrations. But the civil discourse of both the conference and the response were all beside the point. The topic that ultimately attracted the most attention here was not the relative merits of Israeli self-defense vs. Palestinian self-determination. Rather, it was plain old Jew hatred.

Immediately after the close of the conference, The Chronicle, Duke's student daily newspaper, published an op-ed by a journalism-award-winning Duke senior titled "The Jews." Without elaborating on the specifics of the abhorrent piece of writing, suffice it to say that there were few epithets the writer failed to throw at "the Jews," all carefully hidden in code words, statistics and the gloss of pseudo-scholarship. The article referred broadly to "the Jews" as "a very well-

funded and well-organized establishment," complained of a suspicious overrepresentation of Jews in elite universities and the Supreme Court, decried the dominating power of the "Holocaust Industry" and claimed, "In short, Jews can renounce their difference [from others merely] by taking off the yarmulke." (For the full text, visit www.chronicle.duke.edu.)

I had been ready to argue rationally the points of contention in the Palestinian-Israeli debate, to deal with an audience of inquisitive peers, and I was eager to learn and question their preconceptions. I was unprepared, however, for classic anti-Semitism. I had not seen it before. I had not understood how predisposed otherwise intelligent people could be to the hypnotic power of Jewish conspiracy theories.

Even many Jewish friends of mine on campus could not identify the insidious offensiveness about it. They, as well as several non-Jewish friends, found the article full of resentment, not hate, and were quite receptive to the idea that the author was merely jealous of Jewish success. They felt that in turn, the Jewish community on campus should view his accusations as compliments. I was at somewhat of a loss to respond.

My generation, particularly my insulated tristate-area generation, was not raised to combat anti-Semitism; some of us were raised to combat anti-Zionism and to support Israel. But that's political discourse. How can you argue with hate?

Thus the challenge to my generation is twofold. Primarily we must continue to advocate for Israel because relenting now in order to focus on anti-Semitism will send mixed messages and weaken both fights. This is not a new idea. But my generation needs to acclimate itself to the fact that anti-Semitism exists both in a vacuum separate from, and also in a marriage with, the political debate surrounding the

Israeli-Palestinian struggle.

Once this realization is made, my generation can learn which anti-Semitic rhetoric is worth confronting. We must be prepared to tease the threads of anti-Semitism out of the knot that too often surrounds the Palestinian-Israeli dialogue, and be ready to identify hate speech in its traditional and insidious forms.

If we cannot rise to this occasion, then we cannot hope to bring our country's leading universities from the edge of reactionary irrationality and back to scholarly debate. ■

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