



# The Campus Crisis: Essays

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# Anti-Semitism Goes to School

Anti-Semitism on American college campuses is rising—and worsening. Where does it come from, and can it be stopped?



Anti-Israel protestors in July 2014. Yunus Kaymaz/Anadolu Agency/Getty Images.

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## About the author

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“I never dreamed that it could come to *this*!”

In February, a Jewish college student was hospitalized after being punched in the face at a pro-Palestinian demonstration on a campus in upstate New York. His family has insisted on maintaining the boy’s privacy, but other such incidents, some caught on camera, include a male student punched in the face at Temple University, a female student at Ohio University harassed for defending Israel, and a male student at Cornell threatened physically for protesting anti-Israel propaganda. On three successive days last summer, the Boston police had to protect a student rally for Israel from pro-Palestinian mobs shouting “Jews back to Birkenau!” At the University of California-Irvine, this year’s Israel Independence Day festivities were blocked and shouted down by anti-Israel demonstrators. Every year, some 200 campuses now host a multiday hate-the-Jews fest, its malignancy encapsulated in its title: “Israel Apartheid Week.”

The Louis D. Brandeis Center in Washington, founded in 2011 to protect against such intimidation, has reported being startled by the results of its own 2013-14 survey: “more than half of Jewish American college students [have] personally experienced or witnessed anti-Semitism.” The film *Crossing the Line 2: The New Face of Anti-Semitism on Campus* faithfully captures scenes of the violence that often attends this new academic experience.

Nor are students the only targets. At Connecticut College, to cite but the most recent example, a quietly pro-Israel professor of philosophy has been maliciously singled out and hounded as a “racist” in a campaign instigated by Palestinian activists, endorsed by numerous faculty members, and at least tacitly complied with by the college administration and the campus Hillel organization. At the annual meetings of prestigious academic

associations, boycott resolutions against Israel and Israeli academic institutions are routinely aired and often passed.

As one of its first acts in December 1945, the Arab League called on all Arab institutions and individuals to refuse to deal in, distribute, or consume Jewish and Zionist products or manufactured goods. Seventy years later, calls for boycott of Israel, under the acronym BDS—boycott, divestment, and sanctions—have become a staple of American university agendas, extending not only to Israeli companies like SodaStream but to Israeli scholars in the humanities and social sciences. Last year, a petition by “anthropologists for the boycott of Israeli academic institutions” garnered the signatures of the relevant department chairs at (among others) Harvard, Wesleyan, and San Francisco State. The American Studies Association attracted the “largest number of participants in the organization’s history” for a vote endorsing a boycott of Israeli academic institutions.

In his introduction to a timely volume of essays, *The Case Against Academic Boycotts of Israel*, Paul Berman provides a witty summary of the efforts by university boycotters to frame their campaigns as “modern and progressive” when in fact they are “disgraceful and retrograde.” But the truth is that anti-Semitism never needed a sophisticated veneer in order to win susceptible recruits among the educated and the allegedly enlightened. Urgent as it is to expose the undeniably disgraceful and retrograde nature of the boycott movement, some of its ancillary effects are already playing themselves out in modern institutions and in “progressive” ways.

**One of those effects** is the scandalous insult—the undreamed-of *this!*—that cracked the patience of my academic colleague quoted at the head of this article. The “*this!*” emanated in reports first from UCLA, then from Stanford. At both universities, Jewish students running for election to the student government had been challenged on the grounds that their “strong Jewish identity,” manifested by travel to Israel, made them untrustworthy candidates for office. For my colleague, who had tried until now to treat anti-Israel agitation as a legitimate political activity, this now-naked move to place Jewish students under automatic suspicion for being *Jewish* made it impossible to maintain any longer the distinction between anti-Zionism (permissible) and anti-Semitism (impermissible). To be sure, there had always been some kind of link between incitement against Jews in Israel and incitement against Jews elsewhere, but how was she now to distinguish between the two when her colleagues, peers, and students blithely insisted on conjoining them?

For the moment, most of the American public seems free—solidly free—of the anti-Semitism that infects American universities. According to the most recent Gallup poll, seven in ten Americans view Israel favorably, up substantially from the 47 percent that viewed it favorably in 1991 around the time of the first Gulf war. It would be hard to imagine greater enthusiasm for a foreign leader than that shown to Benjamin Netanyahu when he spoke at a joint session of Congress in 2011 and again this year. Appreciation for Israel seems secure when the *Wall Street Journal*, widely considered America’s most influential newspaper, is also its most effective editorial champion of Israel, with the FOX News channel not far behind.

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Which is not to say that grounds are lacking for larger concern. In addition to the catalog of academic offenses I've briefly summarized here, a growing number of anti-Jewish incidents—from a swastika-desecrated Jewish cemetery in New Jersey to fatal shootings at a Kansas City Jewish community center—has been registered by agencies like the Anti-Defamation League and the American Jewish Committee. At the government level, more ominously, and perhaps for the first time in recent American history, it is the White House, rather than the once notoriously Arabist State Department, that has taken the lead in threatening to isolate the Jewish state. President Obama's frankly contemptuous treatment of Israel's prime minister smacks more of the university than of the Senate in which he once served, but he *is* the president, and his words and actions give license to others.

At any rate, the basic truth is this: Israel and the United States, unlovingly paired by their Islamist enemies as the Little Satan and the Big Satan, are prime targets of the same antagonists. It remains to be seen, then, whether the rise of anti-Semitism in America—itsself an extension of the Arab- and Muslim-led war against Israel and the Jewish people—will fatally penetrate America's thick constitutional culture, in which some of us still place our trust.

Universities are the obvious place to begin investigating that question.

## I. Anatomy of an Attack

Although no single scenario can represent the workings of the anti-Israel syndrome among the educated, a recent UCLA initiative demonstrates how the movement achieves its goals. The steps go more or less like this:

(1) A consortium of self-declared pro-Palestinian student organizations devises a "statement of ethics" asking candidates for the student council to pledge that, if elected, they will not participate in trips to Israel organized by groups like AIPAC, the Anti-Defamation League, or Aish International's Hasbara Fellowship on the grounds that these trips are discriminatory or, in student shorthand, "Islamophobic." (At UCLA, the consortium comprises Students for Justice in Palestine, Jewish Voice for Peace, Muslim Student Association, Afrikan Student Union, Armenian Students' Association, and Samahang Pilipino; at Stanford, the umbrella group is the Students of Color Coalition [SOCC], which is formally aligned with Students Out of Occupied Palestine [SOOP].)

(2) Most candidates at UCLA, and the largest student party, decline to sign the pledge, but among the signers is the student who is elected student-council president.

(3) Before and after the elections, Israel's defenders on campus urge UCLA's chancellor to condemn the pledge in the name of the university.

(4) After the elections, in an email to students, faculty, and staff, Chancellor Gene Block (a) offers reassurance that the pledge was strictly a voluntary affair: "No one was barred from running for office, participating in the election, or serving on the council as a result of not signing the pledge"; (b) defends the pledge on the grounds that the core issue is one of free speech: "The decision to circulate this pledge and the choice to sign it or not fall squarely within the realm of free speech, and free speech is sacrosanct to any university campus"; (c) nevertheless goes on to say that he is personally troubled: constitutionally protected speech is not necessarily "wise, fair or productive," and he is "personally concerned any time people feel disrespected, intimidated, or unfairly singled out because of their beliefs."

(5) The chancellor's statement is followed by an expression of "shared concern" from Janet Napolitano, president of the University of California.

On the face of it, the outcome at UCLA might seem to indicate a "win" by the pro-Israel side, since administrators, even if they did not condemn the pledge outright, as they were asked to do, did bring themselves to express a degree of discomfort with it. At least, that is the positive face that the pro-Israel groups on campus chose to put on the affair. A similar sense of satisfaction issued from events at the annual meeting in January of the prestigious American Historical Association, where, after strenuous efforts by pro-Israel members, it was finally decided (by a vote of 144 to 55) not to pursue further resolutions denouncing the Jewish state. Jeffrey Herf, a historian at the University of Maryland who spearheaded the opposition, took rightful pride in reporting that "a group of determined scholars fought the good fight and . . . won far beyond our expectations. . . . The momentum of BDS," Herf concluded, "runs up against academic integrity and respect for evidence."

But what kind of a victory is it, and how much integrity and respect for evidence are on display, when every anti-Israel referendum, exhibit, assembly, protest, and campaign reinforces the air of *normalcy* that this political minuet has acquired? Regardless of their outcome, anti-Israel allegations achieve their aim by negatively singling out the Jewish state from among all others and forcing its supporters onto the defensive. Aggression against Israel is by now reminiscent of the joke that circulated after World War I. The mayor of a town tells his deputy to round up all the Jews and all the bicyclists. The deputy replies: "Why the bicyclists?" Those who don't get the joke apparently find nothing remarkable about Jews being apprehended. Yet just as it was never "normal" to single out European Jews for roundup, so it is not "normal" to single out Israel for censure.

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Contrary to the claims of administrators like the chancellor of UCLA, prosecuting the war against the Jews is not an issue of free speech, "sacrosanct to any university campus." Had UCLA's chancellor and president faced a campaign to reinstate segregation, recriminalize homosexuality, or bar women from the faculty club, they would have reacted with more than "concern." Yet behind the banner of free speech, they tolerate, however squeamishly, campaigns to undo the Jewish homeland and to demonize the already most mythified people on earth. Anti-Jewish politics are no more innocent when pursued by left-wing American SOCCs and SOOPs than when they were prosecuted by right-wing European blackshirts.

Indeed, institutions that enforce "sensitivity training" to insure toleration for gays, blacks, and other minorities may inadvertently be bringing some of these groups together in common hostility to Jews as the only campus minority against whom hostility is *condoned*. On almost every campus in the land, the norms of political correctness are rigorously enforced; punitive speech codes proliferate; a phalanx of administrative functionaries labors so that nothing said, or read, will ever offend the sensibilities of any student—with one licensed exception. Multiculturalism has found its apotheosis in a multicultural coalition of anti-Zionists: a uniquely constituted political phenomenon with its own functions, strategies, and goals.



Surprising as this may sound to today's activists, freedom of speech and the practice of anti-Semitism are not necessarily bedfellows. Both the United States government and Israeli courts have found ways of drawing the line between liberty and incitement. In the mid-1970s, at the height of the Arab boycott of Israel and at the very time when the Arab-Soviet coalition succeeded in passing United Nations Resolution 3379, which demonized Zionism as racism, the U.S. enacted laws to prevent citizens and companies from participating in other nations' economic boycotts or embargoes. By prohibiting compliance with the boycott of Israel that had been enforced by the Arab League since 1945, the United States greatly reduced the damage being done to Israel through this branch of warfare.

More recently, the hyper-liberal supreme court of Israel upheld the provisions of Israel's own "Anti-Boycott Law," which withdraws accreditation from actors pursuing boycott campaigns by means of false and distorted legal or factual claims. Although the United States is reluctant to thwart American trade, and Israel prides itself on free speech, both recognize that democracies must also protect the freedoms they enshrine.

So, too, universities and the academic community, without limiting the free-speech rights of groups that promote anti-Semitism, whether through BDS or demonstrably false accusations leveled at Jewish students or faculty, could deny them accreditation and university funds. Student groups that justly demand respect for their own particular religions and ethnicities should be held to the same standards of mutual respect that govern formal group behavior toward gays and women. Newton's first law of motion operates equally in politics: anti-Semitism in motion will remain in motion—and will pick up ferocity—unless stopped by resistant power.

## II. Why the Academy?

The contrast I have drawn between the college campus and the rest of American society is counter-intuitive: why should anti-Semitism flourish in the sweet groves of academe rather than in the fouler corridors of power? How does intolerance for a Jewish state thrive in the very institutions that advertise their tolerance for threatened minorities? The political columnist Bret Stephens often asks college audiences why, if they claim to be liberal, they don't support the only liberal society in the Middle East. On what grounds do American universities, considered liberal to a fault, assail the only liberal democracy in that part of the world?

The question harbors its answer. Israel is attacked not despite but on account of its liberal democracy and its buoyant pluralistic culture: two commodities held in notable disesteem in the nominally liberal but in fact anti-liberal environment of the contemporary American university. The boycotters wrap themselves in the mantle of free speech only to silence those who stand for the kind of genuine individual and human rights that flourish in Israel. They shout down liberal speakers like Israel's ambassador to the United States just as they shout down and shut out champions of Muslim women's rights.

In these respects, today's anti-Israel campus coalitions are heirs to the anti-liberal coalitions that raged in the 1960s against the war in Vietnam and against the traditional American values embedded in America's constitutional culture. Already then, America's radicals recognized in universities a softer and more conquerable target than the government. Within the twinkling of an eye, school after school, tutored in the higher wisdom of political correctness, fell into line. Divinity schools de-valued



Christian or Judeo-Christian religion; humanities departments scuttled their commitment to Western civilization and foundational Western texts; ROTC was banned from the campus to make the point that America was not worth defending; the idea of American exceptionalism was denounced as a racist and imperialist excuse for war.

Anti-Semitism, to steal a talmudic image, would seem to suit this new anti-Americanism like a red ribbon on a white horse. In fact, anti-Semitism has never been solely or even primarily about the Jews. As a political idea, it was invented in Germany in the 1870s to oppose what “the Jews” *represented*—civil rights, individual freedom, and the ability to benefit from the features of liberal democracy that others feared, resented, and wished to undo. Wholly negative in its goals—indeed, a prototype of the negative political campaign—anti-Semitism promised and still promises progress not through social reform, which must be seen to *keep* its promises, but through destruction, symbolized in the destruction of what the Jews have attained.

The anti-Semitic component of modern anti-liberal ideologies like fascism, Communism, pan-Arabism, and now Islamism has allowed alliances to form among otherwise competing groups, thereby facilitating anti-Semitism’s acceptance and normalization and in turn gaining for these ideologies a greater durability than they could likely achieve without it. On the merits, Arab and Muslim students could never have persuaded their American peers to sympathize with repressive regimes and homegrown terrorists; blaming the Jews for these and other deformities was the key that unlocked the door.

In the campus culture of victimhood, where it pays to be even one-sixteenth Cherokee, someone must be cast as the invader. It was thus inherent in the “logic” of left-wing campus politics that the anti-American revolutionaries of yesteryear would morph into the so-called pro-Palestinian protesters of today; once Arab and Muslim students began pressing the case against Israel in the familiar terms of victimized natives vs. Western imperialists, they filled the vacuum previously occupied by Students for a Democratic Society. It tells us much that the cause of anti-Zionism, forged and perfected in Stalinist Russia, should have become the strongest legacy of the phony “idealism” of ’60s radicals, and anti-Jewish campus coalitions their logical heirs.

**What a relief to have a Jewish state on hand to represent the world’s worst criminal! Without it, activist students might have to worry about Iran, or jihadist beheadings, or mass female enslavement in Africa.**

And what a relief to have Israel on hand to represent the world’s worst criminal: occupier, racist, exploiter, warmonger, aggressor-in-chief extraordinaire! Were it not for the Jews, activist students might still be relegated to attacking ROTC or occupying college buildings. Were it not for Israel, one might actually have to worry about—say—Iran, or jihadist beheadings, or the hundreds of thousands of casualties created in Syria, or the atrocity of mass female enslavement in Africa, about all of which, to my knowledge, scarcely a tear has been shed or a nickel raised.

And this in turn helps explain something else: the role of liberal enablers, from fellow students to sympathetic professors to administrators like UCLA’s. For today’s campus radicals could hardly operate without the acquiescence, if not the tacit complicity, of the liberal majority, or the

impotent tut-tutting and exquisite moral contortions of administrators in the face of challenge to the liberal façade they are paid to uphold.

The incapacity of liberalism to defend itself from its enemies on the left is by now an old story, well documented in histories of the violent disruptions of college and university campuses in the late 1960s. And indeed, who today would *not* be relieved to turn away from the implacable threats to liberal democracy now gathering on the near horizon and join the assault on the Jews, or at a minimum refrain from objecting?

And that leads to the next chapter in this sorry saga.

### III. What about the Jews?

What if anything have American Jews done about the rise of anti-Semitism? How do they react to a phenomenon that even ostriches can no longer ignore?

Like UCLA's chancellor and president, many American Jews admit to being troubled and concerned by a gratuitous aggression that they cannot seem to stop. Accepted as equal citizens in a country that respects freedoms of religion and association, at liberty to affirm, alter, or deny their Jewish affiliations as they wish, they have willy-nilly become associated with a state and a people subjected to the most disproportionate and least negotiable assault in the history of the world.

If this sounds hyperbolic, consult a full-scape map of the Arab Middle East and consider that, for 70 years, most Arab and many Muslim countries have not even granted *recognition* to Israel. This refusal violates several core principles embedded in the founding charter of the United Nations, including "the sovereign equality of all . . . members" and the proscription of "the threat or use of force against the . . . political independence of any state," and it should long since have constituted grounds for suspension or expulsion. Instead, the world body has provided its members with collective rights of a different kind: rights of attack against the state of the Jews.

Confronting this international threat, some American Jews, to their credit, have risen to the defense of Israel in ways that distinguish their behavior from alleged communal lapses during World War II. The postwar slogan "Never Again!" originated as a response to the helplessness of Jews facing Hitler's Final Solution and the dismal record of Jewish communities in lobbying on their behalf. Now that they are more politically experienced and better organized than the largely immigrant community of the 1930s, American Jews have mustered significant material and political assistance in Israel's behalf. As is the case with other American ethnic and religious minorities, support of the Jewish homeland has become part of a common responsibility.

That responsibility is exercised on a variety of fronts. Defense agencies have arisen to fight disinformation and bias in the media, to guard against abuses of international law, to investigate terrorism with special concern for Jewish targets, and to monitor and counteract anti-Israel propaganda. A growing number of organizations now specialize in arming high-school, college, and university students with information that refutes the distortions and overcomes the ignorance they are likely to encounter in their educational institutions.

Yet it must be said that the negative campaign against the Jews has also

revived older and more damaging patterns of Jewish political behavior. What, for instance, is a “Jewish Voices for Peace” doing within an avowedly anti-Israel campus coalition? Why should an organization like J Street form to undercut united Jewish action on behalf of Israel? Ukrainian Americans have not mobilized to urge the capitulation of Ukraine to Russia. American Greeks do not rally to force Greece into bankruptcy. Hispanics do not join the call to prevent all immigration from Mexico. Tibetans and Taiwanese in America try to expand—not to contract—political options for their beleaguered people. If some Cuban refugees want to bring down Communism in Cuba, or Russian émigrés warn against Putin’s concentration of power, it is because Cuba and Russia *aren’t* liberal democracies.

**Ukrainian Americans have not mobilized to urge the capitulation of Ukraine to Russia. Hispanics do not join the call to prevent all immigration from Mexico. So why do so many American Jews organize against Israel?**

American Jews who propagandize and organize against Israel are the only members of a threatened minority who turn against the democratic homeland of their people on the pretext of promoting some higher cause. Whence such demoralization?

To those who know their Jewish history, this is a painfully familiar story, and rehearsing it gives no comfort. In his 1890 travelogue of a journey through the Tomaszow region of Poland, the Yiddish writer I.L. Peretz provided pen portraits of the Jewish types he encountered: shopkeepers, market-women, rabbis and their wives, children, tavern-keepers, artisans—and the *moser*, the obligatory Jewish informer. In the course of my studies of Yiddish literature, the cascade of synonyms I discovered for this figure testifies to the proliferation of snitches who reported to the authorities on the evils of their coreligionists. English is paltry by comparison.

To be sure, exceptional political pressures in 19th-century Europe created exceptional responses. Jews may be admirable in having no incentive to aggress against other nations, but the intensity of hostilities against them could sometimes generate less than admirable aggression against their fellow Jews. Moreover, it has to be stipulated that Jews who rattled for pay or personal advancement were less dangerous than the reformers who persuaded authorities to impose by fiat the “improvements” their fellow Jews would not voluntarily undertake.

Unhappily, the type persisted even in the radically changed circumstances of American democracy. David S. Wyman’s *The Abandonment of the Jews* (1984) describes failures by the American government to intervene during the Holocaust and by American Jewish leadership to assign top priority to rescue, but says little of those Jews who worked *against* Jewish interests.

One such group was the American Council for Judaism, founded in 1942 as an organization committed “to the proposition that Jews are neither a nationality nor a race in the modern world, but rather a religious group consisting of people of many nationalities and all races and from all streams (or denominations) of Judaism.” Regrettably for the Council, despite its reinvention of the Jewish people in what it hoped was an inoffensive form, the Nazis chose not to respect the distinction. They

pursued Jews as the very race or nationality that the Council claimed did not exist. The only hope for the Jews was to react as a people to save their people, which is what the Zionists had been doing for a half-century by trying to become politically autonomous. The Council constituted an anti-Zionist faction at a time when Palestine was the only potential escape hatch for the Jews of Europe, the only place that wanted the unwanted Jews.

A second and much larger sector of American Jewry that worked against Jewish political interests was the far left, including members of the Communist party, fellow travelers, and Trotskyist opponents of Stalin who shared his Marxist opposition to Jewish religion and nationality. Defining politics in terms of class conflict, the radical left insisted that the mission of the itinerant Jews was to pioneer the international transformation of humankind. In so doing, radical leftists, like their opposite numbers in the American Council for Judaism, reinvented politics in a way that falsified the war actually being waged against the Jews. They falsely claimed that the German proletariat was friendly to the Jews and would stand up for them against Hitler, and no less falsely claimed that Marxism was the only hope for Jewish salvation. But never mind what the left said it stood *for*; it stood *against* Jewish self-determination and it worked to prevent European Jews from reaching and securing the land of Israel when that was the route they needed and sought.

Soviet policy aimed at the dissolution of the Jews by incremental means. At home, despite boasts of having outlawed anti-Semitism, the Soviet Union through its Jewish enforcers prosecuted anyone who observed the Jewish religion, studied Hebrew, or affirmed attachment to the land of Israel. Abroad, Soviet policy supported the Arab anti-Jewish pogroms in Palestine as the catalyst of an Arab revolt against “British and Zionist imperialism.” American Jewish Communist newspapers relayed these slogans, knowing that the Jews of Palestine were themselves battling British imperialism. In fact, Soviet anti-Zionist campaigns of the 1930s provided the source for the later parallel drawn between Zionism and Nazism, and for other attempts to criminalize Jewish self-determination. As I noted above, that legacy persists to this day.

Although party members and fellow travelers constituted only a small percentage of American Jewry, anti-Zionism was the essence of their Jewishness. And so I emphasize what today’s American Jews have suppressed in their commemoration of the Holocaust: during the years of the Nazi mass murder of Europe’s Jews, the loudest American voices against the return of the Jews to Zion were those of American Jews claiming to be on the side of pluralism, justice, and world peace. Whatever may have been their intentions, those intentions had no bearing on the consequences of their deeds.

Thankfully, in the same decade that Jews lost one-third of their people, other Jews recovered Jewish sovereignty in the land of Israel. “Never was so much owed by so many to so few,” said Prime Minister Winston Churchill on August 20, 1940. He was talking about the Royal Air Force, but he might just as well have been talking about the Jewish pioneers of Palestine. Arab leaders, for their part, performed no analogous miracle. Though they emerged from the war better positioned than they had been for centuries, they thought less of building strong and healthy societies than of mobilizing those societies to undo the Jewish miracle. Three years later, having failed to defeat the Jewish state that came into being, the Arab nations refused to grant it recognition, thereby keeping open, with the aid of others, the question of Zionism that had been settled once and for all by the establishment of the Jewish state. Arab denial or rejection kept Israel *contingent*.



The protean war against Israel prosecuted by Arab and Muslim rulers after the end of World War II contributed to recreating some of the old political reflexes within Jewry. One might have thought that just as Israelis were conscripted into the IDF, Jews outside Israel would fight for the unequivocal and unconditional recognition that is every country's due. Indeed, some American Jews went and continue to go even farther than that, by volunteering to serve in the IDF alongside their Israeli counterparts. But many more Jews took a different route. Perhaps they thought: so what if the Arabs don't recognize us? Who cares? Or perhaps they believed that the problem would resolve itself in time. If so, they failed to understand that the Arab and Muslim refusal to recognize reality conveyed an intention to overturn that reality.

And we—for I participate in American Jewry's failures as well as in its accomplishments—failed to understand, or to remember, something else: the talmudic teaching that those who are soft on evildoers will end by being hard on their intended victims. Those who, tacitly or otherwise, defend anti-Semites will end by aggressing against Jews.

Thus, Israel's ability to defend itself against Arab aggression in the Six-Day war of 1967 gained *it* a reputation, including among liberal and leftist Jews, for "conquest," "militarism," "expansionism," and "imperialism." As with older charges once used by Jewish leftists to justify attaching themselves to the political battle against their fellows—"capitalists," "exploiters," and so forth—the new pretext for assailing Israel was that it had become an "occupier" of another people's land. In reality, Israel's "imperialism"—that is, its presence in the West Bank, Gaza, and the Golan—was to Arab hostility as the length of Jewish noses was to the Final Solution: irrelevant to the facts of the case but a useful pretext for those who wanted to deny them.

**Israel's citizenry has grown** increasingly sober in assessing what it stands to risk by relinquishing territory to people with no record of feasible self-governance. Where are American Jews here? Rather than throwing all of their efforts into trying to gain for Israelis maximal political leverage in so lopsided a conflict, many have taken to blaming Israel for the war being waged against it, with Israel's current prime minister as their favorite whipping boy. The escalating propaganda war against Israel within America, a war so conspicuously waged on university campuses, has tempted many into demonstrating their own innocence by excoriating their allegedly culpable fellow Jews.

Some go to great lengths in this sordid exercise, as was seen last summer when Hamas rocket fire from Gaza penetrated Israeli civilian areas to an unprecedented degree. In the course of this bombardment from territory that Israel had given up to Palestinians in 2005, the Jewish *Forward* ran anti-Israel cartoons by Eli Valley. One of them envisioned "a conversation on Zionism and the course of Jewish history" between two Israeli pilots "during a military mission over Gaza":

**Pilot One:** "For 2,000 years of exile we faced crushing anti-Semitism for a simple reason: we were not in charge of our destiny."

**Pilot Two:** "Agreed. We were a withered people, scattered like the wind and subject to the whims of those with an irrational, never-ending hatred."

**Pilot One:** "But now, with a state of our own we have full autonomy. We control our destiny, thereby liberating ourselves."

In the final panel, the pilots have dumped their load, leaving behind a gigantic billowing cloud evocative of Hiroshima:

**Pilot Two:** “And finally, at long last, the world’s irrational hatred will disappear.”

The cartoonist, whose work can also be seen in the *Nation*, has here outdone Arab propagandists in projecting a destructive passion onto the Jews, who allegedly enjoy destroying others in the spirit in which they themselves were once destroyed. Going a step farther, this Jewish insider also takes down a caricatured “Jewish history,” mocking the “rationality” of Zionism now that Jewish autonomy has issued in the supposedly wholesale, irrational murder of others. Back in the 1930s, it was the Communist Yiddish daily *Freiheit*, not the nominally democratic-socialist *Forward*, that ran anti-Zionist cartoons of this nature. If real Jewish history is any guide, Arab aggression will bring on more Jewish anti-Semitism of this kind.

### To the fun of thwarting Israel, J Street adds the fun of doing it as Jews.

The *Forward* is among several Jewish publications that specialize in what they like to call “provocative” messaging; but at least it was not created, as was the organization J Street, explicitly to foil political action on Israel’s behalf. Meeting with President Barack Obama on April 13, Jewish members of J Street asked him to lift the longstanding American veto protection of Israel at the United Nations, promising publicly to defend this proposed American sellout should the Security Council, now with Washington’s consent, call for the creation of a Palestinian state. Concerning the latest American nuclear deal with Iran, a country whose leaders ceaselessly proclaim that “the Zionist cancer” must be eliminated, J Street boasted of having joined the Arab American Institute and the National Iranian American Council in congratulating the president and his team for their “historic agreement that . . . averts a disastrous war.” To the fun of thwarting Israel, J Street adds the fun of doing it as Jews.

And then there are the campuses. The BDS movement is the crown of the propaganda war against Israel. “There should not be any equivocation on the subject,” states one BDS champion, As’ad AbuKhalil, a professor of political science at California State University: “Justice and freedom for the Palestinians are incompatible with the existence of the state of Israel.” Again, where are the Jews? Some of them are also professors, and some of these professors produce defamatory works of doctored scholarship, organize anti-Israel demonstrations, disseminate anti-Israel propaganda—and sponsor BDS initiatives at their universities and in their academic associations. Others stand by in fastidious silence, or chastise their pro-Israel students and colleagues for, essentially, making them uncomfortable.

Ostensibly more “even-handed” in its approach is the relatively new Jewish campus organization Open Hillel. According to its student founders, Open Hillel seeks to “encourage inclusivity and open discourse”—in plainer English, to include anti-Israel voices and groups in Hillel’s programming. This, it claims, has hitherto been disallowed by the international Hillel organization. From my experience, these students could have saved themselves the trouble. Many Hillel directors have already tipped so far to the Palestinian side of the “narrative” that at least once a year they have to parachute in a “pro-Israel” speaker for the balance they would not otherwise achieve. I know because I have been that speaker. I have met with Jewish students who stand up for Israel and America—for the liberal-democratic side—and I have met Jewish students who employ “inclusivity” as a code-word for bashing that side. Are we required to pander to the latter on account of their youth, ignorance, and demoralization? It is a rhetorical question.

**War differs from other forms** of human interaction in dividing us into those for and those against. The organization of politics against the Jews constitutes an unusual form of warfare in that all the aggression is on one side and all the hunger for resolution on the other. The desperation or “pessimism” that is generated by this genuinely irrational barrage has tempted some Jews to hold other Jews responsible, preposterously, for the suffering of Palestinian Arabs. Anti-Semitism thrives on the “hopeful” idea that if Jews are responsible for a crisis, it can be easily solved by the Jews’ transformation, or elimination. Some Jews, seduced by this irrationality, help to stoke its fires.

**Anti-Semitism has by now thoroughly corroded Arab societies and is making its way back into Europe. Can America prove exceptional by recognizing the threat and fighting it off?**

When the current enemies of the Jews first chose the universities as a primary battleground in America, they met little or no opposition from liberal administrators or faculty, including Jewish faculty. Anti-Semitism, after all, is just an idea—is it not?—and ideas, which is what universities traffic in, can be the springboard for the best of human endeavors. Indeed they can; but they are also the springboard for the worst, and not even God can help those who fail to distinguish between the two. Anti-Semitism, among the very worst of human inventions, has by now thoroughly corroded Arab societies and with great force and determination is making its way back into Europe. Can America prove exceptional by recognizing the threat and fighting it off?

The creation of Israel proved what a people can do with faith in its own restorative powers, and the defense of Israel proves that a robust democracy *can* stand up to evil. How good it would be if American Jews, on campuses and off, behaved in ways that emulated Israel’s self-respect and self-reliance, thereby bolstering the pro-Israel efforts of their fellow Americans who cannot help wondering why, with the danger so great, so many Jews are flaccid and disengaged, if not actively engaged on the other side. How astoundingly wonderful if, by dint of such moral self-reclamation, American Jews could help American universities, and the young people sequestered within them, to heal themselves of this most deadly pathology to which they appear all too willingly to have succumbed.

# Will Anti-Semitism Spread From American Universities to American Culture?

American society is solidly free of the Israel-centered anti-Semitism that dominates its universities. Can that last?



*A sign at an anti-Israel protest in 2014. DuncanC/Flickr*

BEN COHEN

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## About the author

Ben Cohen, a New York-based writer, has contributed essays on anti-Semitism and related issues to *Mosaic* and other publications.

At the end of her sweeping probe into the normalization of anti-Semitism on American campuses, Ruth Wisse lays down a double challenge. Can the United States, the world's pre-eminent liberal democracy and the one most exceptionally hospitable to its Jewish minority, retain that exceptional status "by recognizing the threat [posed by contemporary anti-Semitism] and fighting it off?" For their part, can American Jews, by gathering their mettle, help this country's universities "heal themselves of this most deadly pathology?"

In fact, the challenge is not just national but global. What happens in America will determine whether the Jewish people can maintain a center of power and influence in the Diaspora as well as in the sovereign state of Israel. At this critical juncture, as Wisse acknowledges, American Jewish political power, if it is to be effective, needs to be not just nursed but *projected*. The turmoil of recent years has been bruising: alongside the campus crisis and BDS, we have seen America's bilateral relations with Israel collapse, in tandem with an assault of unprecedented scale against the "Israel Lobby," a hydra-headed creature whose efforts to derail American foreign policy were menacingly portrayed in a 2007 book of that name by the political scientists John Mearsheimer and Stephen Walt.

As Wisse shows, anti-Semitism in American universities is channeled through the demonization of the state of Israel, which concretely gets expressed through the intimidation, rhetorical and sometimes physical,



of Jewish students. Much of the blame for allowing this state of affairs to fester lies with university administrators who, decking themselves in the garb of free speech, “tolerate, however squeamishly,” campaigns “to undo the Jewish homeland and to demonize the already most mythified people on earth.”

**It may be useful** to remember that this is not an altogether new story—even in America. In the 1930s, as Europe entered its darkest age, university administrators impeded efforts to find departmental posts for German Jewish academics fleeing Hitler. According to Stephen H. Norwood in *The Third Reich in the Ivory Tower*, there was already “a longstanding tradition in American colleges and universities of excluding Jews from their faculties,” a tradition then exacerbated by “administrators’ unwillingness to appoint refugees to anything but very short-term positions.” Simultaneously, university authorities were content to tolerate both agitation on behalf of, and apologetics for, the Nazi regime in Berlin. In June 1933, an alarmed Anti-Defamation League asked its academic contacts to “transmit [any] information they gathered” about German exchange students spreading “extremely destructive” Nazi propaganda on American campuses.”

Inevitably, the problem extended to faculty as well. German departments and German campus clubs played a key role in assisting the Nazis, in the words of a May 1935 report in the *Philadelphia Jewish Exponent*, “to inject the Hitler virus into the American student body.” Just as insidious were apologists for the Nazis who cautiously distanced themselves from the violent assaults by Brownshirt thugs on Jews and others while insisting that the German regime was essentially a rational actor deserving of respect. In this connection, Norwood highlights the efforts of the Institute for Public Affairs at the University of Virginia, whose professors assured Americans that Hitler’s seizure of power was caused by the “unfair conditions” imposed by the Allies in the Treaty of Versailles. In an article submitted to the *New York Times*, he notes, a history professor at Smith College purred that the restrictions imposed on Jews in April 1933, which included their expulsion from professions like medicine and law, were “relatively moderate.” (In a rare moment of institutional honor, Lester Markel, who ran the *Times* Sunday edition, turned the piece down.)

**Rationalizations like these** will be familiar to anyone today who has read the efforts to downplay the eliminationist cries of Iran (or Hamas, or Hizballah) as so much rhetorical bombast. But there’s an important difference. In the 1930s and 40s, by contrast to the present, strong *general* hostility to Jews was a serious factor in America. In a 1938 survey, 41 percent of the American public agreed that Jews possessed too much power. By 1945, that figure had risen to an astonishing 58 percent. In a separate survey that same year, even as victory in Europe beckoned, 23 percent of respondents answered that they would be influenced to vote *for* a candidate for Congress should he “declare himself as being against the Jews.”

By any measure, public opinion is vastly more benign today, and has been consistently benign, with only occasional and temporary dips, for decades. American society, as Wisse writes, “seems free—solidly free—of the anti-Semitism that infects American universities.” But there is that exception: in the elite precincts of colleges and universities, in the media and the publishing world, in many churches and in many policy circles, the ground has shifted dramatically. Which raises the question: given the influence of these sectors, how long can society at large remain resistant to the plague?

The answer to that question will not be revealed, at least not yet, in survey data. In the past, polling tended to focus on non-Jewish attitudes to Jews *as Jews*, thereby providing an accurate record of feelings about such conventional anti-Semitic tropes as, for example, Jewish avarice or Jewish clannishness. In our time, when anti-Semitism crystallizes around detestation of Israel, there is a need to explain, in the teeth of bitter opposition, why the phenomenon under investigation deserves to be called anti-Semitism at all.

This brings us to something that Wisse has written about elsewhere: the widespread accusation that Jews or others who raise concerns about the virulence of the anti-Israel mood are “playing the anti-Semitism card.” “Anyone who criticizes Israeli actions or says that pro-Israel groups have significant influence over U.S. Middle East policy,” complained Mearsheimer and Walt in *The Israel Lobby*, “stands a good chance of getting labeled an anti-Semite.” As they saw it, American Jews and their leaders, not content with perverting the proper aims of U.S. foreign policy, were also silencing honest criticism by calculatedly smearing the motives of the critics.

This, too, is an old trick: even that out-and-out anti-Semite Henry Ford harrumphed at having “to meet the degrading charge of ‘anti-Semitism’ and kindred falsehoods.”

An old trick, yet still a reliable one—and therein has resided perhaps the greatest difficulty when it comes to responding to Wisse’s dual challenge. The scholar David Hirsh, writing about the boycott campaign launched in British universities, observes that it “sought to protect itself against a charge of anti-Semitism by including clauses in its boycott motions which defined anti-Semitism in such a way as to make its supporters not guilty.” The same tactic was enshrined in a motion passed in 2003 by the Association of University Teachers (AUT), a British labor union representing academics:

Council deplores the witch-hunting of colleagues, including AUT members, who are participating in the academic boycott of Israel. Council recognizes that anti-Zionism is not anti-Semitism, and resolves to give all possible support to members of AUT who are unjustly accused of anti-Semitism because of their political opposition to Israeli government policy.

Similar arguments are deployed in America, too, including by anti-Zionist Jews. Currently, promoters of BDS in Indiana are seeking signatures for a petition that cites “the Torah values of justice,” no less, as being in complete harmony with the action of boycotting the Jewish state.

**But, thankfully,** that’s not the end of the story. The pro-BDS petition in Indiana was itself launched to protest a bill by Indiana’s state legislature declaring that body’s forthright “opposition to the anti-Jewish and anti-Israel” BDS movement. And the Indiana bill went even farther, decrying today’s *global* escalation of anti-Semitic speech and violence as “an attack, not only on Jews, but on the fundamental principles of the United States.” Finally, the bill expressed the legislature’s gratitude to the presidents of Indiana University and Purdue University for their own strong condemnation of the academic boycott of Israel.

The Indiana bill came nine days after a similar measure was passed by Tennessee’s state legislature. That resolution denounced the BDS movement as “one of the main vehicles for spreading anti-Semitism and advocating the elimination of the Jewish state . . . [and] undermin[ing] the Jewish people’s right to self-determination, which they are fulfilling in the state of Israel.”

The Indiana and Tennessee bills were passed following an active campaign by local Jews and their allies, including a large contingent of Christian pro-Israel advocates. In light of Wisse's challenge, they are valuable for several reasons. First, the legislators' unanimous support for the bills underlines the abiding affection with which large numbers of Americans regard Israel. Second, the bills were the product of activism at the local level—the very same political space in which the BDS movement has chalked up a slew of minor victories. Third, the bills amount to a policy guide for professional associations, voluntary groups, and other civil-society organizations faced with demands to endorse the boycott. Instead of allowing BDS advocates to define the issues on their own terms, these bills oblige them to explain first why and how they are not, in fact, trafficking in an especially devious mode of anti-Semitism.

Above all, the passage of the two bills neatly demonstrates the rightness of Wisse's stress on America's potential to exercise wisely and forcefully its exceptional clarity on the issue of anti-Semitism. American Jewish organizations would be well advised to take the hint, and to begin promoting similar measures in other states with the goal of isolating the boycott movement and forcing it onto the defensive.

In an earlier contribution to *Mosaic*, I argued that anti-Semitism in Europe had adopted the characteristics of a social movement, seeking a fundamental shift in beliefs and behavior with the aim of reaching a critical mass of opinion hostile to Jews. In practice, such shifts are achieved by transforming contentious propositions (for example, that Israel is an "apartheid state") into commonsense axioms that are then reinforced by opinion-forming institutions like universities.

But there is no good reason why the process can't be turned on its head, and even turned around, by groups prepared to seize the initiative, perhaps by taking the wins in Indiana and Tennessee as a point of departure. Defeating anti-Semitism necessarily entails, as a first step, exposing the *denial* of anti-Semitism that enables anti-Zionism to portray itself as considered speech and not as hate speech.

Ruth Wisse is to be applauded for the great lucidity of her own understanding that the fight against anti-Semitism is also a fight for the soul of our century, and that winning it will require a creative fusion of political influence and political imagination. The success of such a counteroffensive will be measured, both on and off campus, by how it affects assumptions and emotions about the Jewish state and the Jewish national movement that created it. Like Wisse, I hope that the American Jewish community, with the help of its myriad non-Jewish friends, will rise to the challenge.

# Unsafe Spaces

I thought our British universities held the patent on academic anti-Semitism; it seems America has caught up with us.



Students protest a 2014 visit to the Cambridge Union by Israeli Ambassador to the UK Daniel Taub. Chris Williamson/Getty Images

DOUGLAS MURRAY

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## About the author

Douglas Murray is an associate editor at the *Spectator* and author of, most recently, *The War on the West*.

In recent years, whenever I have had an opportunity to speak to an American audience concerned about anti-Israel activism and rising anti-Semitism, I point out that in these matters the U.S. is only a few years behind Britain and Europe. Look what is happening on the old continent, I say, and you can see your future. Reading Ruth Wisse's important essay, "Anti-Semitism Goes to School," is a reminder that the years change faster than my speeches—so much faster that I feel I can finally say, "Commiserations, America: you have caught up with us."

It is fascinating how closely our situations resemble each other. Throughout my adult life I have spoken repeatedly on British campuses, and the patterns described by Wisse, though still shocking, are deeply familiar. I have been ushered out of back doors, had things thrown at me, and on one occasion—during an Israeli engagement in Gaza—asked not to come to a London campus because certain students were threatening violence against any visitor known to be pro-Israel.

In this respect, the subject of Israel on campus does indeed, as Wisse shows, constitute an issue apart. As in the U.S., British seats of learning have turned from being hothouses of ideas to places where students are meant to expect a "safe space." Ideas unusual or discomfiting to them are designated as not just challenging or even dangerous but undesirable. At several of Britain's leading universities, "trigger warnings" now appear at the head of articles in student newspapers, allowing the reader to avoid encountering any potentially upsetting issue or idea.

But again as in the U.S., there is of course one exception to this regime of curated and policed speech, and that is anything connected to Israel. On this subject the whole offensive geyser is munificently allowed to gush



forth. If a student union were to organize, say, a debate on trans-sexuality, all of the speakers would exercise unimaginable care and sensitivity, and the audience would attend their words in respectful silence. Compare that with any debate on Israel.

A couple of months ago, Cambridge University's student union held the latest round of its now annual debate on the proposition that "Israel is a rogue state." Those speaking for the motion included the disgraced academic Norman Finkelstein, who lambasted the Jews for allegedly using the "Holocaust card" to their and Israel's advantage—and an obscure blogger by the name of Ben White. Outside the academy both of these figures would be unknown. At the university they—like the blogger Max Blumenthal in the U.S.—were treated like rock stars. The crowd cheered and whooped as its favorites knocked down supposedly sacred cows in terms that any outside observer could see as offensive to the most elementary standards of academic integrity and decency.

The presence at such debates of so many hijab-covered girls and their male counterparts—rarely to be found when the subject of debate is, say, the EU—may account for some of this. But it does not account for all of it. In the academy, as in the wider society, the 10-10-80 formula holds. Perhaps 10 percent of students care for Israel. Perhaps 10 percent care for the Palestinians. The other 80 percent just want to go out to the nearest bar, pretend to be cleverer than they are, and watch soccer. It is tempting for either of the 10 percenters to spend all of their time warring on the other 10 percent, a war neither is likely to win. In recent years, however, the Palestinian lobby has intelligently decided to devote much of its effort to persuading the 80 percent that its cause is theirs.

In this endeavour, the pro-Palestinian (or these days, more accurately, the anti-Israel) lobby has some advantages. Many of the people who speak for it on UK campuses—notably, the now-unseated MP George Galloway—possess serious rhetorical firepower. By contrast, British pro-Israel voices, especially if they are Jewish communal leaders, tend to slip into the kind of disarray or demoralization that often presages defeat. At the recent Cambridge debate, Finkelstein and White confidently rehearsed for the crowd what they expected their opponents to say. One of the opponents was the head of the Board of Deputies of British Jews. Failing to deviate from his indeed predictable text, his performance duly elicited gusts of laughter from the entire audience.

In the UK, the figures who inhabit the pro-Israel side in debates like the one at Cambridge tend to fall into a couple of crippling sadly defensive groups. There are the communal leaders whose tired arguments are no match for their opponents. "Israel is a democracy," they protest. "So what?" their adversaries reply; "it's also a criminal state." Then there are the pro-Israel "progressives" who talk up the subjects of gay rights and the easy availability in Israel of in-vitro fertilization (IVF). "So what?" again comes the reply; "you're still oppressing the Palestinians." It's hardly surprising that people who do this too much, not to mention the few pro-Israel academics, rapidly succumb to exhaustion.

This, I would suggest, is not solely a result of too few troops being spread too thinly. It is a result of the opposition's tireless vitriol and violence, and of the fact that the old arguments for Israel seem tired and the new arguments seem thin. A pro-Israel activist I spoke to in America who had just met her British counterpart said to me, memorably, "I've never met anyone so jaded or cynical." The British girl must have been all of twenty-two.

America does not currently suffer a comparable dearth of talent on the pro-Israel side. But that time could come—which is why diagnosing the problem correctly must lead to a search for solutions. Ruth Wisse’s essay reminded me of a couple of truths. For years I have thought it a mistake to assume that the radicals arrayed against Israel constitute a vast movement. They may well become that, but they are not there yet. The *organized* anti-Israel movement in the UK—as I believe in America—is in fact remarkably small. There is a hub, certainly, but it is neither huge nor impossible to defeat. If we are to avert an even worse state of affairs than the present, the crucial thing is to prevent the 10 percent—or wherever you peg that figure—from further polluting the 80 percent, or wherever that figure is now. Demographic trends in American life suggest this could get difficult. A recent Pew survey found that by 2050, Jews in America will be outnumbered by Muslims. But the outcome relies not just on numbers of people who can turn up but on the sharpness, pointedness, and essential unyielding truth of the message being conveyed.

I am also reminded of how important it is to raise the bar of what pro-Israel figures think of as a “win.” Wisse refers to a couple of examples but we all know of a thousand more. Item: a panel of extremists is “balanced” by the inclusion of a left-wing, broadly pro-Israel figure who fervently attacks Netanyahu or explains at length his or her differences with the government of Israel before leaving the tiniest amount of time to mention that it is not a rogue state. Item: the conference—in fact, an anti-Israel rally—scheduled for the University of Southampton and canceled a month ago to rejoicing among Jewish and other groups even though the university canceled on grounds only of fears for health and safety. That is not only not a glorious victory, it is not really a victory at all, but at best a small breathing hole in the ice. Victory is persuading universities that rallies that spread lies have no place in publicly-funded institutions devoted to the pursuit of truth.

Winning the argument involves going heads-up against the hardest and knottiest parts of the issue. Success in stopping a whole new generation from being brought up on lies involves individuals and groups relentlessly turning the anti-Israel movement around like a carriage-clock, opening up its back and displaying its wretched workings for all the world to see.

# How to Fight Anti-Semitism on Campus

Advice for today's Jewish college students: build and affirm, don't plead and apologize.



Young people at a Masa Israel program in 2009. Masa Israel/Flickr.

BARI WEISS

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## About the author

Bari Weiss is the author of *How to Fight Anti-Semitism*. She is a former opinion editor and writer at the *New York Times*.

During the fall of 2005—my sophomore year at Columbia—I took a lecture course on the history of the Middle East taught by a then untenured professor named Joseph Massad. One of my classmates, whom I'd met the previous year in a freshman literature seminar, was a Californian and a genuine Valley girl—naturally blonde and thin, but without the attendant ditziness. On one of my frequent weekend forays downtown, I ran into her in the subway. She had gotten to know me fairly well in that small freshman seminar, but now she confessed she had a question. You're a reasonable, good person, she said. So how can you be a Zionist?

Her question was entirely sincere. The farthest thing from an activist or rabble-rouser, she was simply curious how I, certainly no obvious racist, could support the last bastion of white, racist colonialism in the Middle East—which was what she was now learning about Israel. We certainly heard nothing from Massad himself to suggest that, contrary to the infamous 1975 resolution of the UN General Assembly, Zionism was *not* racism. Nor did we encounter any text to that effect. Our one assigned book on the Jewish state was *Israel: A Colonial-Settler State?* by the French Marxist scholar Maxime Rodinson. Suffice it to say that the question mark in the title was superfluous.

As for his personal views, Massad was nothing if not forthright. They were summed up nicely in two lines from a lecture he'd given at Oxford three years earlier: "The Jews are not a nation. . . . The Jewish state is a racist state that does not have a right to exist." Perhaps needless to add, his course, which was supposed to be about the whole Middle East, failed to mention the true brutalities—honor killings, slavery, female genital

mutilation, and so forth—endemic everywhere in the region but Israel.

Massad's real aim in the course was to implant in his students the idea that, as he wrote in *al-Ahram* in 2004, anti-Semitism was indeed "alive and well today worldwide"—but that its "major victims [were] Arabs and Muslims and no longer Jews." Indeed, according to Massad, Israel's "ultimate achievement" was "the transformation of the Jew into the anti-Semite, and the Palestinian into the Jew." Although he may not have succeeded in persuading everyone, he had succeeded with my classmate from California, and hardly with her alone.

Baudelaire said that "the finest trick of the devil is to persuade you that he does not exist." Adapting this thought to suit the current crisis at my alma mater and at a growing number of campuses across the country, I'd say that the finest trick of anti-Semites is to persuade you that they don't exist. Such, at any rate, is the powerful message delivered by Ruth Wisse in her analysis of how student coalitions, led by expressly pro-Palestinian groups but often supported by black, Hispanic, gay, and anti-Zionist Jewish groups, build momentum against Israel on campus. In pointing out that "multiculturalism has found its apotheosis in a multicultural coalition of anti-Zionists," she is entirely—and tragically—correct.

Although Wisse mentions the acquiescent role of many faculty members in the campus battle, she doesn't draw attention to the powerful incentives supplied in particular by Arabist professors, the legatees of Edward Said. Professors like Massad—who won tenure in 2009 despite the sustained and strong opposition of student whistleblowers, concerned alumni, and others—have turned untold numbers of naïve students into unwitting tools of anti-Semitism. The hard core of the campus movement does indeed comprise, as Wisse writes, the "heirs to the anti-liberal coalitions that raged in the 1960s against the war in Vietnam and against the traditional American values embedded in America's constitutional culture." But the silent members are often ignorant young people of good faith who, understandably, want to oppose racism but have been unknowingly drafted as foot-soldiers for the academy's most vicious bigots.

**So, aware that students** like my classmate are going to graduate with a deeply biased understanding of Israel, what is a Zionist to do?

The problem of tenured anti-Semites is far too complicated and entrenched to be dealt with summarily, but one critically important—and feasible—response is to shame them for *their* racism. Here, for instance, is Hamad Dabashi, Columbia professor and former chair of its department of Middle East Studies, on Israeli Jews:

A subsumed militarism, a systemic mendacity with an ingrained violence constitutional to the very fusion of its fabric, has penetrated the deepest corners of what these people have to call their "soul." . . . Half a century of systematic maiming and murdering of another people has left its deep marks on the faces of these [Jews], the way they talk, the way they walk, the way they handle objects, the way they greet each other, the way they look at the world.

That such a bigot enjoys tenure at a university whose biggest donors include well-known and proud supporters of Israel is a wonder and a scandal. That scandal must be continually, insistently exposed.

The other game plan I'd suggest is ancient, though these days it feels almost radical. It involves the internal orientation not of the anti-Semites but of pro-Israel campus Jews.



Let me explain. I spent much of my own college career trying to convince my fellow students—in the school paper, in public debates, and in the classroom that Zionists like me weren't colonialists, weren't oppressors, weren't war-mongers, and didn't control American foreign policy. Honest! I promise!

How I wish I could get back some of the hours I spent in this defensive crouch, diplomatically cajoling people to like me and my political position. If I had to do it over, I'd spend 90 percent of those hours doing something else entirely. A fellow alumnus whom I've never met, Ze'ev Maghen, gave me the idea. Now a professor in Israel, Maghen was a graduate student at Columbia in 1990 when Leonard Jeffries, an anti-Semitic professor of African studies at another university, came to speak on campus. The organized Jewish community on campus mounted a protest outside the hall. Shocked and outraged by the feebleness of its content, Maghen wrote an essay, "How to Fight Anti-Semitism," that, years later, an older student passed on to me and that I, in turn, have shared with any and all serious Zionists on campus. Herewith a few nuggets from that essay:

Seldom have I experienced such a welling-up of nausea, such an onslaught of disgust, such a feeling of helplessness in the face of unbounded ignorance, such a feeling of hopelessness for the predicament of my people, as I did that night. . . .

A man calls you a pig. Do you walk around with a sign explaining that, in fact, you are not a pig? Do you hand out leaflets expostulating in detail upon the manifold differences between you and a pig? . . . When it comes to concerted action, we are less Jews than we are anti-anti-Semites. . . .

How often, my fellow Jews, we gather to "oppose"; how rarely we gather to create. When, may I ask, was the last time any of us got together to form a movement for real change? When was the last time we stayed up all night debating and planning how to build and improve Israel, how to arrest and reverse assimilation in America . . . ? Once upon a time such pragmatic, productive idealism was the preeminent preoccupation of Jewish college students, this was how they spent their evenings, dreaming, planning, implementing. What has happened to us? How have we become bureaucratized, mediocratized, too cynical to dream, too complacent to struggle?

To my fellow Zionists currently sitting and tearing your hair out late into the night as you debate how to respond to Israel Apartheid Week, or the latest hummus boycott: I urge you to heed Maghen's wisdom. For one thing, building and affirming instead of defending and pleading will do wonders for you spiritually, emotionally, and intellectually. For another, it will win over—or at least pique the interest of—those among your fellow students who are in the same situation as the young undergraduate I chatted with on the Number 1 Broadway local train. Non-Jews respect Jews who respect Judaism, Rabbi Jonathan Sacks said recently, and the same goes for our own kind as well. This, I think, may hold especially true in the college years when young adults are trying out identities and allegiances. What is more attractive than people confident in themselves, grateful for their historical legacy, and proud of their culture?

Oh, and if you're looking for a role model for how to live such a life and be such a person, how to be a protagonist of Jewish culture and Jewish learning and Jewish humor while advocating the cause of Israel and the Jewish people with dignity and moxie, I've got the perfect person for you. Her name is Ruth Wisse.

# Jewish Studies against the Jews

As America's universities catch fire and its Jewish students grow more fearful, the field most likely to have something to say has remained silent—or worse. How did it go wrong?



*A man walks by Columbia University students at a vigil in support of Israel on October 12, 2023. Spencer Platt/Getty Images.*

ANDREW KOSS

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## About the author

Andrew N. Koss, a senior editor of *Mosaic*, is writing a book about the Jews of Vilna during World War I.

For the past several weeks, national and even international attention has been locked on the chaos brought to American college campuses by anti-Israel demonstrations that have become increasingly bold in flouting the authorities, harassing fellow students, and echoing Hamas slogans. Less attention has been paid to the professors who teach those students, yet no small number of professors have gotten involved, sometimes to comfort Jewish students, far more often to join the protesters or to complain about efforts to restore order.

Middle East-studies departments have been well represented, almost exclusively in the anti-Israel camp, but Jewish-studies faculty have largely sat out of the conversation. Some may find this strange. At a time of crisis for the Jewish people, and especially for Jewish university students, it would seem that those who have dedicated their lives to studying Jewish history, Jewish culture, and Jewish religion would have the most to contribute.

Having spent a good chunk of my life involved in academic Jewish studies, I am not especially surprised. The six years I spent studying Jewish history in graduate school were good ones: I had the usual share of ups and downs, but I got an absolutely unbeatable intellectual experience. Likewise, the four subsequent years I spent teaching Jewish history at universities were quite rewarding. I got an inside view of a lot of the problems with academia, but I had some great colleagues and students. I spent almost none of this time engaged in political fights about Israel, or anything else for that matter.

For all that, the problems in my old field have been building for decades,

and have now come to a head, clear for all to see. The silence is both the heart of the problem and the least of it: the way too many scholars of Jewish history have conducted themselves since October 7 has confirmed my growing suspicion that something has gone deeply amiss.

There was the November 20 open letter in the *New York Review of Books* that sixteen Holocaust and anti-Semitism experts wrote in November cautioning Jews against comparing the still-fresh massacre to the Holocaust and Hamas to the Nazis. This was not because nothing should be compared to the Nazis, but because it was the rhetoric of *Israelis* that should remind people of them, and it was the still-nascent campaign in Gaza that more resembled the Holocaust. There was the way that, on October 13, Raz Segal, a professor of Holocaust and genocide studies, argued that Israel's actions in Gaza were "a textbook case of genocide."

These problems are not limited to the fringes of the field or a few professors. The Association of Jewish Studies, the field's main professional organization in North America if not in the world, on October 9 sent a message to current and former members expressing "deep sorrow for the loss of life and destruction." This infuriatingly vague statement—who lost their life, and where, from whom?—received immediate pushback, leading to a second email the next day. Yet even the second likewise refused to name Hamas's victims.

There is a common thread to these and plenty more episodes. It is, thankfully, not that the worst mass murder of Jews since World War II cannot be condemned—things are not that bad yet in Jewish studies. It is that the attack cannot easily be condemned as an attack on *Jews*.

Perhaps strangely, perhaps not, this problem has reared its head at a time when the field is in many ways at its height. There are more professorships than ever before, more courses being given, and more books being published. Much of the scholarly work is extremely good, exploring previously unstudied subjects that deserve attention, and correcting errors and misinterpretations made by previous generations of scholars. Moreover, the field is more accepted by other disciplines than ever before, with distinguished experts in those disciplines mentoring students working on Jewish topics and writing on these topics themselves. Outside of the universities, the Orthodox and even the haredi world are showing newfound willingness to learn from academics, and academics are happy to oblige.

In a way, all that merely heightens the anger and disappointment Jews should feel at the shortcomings of those who study them. My goal in what follows is to attempt a diagnosis, to explain the origins of the ailment, and to think about a couple of models for restoring it to health. As I do, a picture will emerge of both an individual field highly relevant to the current crisis, and of the whole university, in all its tatters.

## I. The Emergence of Jewish Studies

The emergence of academic Jewish studies as something distinct from traditional religious study was a complicated process, so I offer here a highly abridged version. In my view it's worth beginning in the 16th century, when a German Jew was received into the Catholic Church and took the name Johannes Pfefferkorn.

Like some baptized Jews both before and after him, Pfefferkorn used his knowledge of Jewish texts, especially the Talmud, to defame his

former coreligionists. His success at his new calling eventually drew the involvement of Johannes Reuchlin, one of the great humanist scholars of his day and perhaps the greatest of all Christian Hebraists, who drew on his vast erudition to defend the Jews, no doubt saving them from persecutions that would have been far worse.

It was on the work and spirit of figures like Reuchlin that later Christian Hebraists would build. But it was only when Jews themselves became involved that one sees the emergence around 1820 of the field known as *Wissenschaft des Judentums*, a name properly translated as either the scholarship of Jewry or the academic study of Jewish things. The field's founders belonged to the first generation of Jews to attend German universities, and they were a remarkable bunch. Two of them, Leopold Zunz and Isaak Marcus Jost, wrote the first major works of Jewish history according to the sense in which history writing is now understood. Two others, Eduard Gans and Heinrich Heine, would later convert to Christianity; the former went on to become Germany's leading scholar of jurisprudence, the later one of its greatest poets.

Whether they remained Jewish or not, these men saw their scholarship as in the service of the Jewish people, part of a project to help it to obtain civil rights and to become more modern, which, as they understood it, meant moving away from Orthodoxy while maintaining a strong connection to Judaism. Even the converted Heine drew on what he learned from this circle in crafting his marvelous poem "Jehudah Ben Halevy," which tries to weave the story of Jewish literature into the story of the world. In the following decades, the founding group's most prominent successor, the historian Heinrich Graetz, played a key role in the formation of Conservative Judaism's German predecessor and developed a kind of proto-Zionism. Graetz rarely failed to use his knowledge to defend Jews from attack, doing so most prominently in a dispute with an eminent scholar of the ancient Near East who had written an "expert" defense of anti-Semitism. In a sense, this was a 19th-century version of the Pfefferkorn-Reuchlin debate, except this time the Jews had a defender from within their own ranks.

Later generations of Jewish scholars would take different approaches to their academic pursuits and had very different visions of the Jewish future. But all shared a sense that the study of Jewish life should also promote that life. The Russian historian Simon Dubnov (1860–1941) or the social scientists associated with the YIVO Institute for Jewish Research in Vilna wanted to preserve and celebrate the Jewish cultural heritage while paving the way for what they imagined as a new era of secular Jewish flourishing and political self-confidence. In Germany and Austria, their contemporaries—Franz Rosenzweig, Gershom Scholem, and Martin Buber—used modern Jewish scholarship to delve into the religious tradition for spiritual succor in an era of rising anti-Semitism and civilizational crisis.

After World War II, the so-called Jerusalem school—led by scholars at the Hebrew University—cultivated a view of Jewish history deeply informed by Zionism. The founders of Jewish studies in the U.S., meanwhile, drew on a newfound self-confidence as Jews and Americans and on a desire to salvage and rebuild the cultural and intellectual edifice the Nazis had demolished. They hoped, moreover, to bring the riches of Judaism and Jewish culture to an increasingly multicultural and tolerant country.

Perhaps the greatest examples of the intertwining of secular scholarship and the protection of the Jewish people came during the Shoah itself. In the Warsaw Ghetto, the historian Emanuel Ringelblum organized an underground effort to create the first Holocaust archive, preserving, with



considerable success, the experiences of a Jewish community even as it was about to be slaughtered. Another historian, Majer Balaban, performed one of the noblest recorded acts of intellectual dishonesty, arguing, in contradiction to his previous conclusions, that the Karaite Jews of the Crimea were descendants of Tatar converts. He thus persuaded the Nazis that these were not Jews in the racial sense and saved hundreds of lives.

We should not idolize these figures. They produced a vast corpus of brilliant scholarship, but also much that was flawed. Sometimes their ideological priors warped their interpretations. Nor did they see themselves merely as cheerleaders of, or apologists for, the Jews; they were happy to point out flaws where they saw them. Yet despite the intellectual and ideological variety among them, they shared an understanding that Jewish studies was an academic discipline dedicated to the pursuit of the truth, and that the pursuit of the truth was not in tension with but could even serve Jewish civilization.

For all the robustness of the field today, much of what has gone wrong comes from the loss of this shared sense, which has been replaced not with aloof impartiality, but with something more worrying. This transformation took place in several phases, the first, to my eyes, beginning slightly before the turn of the century.

## II. Decline, Phase 1

A generation ago, before terms like “intersectionality” and “critical race theory” made their way from academic conferences into political discourse, the new scholarly techniques of the day were known by the names “deconstruction” and “postmodernism.” Broadly speaking, these techniques rejected Enlightenment rationalism, grand narratives of human progress, and the notion that texts had well-defined meanings, instead seeing in them a struggle among competing meanings and narratives.

Since Jewish studies was part of the university and had been from its inception, it was no surprise when these techniques showed up on its shores. By the 1990s, Jewish-studies scholars were increasingly focusing their attention on individuals and phenomena that “didn’t fit into existing categories” or that “crossed boundaries.” As in the wider university, this research was not necessarily bad or even unimportant in itself. But, as in the wider university, an overabundance of it had a cumulatively corrosive effect.

*Cultures of the Jews: A New History* (2002), a multiauthor work assembled and edited by the historian David Biale meant to cover the entire scope of Jewish existence, embodied this problem. More postmodern than many of his contemporaries in the field of Jewish history, Biale has produced some important and intelligent scholarship. Many of the contributors to the volume have likewise earned their distinguished reputations, and it is one of those books I turn back to from time to time as a resource.

The problem with *Cultures of the Jews* doesn’t arise from any of the individual chapters, but in the idea that this hodgepodge could come together as a “new history” of the Jews, and, indeed, that the hodgepodge was a *better method than*, say, a work by a single author motivated by a central thesis. Behind this idea was a theory Biale had first outlined in 1994, when he decried what he called the “hegemonic discourse” of Jewish studies. The hegemony of this discourse was embodied in his view by the word “Judaism” itself, which Biale considered to have been “quite literally

‘invented’ by canonical Jewish thinkers in the last 200 years”—rabbis, scholars, or other authority figures—and which led to the exclusion of “those voices that have resisted or ignored this hegemony”—2nd-century Jewish peasants who might not have accepted rabbinic canons of interpretation, medieval Ashkenazi women, or any number of less-influential figures in Jewish history.

In most cases, Biale’s rejection of hegemony amounted to looking at exceptions to trends in Jewish history: liberating the field from hegemony meant that scholars ought to focus on other, less-popular matters. (It also meant accepting that it is necessary to challenge the “discursive distinction” between Jew and Gentile.) Looking at buried bits of history is not an unworthy goal, but the result, as realized in *Cultures of the Jews*, is a bit like Tom Stoppard’s *Rosencrantz and Guildenstern Are Dead*: it’s ingenious, but it isn’t as good as *Hamlet*, and it makes no sense if you haven’t seen the original.

The literary scholar David Roskies summed up the problem in his [review](#) for *Commentary*:

Although Biale would no doubt deny the charge, implicit in his historical trajectory, with its celebration of “hybridity” and “boundary crossing” and its lavishing of attention on the idiosyncratic, on converts and apostates and outliers of various stripes, is the assumption that historically Jews have had little or nothing to say for *themselves*. . . . What it utterly fails to explain is what they brought with them, or why, for the most part, they bothered to remain Jews. For that, one must look elsewhere.

In other words, investigations into neglected subjects like Babylonian magic bowls or the sexual indiscretions of wealthy Jews in Renaissance Italy can help add texture and detail to the story of the Jews, but these eccentricities of history cannot on their own convey that story. By trivializing and fracturing Jewish history in this manner, scholars like Biale left a void at the core motivation of the field: if there is not really any single thing as Judaism or a Jewish people, what makes Jewish history worthy of study in the first place?

That question lies at the heart at the field’s current troubles. Jewish-studies scholars did not have much trouble answering it in the past. As Ruth Wisse, who was part of the [pioneering generation](#) of Jewish-studies scholars in America, put it to me: originally, Jewish studies sought to tell the world “come see what Judaism is.” This was an attitude based on the assumption that Jewish history, culture, and religion had something to teach the world. Even when the field looked outward, its motivation came from inside.

But at some point, Wisse argued, the “come see” motivation was supplanted by another one, what she calls a “we can do that too” spirit, a competitive or jealous attitude that declared that Jewish studies can do what other fields do. To give an example, when women and gender studies burst on the broader scene, Jewish-studies academics wanted to prove that they too could deal with such questions in their own work. This proved a misstep. The problem is not with studying women and gender, nor with any of the other subjects of the “studies” fields as such. The problem, as it was with postmodernism, was oversupply: too much imitation, external motivation, and desire to be recognized for it have weakened the field’s own internal resources. Once that happened, Jewish studies became, to borrow a term, colonized by outside and increasingly ideologically driven methodologies.

I became aware of this shift, although I wasn’t sure what to make of it at

the time, in my first year of graduate school in 2004, when I encountered the then-trendy term “subaltern studies,” that is, the study of those who are oppressed or subjugated. The study of the oppressed—wasn’t this what Jewish historians had been doing since the 19th century? And why weren’t more of the practitioners around me saying, “Look, our field has been doing the subaltern thing for more than a century, here’s what we can teach you”? Instead, too many scholars within the field responded by saying, “How can we get in on this subaltern thing too?”

### III. Decline, Phase 2

At the time, I didn’t fully grasp how corrosive these trends would be. It was only the arrival of the fateful years between 2016 and 2021 that revealed the consequences of our earlier lack of intellectual self-confidence. That was when the growing influence of the set of ideas now called “wokeness,” a sharpening of tensions around the Israel-Palestinian conflict, the election of Donald Trump, revelations of widespread sexual harassment in Hollywood and elsewhere, the COVID-19 epidemic, and the slaying of George Floyd mixed together into a roiling cauldron of cultural-political passions. These passions overflowed into every sphere. They overflowed most of all into the academy.

At the beginning of this period, when I attended the Association for Jewish Studies conference in 2016, I found the climate not much different from what I had been used to. I made no secret of the fact that I had been working at *Mosaic*, a publication that has been known to advocate positions not always popular among academics, and nobody pelted me with stones, figuratively or literally.

When the stone throwing did start, in 2021, it was aimed at a scholar of American Judaism named Noam Pianko, who was forced to resign from his position as president of the AJS for the crime of participating in a conference call with Steven M. Cohen, an eminent demographer and sociologist who, it had recently been revealed, had been sexually harassing female colleagues.

Cohen was rightfully disgraced, but the defrocking of Pianko, on the other hand, was absurd and vengeful, an act not justified by his presence on the call. Academia has always been full of backstabbing and competitiveness and probably always will be. The Pianko affair, by contrast, had the character of a power struggle: the usual sniping was not enough, and had to give way to de-platforming, to disappearing.

Even more concerning was the way Cohen’s personal conduct was turned into a reason to lambast his research. Why was he so obsessed, his critics asked, with Jewish fertility, Jewish marriage, and Jewish “women’s bodies”? Something nefarious must be at work. Indeed, these preoccupations, they wrote, were symptoms of the fact that “American Jewish continuity discourse was embedded within patriarchal and misogynistic structures.” Here were Jewish-studies professors using the faddish vocabulary of 21st-century academia to set themselves against Jewish reproduction—a maxim encoded in the first commandment of the Hebrew Bible, a preoccupation of thousands of pages and works of Jewish law and thought, and a duty around which some of the religion’s and the world’s most interesting and vital cultural practices have grown.

If there was ever a signal as to the field’s shifting values, that was it. Cohen used the methods of social science to understand American Jews so that they could continue to exist and thrive. This was solidly in line with

what the field used to believe in—with one of its animating drives. The mostly secular and Marxist Jewish social scientists of 100 years ago whom I studied in my own research sought to use the methodologies of their time to understand Jewish life so that those who wanted to help the Jews would have data to draw on. Even in the recent past this belief held: for all my objections to David Biale’s vision, he argued in his 1994 essay that it is admirable for Jewish historians to “shape their work to engage the pressing cultural questions of Jews” in their own time. Twenty-five years later, Cohen was being targeted for trying to do the same.

And this targeting revealed that a question had opened up at the core of the field. If Jewish studies should not be put to use for serving the Jewish people, and Jewish studies isn’t some wholly impartial form of scientific study, then what is its purpose?

## IV. The Eye of Critique Turns

Condemning other Jews has been a favorite Jewish activity from time immemorial—just open the book of Jeremiah. It’s certainly an activity that Jewish historians and academicians never refrained from engaging in. A Jewish studies that engaged only in apologetics and eschewed any unflattering material about its subjects would be dishonest, disingenuous, and boring—a poor field indeed. But it is hard to escape the conclusion that many of its practitioners now believe that Jewish studies exists in order to criticize Jews. They may believe that this is a form of helping them. But the emerging tendency isn’t about pointing at past mistakes from which Jews today can learn lessons. Nor is it about holding up past virtues to contrast them with the supposed defects of the present. It is about using Jewish history as a cudgel.

Examples of this attitude are none too hard to find. In 2020, I reviewed an ambitious work of history called *Jewish Emancipation*, by the Yale historian David Sorkin. The book was exceptionally impressive and analytically astute. But some of the author’s conclusions struck me as forced, especially his insistence that Jews are not yet fully “emancipated.” To make this case, Sorkin devoted the final pages of his book to lamenting the existence of American Jews who send their children to private schools, oppose affirmative action, and do not “remain concerned for the equality of all members of society.” Sorkin made a similar argument about contemporary Israel, where, in his view, Jewish emancipation has been stymied by discrimination against women, Mizrahim, Arabs, and the non-Orthodox. To look at this another way, here was a top scholar in the field marshalling the authority of Jewish history to condemn Jews that he didn’t like, be they too religious, too racist, too communal.

Equally revealing was an experience related by the historian Joshua Karlip, who has emerged as the field’s most astute internal critic. When asked at a 2020 Jewish-studies panel to explain the growing scholarly interest in tracking and describing anti-Jewish violence, he offered the fairly obvious answer: an increase in anti-Jewish violence had made the topic seem more relevant. Yet a senior scholar who was present took umbrage at the suggestion and told him that his answer “was exceedingly Jewishly focused.”

Exceedingly Jewishly focused is an outlandish criticism to offer in a discussion of Jewish historiography, at a Jewish studies seminar, in response to a comment regarding anti-Jewish violence. It is impossible to imagine it being offered even ten years ago. It would have been regarded as nonsensical. Jewishly focused was the point.



For his part, Karlip saw this exchange as part of a larger de-Judaizing trend in the field, noting the “often scant Jewish knowledge” of many of its scholars, of whom as many as 80 percent are “not able to read Hebrew sources fluently.” It sounds outrageous, but there’s little doubt he’s right: the mid-20th-century days when scholars like Yosef Hayim Yerushalmi and Isadore Twersky dominated the field and demanded extensive and detailed knowledge of classical religious texts is largely a thing of the past. The greater interest in Jewish studies from other fields has brought with it much that is fresh and beneficial, but its cost has sometimes been dilution. A lack of Hebrew—a hard language to master—or of the fundamentals of Judaism doesn’t stop someone from producing an excellent account of, say, Romanian anti-Jewish laws in the 19th century, but it can prevent a thorough investigation of those laws’ effects on the Romanian Jewish community.

Still, I don’t think Karlip’s explanation of declining knowledge gets at the motivation behind the bizarre rebuke he received. After all, there are still many crack talmudists and ordained rabbis today who put their extensive knowledge to academic purpose. In my view, Karlip provoked such a response from his interlocutor because he violated a very specific taboo: he mentioned the murderous attacks on the Poway and Pittsburgh synagogues in the same breath as the deaths of hundreds of Israeli Jews at the hands of Palestinian terrorists during the second intifada. I suspect that this is what was meant by “exceedingly Jewishly focused”—too focused on the wrong kind of Jews, and on the wrong kind of anti-Semites. To Karlip’s interlocutor, the deaths of those Israeli Jews happened because they were Israeli and not because they were Jewish. To say otherwise, as Karlip had—even to admit the possibility that the intifada was motivated by anything other than a fight against oppression—was to commit a grievous conceptual error: Israelis could not be allowed to drink from the fountain of subalternity.

Is it thus any surprise that in the wake of October 7, the Association for Jewish Studies could not say aloud that those killed were Jews, and that they were killed because they were Jewish?

## V. Disentangling Israeliness and Jewishness

The need to disentangle Jewishness and Israeliness was similarly at play in a disturbing occurrence that took place at the most recent AJS conference in December 2023, an occurrence that I don’t think has been reported elsewhere.

Perusing the conference catalogue from afar—I haven’t been in several years—I found no shortage of talks and panels that piqued my interest, and I was pleased to see presentations on a variety of subjects that I think have been insufficiently studied: Jewish responses to the First World War, Kabbalah and early modern science, contemporary haredi society, and a bevy of panels on Yiddish. Others covered topics probably no less serious that appeal to scholars whose interests are very different from mine. There were plenty of the eye-rolling sort that you find at any academic conference too—presentations like “How Goodly Are Your Tents: Studying the Bible Through Circus Arts.”

And then there were the Israel panels, with participants ranging from the far end of the Zionist left to outright anti-Zionism, often without representatives of other views. One revealing panel description asserted that Benjamin Netanyahu’s “political theology . . . explicitly aims at

preventing Jews from following a natural impulse to retreat towards liberal-diasporic forms of Judaism aimed at maintaining the torch of universalistic ethics.” The language is dense but revealing. The issue isn’t whether the prime minister has a political theology or what it consists of. It is the assertion that Jews’ “natural impulse” is toward a “liberal-diasporic” Judaism, which is the only kind that can support “universalistic ethics,” an ethics that is taken to be an obvious and unqualified good.

All of this is an elaborate way of saying that the non-liberal-diasporic form of Judaism, the national-communal form of Judaism known as Zionism, goes against Judaism’s very nature. This the sort of statement I was rightfully taught in graduate school to eschew as a form of “essentialism.” It is also the sort of statement that is intended to depict Israelis as something akin to traitors to the Jewish story.

And it is a statement came to life on the last day of the conference, at a session on Jewish humor during which one of the participants, a left-leaning Israeli professor, shared some scholarly reflections on Israeli comedy in the wake of October 7. During question time, someone in the audience, with support from likeminded companions, took an increasingly hostile line. Weren’t satirical skits on Israeli television lampooning Hamas and its Western supporters racist and homophobic? Didn’t this presentation implicitly—arrogantly—assume that the audience was made up entirely of Zionists? Worse still, didn’t the talk, and those in the audience who laughed at the material, effectively endorse the mass slaughter of Palestinians?

After a while, the presenting professor fainted, apparently in part due to a medical condition, which didn’t deter her opponents from harassing her further while she was down. She tried to continue but collapsed again and had to be taken to the hospital, where, thankfully, she recovered. Her chief antagonist, who regularly posts on social media about the evils of Israel and its Jewish supporters, specializes in European Jewish history and is himself Jewish. I was told by multiple people who were present that he and his fellows remained unrepentant, although the AJS authorities reportedly reprimanded him.

Somehow, it seems, a Jewish-studies conference has become an unwelcome space for Israelis to speak openly about Israeli culture, and there is a growing contingent within the discipline that believes the subject can only be discussed in a way that highlights Israel’s sins. This is a disturbing and unjust development, and one that is destined to corrupt scholarly pursuits.

Perhaps even worse, it seems as if the same attitude is starting to be applied to what might be called the Israeli characteristics of Judaism. A panel at the same conference about the history of the Jews of the American West described the way that Jewish books, museums, and communal commemorations “have long embraced settler-colonial narratives of westward expansion, celebrating the unusual degree of belonging and freedom experienced by 19th-century Jewish pioneers, while obscuring the violence of western settlement.”

The claim is that American Jews have spent too much time focusing on their successes and their escape from persecution and discrimination and not enough on their evils. Evils that happen to resemble the same claims that are now loudly made about Israelis. Evils like settler colonialism. Evils like genocide.

Thus, the panelists demand historians “grapple with . . . Jewish participation in settler colonialism, including land theft and genocide.” American westward expansion indeed involved terrible mistreatment of

Native Americans, including land theft and arguably genocide. I don't doubt that there were Jews who participated in such horrors. But the claim that Jews as a community "have long embraced settler-colonial narratives" is nothing else than a turning on American Jews of the intellectual gun now used against Israel. Are Jews just a people bound to engage in settler colonialism, land theft, and genocide? That's the sense you get from the leading edge of the field.

## VI. Anti-Zionism Bleeds Out

The way that vicious anti-Zionist attitudes are now bleeding from the study of Israel into the study of the diaspora is also evident in the work of Shaul Magid. Magid is the author of much sophisticated research into the history and theology of Hasidism. Now he devotes his scholarly efforts to furthering what he terms a "counter-Zionist" worldview, expressed most fully in his most recent book, *The Necessity of Exile*. Then there is his previous book, a biography of the ultra-Zionist terrorist [Meir Kahane](#) that seeks to tie what Magid doesn't like about American Jewry—in particular its attachment to Israel and its fear of rising anti-Semitism—to Kahane, so that fairly mainstream Jewish attitudes get tarred with Kahane's bigotry and penchant for violence.

Paralleling this development, there seems to be a willingness in the field to absorb the ideas of anti-Zionist scholars from outside Jewish studies, and not only when it comes to evaluations of the history of the Jewish state. Jasbir Puar, a professor of women's and gender studies at Rutgers, has become especially successful by combining queer studies, disability studies, and "biopolitics" in the service of leftwing causes. Her most recent book, *The Right to Maim*, propagates the most perfervid libels against Israel, such as the accusation that Israel is responsible for American police abuse of African Americans. The field of Jewish studies cannot be expected to prevent slanders like these from spreading in other fields. But surely it is not too much to expect scholars in a field devoted to the careful study of Jewish matters not to repeat them or to endorse those who propagate them. Yet one can find Jewish-studies papers declaring their debt to Puar's work.

Perhaps even more pernicious is the influence in Jewish studies of the anthropologist Nadia Abu El-Haj, whose first book, *Facts on the Ground*, almost prevented her from getting tenure at Columbia University because it argued, preposterously, that Israeli archaeologists wantonly destroy artifacts of Arab history in a politically motivated pursuit of evidence to back up Jewish claims to the land of Israel.

Abu El-Haj's second book, *The Genealogical Science: The Search for Jewish Origins and the Politics of Epistemology*, expands the target from Israel to Jews. It purports to be an anthropological study of Jewish interest in genetic markers of Jewish descent, which it attempts to tie to 19th- and early 20th-century race science—an argument that has the tenor of an accusation. The premise is evident on the very first page: namely, that "there is no evidence that a collectivity called 'The Jewish People' was exiled from ancient Palestine or descendants of that collectivity lived for generations in the diaspora and then returned to the land of Israel and founded the modern Jewish state. The story of an 'exiled-people race' is the creation of modern Jewish nationalism."

Starting from this point—a point that echoes Biale's challenging of the idea of "the Jewish people"—*The Genealogical Science* is only one step removed from the crackpot theories of the mid-century Jewish intellectual Arthur

It's Koestler, of acolytes of Louis Farrakhan, and of various neo-Nazi-types on the dark corners of the Internet: today's Jews aren't the "real Jews." It is the work of a scholar with a flimsy understanding of Judaism and Jewish history that—judging by the footnotes and repeated quotations—is informed primarily by the radical anti-Zionist historian [Shlomo Sand](#), author of such books as *How I Stopped Being a Jew*. Once again, historians of Judaism should shun *The Genealogical Science* as bigoted and unserious. Instead, I have more and more found it cited as something to be taken seriously, even if the result is to reject Abu El-Haj's conclusions. Jewish studies will only become more susceptible to such falsehoods if it continues to invite in scholars ignorant of the fundamentals of Judaism and Jewish history.

## VII. The Current Crisis

It's important not to overstate things. So far as I can tell, the ideas that the Jews have no historical existence as a people or that settler colonialism is a particularly Jewish vice remain on the fringes. For all this disturbing scholarship, it still remains confined to a minority in both the university and the field of Jewish studies. At heart, most professors are pedants obsessed with their own obscure and narrow corner of research, and aren't especially politically active or radical. This is both encouraging and a major weakness, encouraging because most professors even at this late date are reasonable people, a weakness because they are too reasonable, too afraid, too reticent to speak up.

For this reason, the deepest danger to the field isn't that all current Jewish-studies professors will become obsessed with bad ideas, but that bad ideas tend to drive out good ones if not actively fought (and that future Jewish-studies professors will take them as normal and acceptable).

Unfortunately, that is what seems to be happening. It is precisely now, when Jews are murdered in Israel and bullied on campuses across the country, that one might expect Jewish-studies professors to have something to say. The problem is that they don't seem to agree. They have become practiced at speaking up only when comfortable for them—when they feel they can reasonably go along with the climate emanating from the rest of the university.

This is the dynamic, I suspect, behind the weak AJS letters in the days after October 7, and behind the silence of most Jewish-studies professors in the last few weeks, as the anti-Israel protests have become disturbingly anti-Semitic, even though that's something most of them surely see.

It is perhaps what impelled David N. Myers, a prominent professor at Jewish history at UCLA, to take to the pages of the *Forward* last week to condemn "one of the darkest nights" in UCLA's history, a night that saw a "total systems failure by the university, the city of Los Angeles, and the state of California." By this he didn't mean the fact that protesters had taken over campus, were harassing students and preventing them from getting to class, and were repeating the slogans and waving the flags of murderous terrorist groups. He was silent about all that. No, what moved Myers to take a public stance was the violence committed by pro-Israel counterdemonstrators, who seem to have stormed a protest encampment in the middle of the night. After criticizing them, he added that *peaceful* pro-Israel protesters "bore striking similarities" to the violent ones, and admonished Jewish communal leaders to join him in his condemnations. Myers is not wrong about the violence—it should not have happened. He is simply revealingly selective in what he speaks and doesn't speak about.



Here he is matched by one of the more famous Jewish studies professors in the country. Harvard's Derek Penslar entered the spotlight a few months ago, when, after much turmoil on campus, Harvard asked him to co-chair the school's anti-Semitism committee. Penslar is an accomplished scholar who has devoted most of his career to substantive research. And when he comments on anti-Semitism as a current issue, it has always been to reduce its boundaries. He said in January that complaints about anti-Semitism are "exaggerated," and has shown a deep commitment to the Jerusalem Declaration on Anti-Semitism, a document that bears the signatures of many prominent professors of Jewish studies and that is designed explicitly to narrow the definition of anti-Semitism.

Imagine a professor of African American studies who had argued that racist abuse perpetrated by American police officers is a much smaller problem than commonly assumed, and that many of the cases usually adduced as examples of racist policing ought not to be considered racist at all. Would he be considered as a possible chair of a major anti-racism center, or to head up a committee about how to respond to racist incidents on campus?

Of course not. We don't have to do much conjecturing either: Roland Fryer, a Harvard economist and expert on racial equality argued in a 2019 paper that there was no racial disparity in policing in the city of Houston. Claudine Gay got him suspended.

But Fryer was never a professor of African American studies. In fact, I doubt such a department would have him. For better or worse, that's what sums up the difference between Jewish-studies departments and every other "studies" department, and that is what returns us to one of the central problems I earlier described: professors in Jewish studies are increasingly drawn to seeing their job not as advancing the prospects of Jews but as exposing their faults, real or imagined. It is hard to imagine Gershom Scholem or Heinrich Graetz behaving the same way.

Rightly or wrongly, academia has committed itself wholeheartedly to the study and elevation of the oppressed, the subaltern. There are indeed some scholars who have applied this term to Jews, but in general Jews are too white, too successful, and above all too Zionist to fit into this category; if they were ever seen as subaltern, they are no longer. And, to return to the other core problem of the field, this means that the original aim of Jewish studies, to advance the prospects of Jews, must be questioned and abandoned, if not reversed.

This need not even be particularly desired on the part of Jewish-studies professors. It just needs to be pressed on them. When Zionism becomes one of the great evils in the eyes of their colleagues, when Judaism is linked to genocide across the world, Jewish faculty embedded in the broader university inevitably feel that they have to demonstrate that they are not associated with *those* Jews. To justify their interest in Jews—to themselves as well as to their colleagues—Jewish-studies professors increasingly feel a need to show that they are active denouncers of Jewish sins. To maintain their credibility, especially if they want to get prestigious appointments, they must display their credentials by keeping up with the latest trends. The idea of Orientalism, created by Edward Said with the primary purpose of attacking Israel, has gone somewhat out of style, but accusations of Israeli colonialism have not. The savvy scholar, jockeying for one of an ever-dwindling number of university appointments, will at the very least pay homage to these theories and their worst proponents. Otherwise, they risk the worst of all possible outcomes: being branded as conservatives.

Thus, Noam Pianko must be de-platformed, Steven M. Cohen's research must be explained by his abuse, Jasbir Puar's work must be seen as a font of wisdom, Jewish settler colonialists in Colorado must be condemned alongside those in Katamon, the Jewish connection to the Land of Israel must be questioned, and worse still is yet to come.

## VIII. What Undergraduates Want

So far, this essay has focused on the ex-cathedra statements of scholars and the work they produce. It has ignored until now what the field looks like from the student perspective. Given that they make up half the university, it's worth thinking about them for a moment. What do undergraduates want from Jewish-studies departments and what are they getting?

First, a qualification. Jewish-studies classes are attended by Jews and non-Jews alike. At some universities, non-Jews make a clear-cut majority of students taking Jewish-studies classes. That's a good thing for all sorts of reasons, most importantly because the primary goal of all university departments is education and scholarly research. As much as I've argued here that it's proper for Jewish studies to serve the Jews, it must also engage in less parochial aims.

Still, that doesn't mean it's not fair to ask what Jewish studies can and should offer Jewish students. Here I want to draw on my own personal teaching experience: from 2005 to 2007 as a graduate student at Stanford, and from 2010 to 2014 as a professor at Brooklyn College and Colgate University. These are three very different institutions, and I encountered a wide range of students, from people who had grown up in relatively insular Orthodox communities, to suburban Jews with paltry Jewish educations, to Haitians and Jamaicans who had no idea Jews existed as a modern people before moving to Brooklyn but knew their Bible backwards and forwards.

So far as I can tell, Jewish students want three things, beyond just a chance to expand their knowledge about a subject important to them, or to take a class that fulfils a requirement, isn't too early in the morning, and is taught by someone who doesn't have a reputation as a tough grader.

First, there are Orthodox students from yeshiva or day-school backgrounds who think they can get an easy A, but there are also many who are very eager to have a perspective on Judaism and Jewish history that's different from what they learned from their rabbis. Teaching them can be very rewarding. There are probably some professors who take inordinate pleasure in destroying the (supposed) myths these students hold dear, but my impression is that that's become less common over the decades, not more.

Second, there are students who have had very little Jewish education of any kind and want to make up for it. Sometimes, I suspect that their parents want the same thing. Jewish-studies departments can do much for these students, but even at their best are ill-suited for the job. If these courses have a message that is anti-Jewish, then the results will be that much worse. Talking to these students outside of the classroom, I found myself torn between acting as a professor and a committed Jew wanting to engage in religious outreach. And that problem just highlights how ill-suited professors are to doing the job of Jewish educators.

Third, there are students who want someone who can bolster them when under attack, or at least put in difficult situations, as Jews.

When it comes to the first, these students will always be a minority, but Jewish-studies departments are well equipped to giving them what they want. As for the second, Jewish-studies courses are a great way to enhance a Jewish education, but no substitute for one. Here the burden lies on parents. If you don't want to send your kids to day school or yeshiva, enroll them in Hebrew school or Jewish summer camp; take them to synagogue; send them to Israel; celebrate Jewish holidays; read them Jewish books; go to the rabbi's house for Shabbat dinner; have them apply to extra-curricular programs. But don't think for a minute that college courses can make up for any of this.

The third desire, for support, was mentioned to me by two different professors quite recently. These students' needs entail anything from asking about how to handle an exam scheduled on Shabbat to wanting to talk to somebody about a vicious anti-Israel protest to wanting to hear the facts from someone with authority who doesn't seem hostile to the Zionist enterprise. Only one of these professors, it's worth noting, is in Jewish studies, but it's not crazy to say that Jewish-studies professors should be natural people for students to turn to. It's also probable that the professors' disappointing silence, if not hostility, to Israel over the last six months will make that much less likely.

## IX. Is Jewish Studies a Lost Cause?

Ultimately the problems of Jewish studies flow from the problems of the university. I frankly don't know how these problems can be fixed, so I won't try to end with direct prescriptions for reform. Instead, I'd like to offer some examples of things that are going right—not examples of good scholarship, of which there is still no shortage, but of Jewish scholarship being used to help the Jews. Perhaps highlighting such scholarship can persuade more scholars to follow in its footsteps.

First, university scholars are rediscovering the appeal of speaking to non-scholarly audiences, and that is true of Jewish-studies scholars in particular. There is a **tremendous interest** in academic Jewish studies among the Orthodox and among Haredim, as shown by the remarkably successful SeforimChatter podcast. And it's not just the Orthodox. A bevy of podcasts as well as publications (like, well, this one) regularly offer academics platforms that weren't available a decade or two ago to write things that aren't necessarily ideological, things that bring their academic expertise to bear on questions of public concern. These endeavors provide audiences with a chance to learn, but also teach academics to speak to the Jews.

Beyond this, I'd like to single out two cases that represent what Jewish studies can and should be. I should disclose that I've had positive personal and professional encounters with both of the individuals I'm about to discuss, but I've deliberately avoided choosing as examples friends, colleagues, and mentors so as to remain somewhat unclouded by bias.

The first is Naomi Seidman's 2019 book, *A Revolution in the Name of Tradition: Sarah Schenirer and Bais Yaakov*. A graduate of the University of California, Berkeley who writes on topics like "the sexual politics of Hebrew and Yiddish" and "gender and the remaking of modern Jewry," Seidman is one of the pioneers of women's studies in Jewish studies. I don't know what her political beliefs are, but I suspect they are very different from mine.

The subject of this book, Sarah Schenirer (1883–1935), was a young

woman from a Polish hasidic family who helped to establish a network of Orthodox schools for girls at a time when such institutions were all but nonexistent in Eastern Europe. Today, most haredi girls' schools are part of this network, and Seidman, an ex-Hasid, attended one herself.

Schenirer has become a revered figure in haredi circles, and Seidman's biography challenges many elements of the hagiographic narrative of her life. It is also meticulously researched, full of insight and penetrating analysis as well as human sensitivity. As an Orthodox Jew with considerably more liberal attitudes about education than the average Bais Yaakov principal, I appreciated Schenirer *more* after reading this book. I can't imagine anyone but the most hardened ideologue (either haredi, feminist, or anti-Orthodox) reacting differently. Seidman's book undermines the picture of Schenirer the saint and gives us something much better: a full-fledged human being to be admired and even emulated.

I'll also note that Seidman, in her nonacademic writing, has used her formidable intellectual abilities as well as her personal experience to defend the Jews—without engaging in apologetics—in her [review](#) of the miniseries *Unorthodox*, about a young woman leaving her hasidic community.

My second example is a scholar named Jonathan Gribetz, now of Princeton. His book, *Defining Neighbors: Religion, Race, and the Early Zionist-Arab Encounter*, has, improbably, received praise from Ruth Wisse *and* from Columbia's Rashid Khalidi, academia's most eminent apologist for Palestinian terrorism.

But I don't want to highlight Gribetz's scholarship, but instead his pedagogical approach, which he recently outlined in an interview with the Orthodox podcaster and rabbi Dovid Bashevkin. Rather than shrinking from the challenge, Gribetz finds himself teaching classes on Israeli and Palestinian history to classes that include Jews as well as Arabs, classes in which he brings an approach that strikes me as just right. "This class," he tells his students, "is *about* the Israeli-Palestinian conflict, but it's not the Israeli-Palestinian conflict." If only the Khalidis of the world had the same attitude.

One of my intellectual heroes is Max Weinreich, a linguist and Yiddishist who was among the founders of Vilna's YIVO Institute, and the only one to survive the Shoah. Contrary to widespread misconception, he wasn't an anti-Zionist, although he wasn't quite a Zionist either. He was deeply committed to two principles: one was that Jewish scholarship should be in the service of the Jewish people. The second was that YIVO should be *unparteyish*, a Yiddish word that literally means nonpartisan, but also conveys something more. The YIVO of old was open to scholars of all political and religious orientations, and it exemplified the hope that scholarship could transcend political loyalties, that research could be oriented toward the truth, and that such an endeavor would strengthen the Jewish people. That's the vision we should hope Jewish studies can recover. This task is hard enough under any circumstances. It's downright impossible if Jewish studies becomes a weapon against the Jews.



# The Hounding of Noam Pianko

The latest drama in the field of Jewish studies has turned into a campaign to reframe the perpetuation of Jewishness as a dystopian project of enforced reproduction.



Uwe Ansapach/picture alliance via Getty Images

RUTH R. WISSE

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## About the author

Ruth R. Wisse is professor emerita of Yiddish and comparative literatures at Harvard and a distinguished senior fellow at Tikvah. Her memoir *Free as a Jew: a Personal Memoir of National Self-Liberation*, chapters of which appeared in *Mosaic* in somewhat different form, is out from Wicked Son Press.

Last month, the historian Noam Pianko, a professor at the University of Washington and the director of its Stroum Center for Jewish Studies, was compelled to resign as president of the Association for Jewish Studies (AJS). His offense was having attended a private Zoom meeting in March, at the invitation of academic colleagues, to discuss a scholarly paper relating to his field of American Jewish history.

Both the AJS committee forcing Pianko's resignation and he in accepting and agreeing to it affirmed their theoretical commitment to academic freedom. "However," he wrote in his explanatory note,

I have now come to understand that although I violated no AJS policy, my role as president of AJS necessitated a different set of obligations and standards than other members of the organization. Accepting this meeting invitation was a mistake.

Some cynics might say that Pianko's confession-cum-resignation merely confirms the degree to which the AJS is striving to keep up with academic fashion. But this episode affects me personally because of my long investment in the field of Jewish studies and in the AJS itself. As it happens, the manner in which Pianko was forced out traces back to a development that confronted me in my own term as AJS president in the late 1980s. When I lost that particular battle—an episode to which I'll return—I did not foresee the extent of damage that still lay in store and whose poisoned fruits lie everywhere about us. Involved in this resignation is not just some institutional squabble, but the intellectual integrity of the academic study of Judaism.

**Where to start?** In 2018, the Jewish press reported on a series of charges against Steven M. Cohen, a prominent sociologist and scholar of the American Jewish community. Accusing him of “sexual assault and harassment that dates back decades,” eight young women, some of whom had been in his employ, complained of unwanted touching, intrusive sexual questions, offensive remarks, and propositions for sex.

The women’s complaints included no mention of reward for sexual favors given or punishment for favors withheld, but their claims of distress and fear of professional retribution were considered serious enough to warrant termination of Cohen’s tenured position at New York’s Hebrew Union College-Jewish Institute of Religion and, as reported in the *Forward*, the loss of “all official titles, roles, and affiliations with Jewish and academic institutions.” Organizations that had once commissioned research from him hired him no more: trust in him was withdrawn as completely as it had once been invested.

Since Cohen faced no criminal charges or civil lawsuits—and since he for his part refrained from suing his employer for unlawful dismissal—lawyers felt that neither side had a case strong enough to take to trial. This no doubt came as a relief to Jewish institutions that in a courtroom proceeding might have found themselves implicated or subjected to more bad publicity. As for the ostracized Cohen, without confessing to an actual transgression he accepted responsibility for having offended women and announced “a critical and painful examination of my behavior”:

In consultation with clergy, therapists, and professional experts, I am engaged in a process of education, recognition, remorse, and repair. I don’t know how long this *t’shuvah* [penitential] process will take. But I am committed to making the changes that are necessary to avoid recurrences in the future and, when the time is right, seek to apologize directly to, and ask forgiveness from, those I have unintentionally hurt.

Since he had been stripped of his authority, there was no professional arena where he might abuse it, and since there was no subsequent evidence of recidivism in his behavior, the resolution of this case would appear to have been at once a win for the complainants and a strong deterrent warning against similar behavior on the part of other men. Meanwhile, there being no evident stain on his scholarship itself, Cohen could theoretically resume work in whatever areas were still open to him. Even if organizations were not ready to hire him, the field could benefit from his decades of research.

Thus, it was to everyone’s advantage when three distinguished academic colleagues who had worked with Cohen over several decades included him in a private colloquium to discuss new issues and problems arising in the ever-changing fabric of American Jewish life. Their meetings went so well that from time to time they invited other researchers, including younger ones, to join their voluntary, online discussions in areas of common interest.

Noam Pianko was one of those who accepted the invitation; Emily Sigalow, an executive at UJA-Federation of New York, was one who refused and who then went public with her refusal, telling the *Forward* that these informal meetings “made a number of women in Jewish studies cringe.” Some of those who had launched the original complaints against Cohen now mobilized the Women’s Caucus of the AJS to topple Pianko from the presidency for his gross indiscretion. True, the defendant no longer constituted a threat; but like the phantom limb that continues to hurt,

phantom-Cohen was said to be prolonging the women's pain and was to be judged by how much, and however long, it lasted.

This, then, was no longer about a senior scholar who had made unwanted advances to younger women—that such advances crossed a line no one disputes—but something else altogether: a #MeToo claim of victimhood in service of a larger social cause. What had seemed a sensible alternative to a lawsuit had morphed into a permanent campaign of harassment against both Cohen and his academic associates.

To be clear: there are serious sex-related crimes that, in a workplace, may include coercion, blackmail, or intimidation. Rape and physical abuse are but the gravest of such offenses that should always be prosecuted and punished to the full extent of the law. In each case, however, the severity of the offense is determined by the nature of the abuse, not by the sensibility of the plaintiff(s). If the kind of behavior of which Cohen was accused is no longer to be distinguished from higher levels of injury, will predators soon be permitted simply to apologize for their acts while mashers are handed lifetime sentences as culprits in perpetuity?

**At the AJS**, an ancillary sphere of damage in the phantom-Cohen case was addressed in a statement organized by the American Jewish historian Jonathan Sarna. Signed by himself and his fellow past presidents, myself included, the statement deplored the events surrounding Noam Pianko's resignation and reaffirmed our commitment to academic freedom. Without actually naming the overreach perpetrated by the AJS Executive Committee, the statement reiterated that the organization was created to advance research and teaching in Jewish studies and to uphold academic freedom, which emphatically includes "the right to pursue, teach, and publish knowledge without undue interference, subject to peer review and judged only by academic standards." Unspoken but clearly implied was that the AJS executive had betrayed its mandate by asking for Pianko's resignation and that he had compounded the disgrace by agreeing to step down.

The pressure came from the Women's Caucus of the AJS. Nor was this the first time that the Women's Caucus had been granted veto powers in the AJS. At least one more such offense had occurred in 2017 when Cantor Gideon Zelermeyer and other participants in a scheduled AJS panel on the music of Leonard Cohen were informed that their session had been canceled because of the inclusion of Leon Wieseltier, who had stood accused of similar behavior while at the *New Republic*—again with no formal indictment.

Against that earlier peremptory action I had remonstrated with the AJS executive privately; this time around, I was grateful to Jonathan Sarna for organizing a formal protest. But the AJS declined to post the statement of its past presidents on its website for longer than a day, even as it continued to feature the phantom-Cohen complaint of the women.

And this brings me back to my tenure as president (1986-1988), during which a group of women introduced the idea of a Women's Caucus. Although a number of academic interest groups were already using the organization's annual conference as an opportunity to gather by discipline or by affiliation with one or more academic publications, the new group ambiguously blended the *study* of women with a gender-defined cause. While some members did use their meetings to develop the fledgling field of women's studies, the caucus served others as a feminist bloc.

I tried to dissuade the founders from forming the caucus on the basis of

gender. First, against their claim that young women felt disadvantaged in what was still a male stronghold, I urged that precisely for that reason they should make a point of caucusing with fellow academics in their various disciplines, because only by participating in meetings and seminars with their senior colleagues could they both feel at home and *make* their home in the AJS. Second, I argued that political factionalism was antithetical to the vision of Jewish studies, a field that would suffer badly if extraneous categories were introduced and one bad example would inevitably encourage others.

In fact, about the same time, none other than Steven M. Cohen was forming within the AJS a chapter of Americans for Peace Now. I argued against that, too, as an egregious intrusion of politics into an academic organization, but I wasted my breath; he did not care about such niceties.

In this respect, incidentally, I never doubted the later claim by women that Cohen was ill-mannered; that part I knew to be true. And I might even have enjoyed the irony of his fate at the hands of the feminists if there were less at stake. But meanwhile the increasingly radical politicization of the academy had begun and proceeded in earnest, and it was but a matter of time for the AJS to catch up.

**I will leave** for another occasion an account of how a growing sector of the AJS has drifted steadily into the campus campaign against Israel, and stick to the issue before us. But here the lens needs to be widened. For, as it turns out, Steven Cohen had long been in the ideological sights of women's groups—not for his manners, but for his research. From this perspective, the hounding of Noam Pianko offered a perfect occasion for slandering the research group whose meeting Pianko had joined and much more besides.

The articles of indictment go like this: the American Jewish community's emphasis on self-perpetuation—on “continuity,” to use a once-favored term—has itself been an exercise in corrupt male power, typified in this case by the work done by Cohen and his fellow scholars. Not to put too fine a point on it, Cohen, who conducted many research projects for Jewish communal organizations, was to be seen as the very symbol of the repressive Jewish “patriarchy.” Therefore, disallowing association with him was potentially a means of shutting down what he allegedly stood for.

Sound far-fetched? Not I but the historians Lila Corwin Berman, Kate Rosenblatt, and Ronit Y. Stahl forged this connection and explained it in both the *Forward* and in an academic article titled “The History and Sexual Politics of an American Jewish Communal Project.” Here is a selection of their chief contentions and conclusions:

A Jewish continuity paradigm emerged forcefully in the 1970s as a set of expert pronouncements and community policies that treated women and their bodies as data points in service of a particular vision of Jewish communal survival.

Condemning intermarriage and decrying low child-bearing rates became signature features of the affective work of Jewish communal research.

American Jewish continuity discourse was embedded within patriarchal and misogynistic structures.

Jewish organizations used data to define, typify, and stabilize “the Jewish family.” This was unsurprising in the context of the cold war. Beginning in the 1950s, the nuclear family became the cultural and



political touchstone that turned researchers' attention to gender roles and sexual behavior as the core variables for defining norms and deviances. The stakes, however, were higher than simple research. Rather, the effort to produce and monitor heterosexual family units with mothers, fathers, and children was central to domestic containment of encroaching Soviet Communism.

We believe that power, expertise, and gender norms are operative and entangled forces in Jewish studies and Jewish communal life deserving of historically grounded analysis.

These deadening Marxoid pronouncements reframe the effort to perpetuate Jewishness in America as a dystopian project of enforced reproduction. Every sensible Jewish communal initiative to encourage Jewish marriage, family, and education as the sustaining features of Diaspora survival is defined as a suspect tool of indoctrination. Scholars who apply social science in determining trends of growth and decline are the "entangled forces" fueling a despotic attempt to control women's bodies.

And so forth. Just as the academic left frames the traditional image of the American family as an outdated tool of cold-war propaganda, so these scholars condemn the Jewish emphasis on "continuity" as a device for ensuring conformist submission: a misogynistic, patriarchal, and chauvinistic scheme to turn Jewish women into "data-points" for baby-making. The thinking, radically dissociated from any conceivable reality, reveals a view of life so hollow and ultimately cruel that it must kill off anything joyous and hopeful in its path—starting with American Jews who aspire to sustain the millennial-old experiment of Diaspora survival in the world's most open society.

Thus do the Women's Caucistas, who may or may not recognize the provenance of the slogans they invoke, project their own reductionist and totalitarian thinking onto others. Meanwhile, Sylvia Barack Fishman of Brandeis, Jack Wertheimer of the Jewish Theological Seminary, and Steven Bayme of the American Jewish Committee—the senior scholars who invited their long-time colleague to join their discussion group—are my nominees for the most sober, balanced, and trustworthy students of American Jewish life. Their findings and their writings demonstrate how rigorously they draw the line between research and its application, data and their interpretation. If the personal views of a researcher are of issue only when they interfere with the integrity of the work, these scholars set the gold standard for the profession. The same cannot be said for the women whose ideology requires that they shut down their betters.

**When the founders** of the AJS in the late 1960s fought to introduce Jewish studies into American universities, they hoped that the study of Jewish civilization in all of its facets would supplement and enrich the offerings and scope of American higher education. The people forged at Sinai had stayed independent of many forms of barbarism, and professors in their diverse disciplines were expected to do the same. Today, if there are still researchers and teachers who uphold the original stated values of the AJS, which include "the right of *all* members to articulate beliefs and positions without fear of retribution," and "to build bridges among Jewish scholars and professionals, the Jewish community, and the wider public," they may have to become independent of the organization that once upheld these goals.

In 2007, Professors Bernard Lewis of Princeton University and Fouad Ajami of the Hoover Institution concluded that their field's umbrella

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organization, Middle East Studies Association of North America (MESA), was too corrupted by anti-Israel and other ideological trends to serve as a genuine learned society. They founded ASMEA, the Association for the Study of the Middle East and Africa, because there was no other way to reclaim the high standards of academic research and teaching in their area.

Now a hostile ideology is pushing the AJS to a similar breaking point, and those in the field of Jewish studies face a similar impasse. True, the rot is everywhere in academia, but that is no comfort to those desirous of conserving the integrity of their precious domain. However they respond, members and would-be members of AJS, if they wish to protect study of the Jews and the American Jewish community, must be prepared to do battle.

# Even In a Pandemic, Columbia Students Promote BDS

They can't vote in person right now, but that's not stopping undergraduates at one of the world's most prestigious universities from trying to pass a boycott of Israel.



*A group of students at Columbia University protest the visit there of Israel's Ambassador to the United Nations on February 13, 2017. Mohammed Elshamy/Anadolu Agency/Getty Images.*

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## About the author

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This coming Sunday, April 5, the undergraduate student council at Columbia University in New York will vote on when to schedule an online referendum that has nothing to do with the academic upheaval caused by the coronavirus. Instead, students at this prestigious ivy-league school will be turning their attention to the urgent issue of . . . boycott, divestment, and sanctions (BDS) against Israel. The referendum will be held either in the coming weeks or next semester.

Who is behind it? Columbia University Apartheid Divest (CUAD) is the coalition of two anti-Israel clubs: Students for Justice in Palestine (SJP) and Jewish Voice for Peace (JVP). Since 2016, its constituent members have proposed successive motions before the student council asserting that Israel is an "apartheid state" and should therefore be regarded by university officials as a target for divestment.

At first, CUAD's petitions were unsuccessful as pro-Israel students packed each meeting to demonstrate their affinity with the Jewish state. But, year after year, the "anti-" side smartened up, electing more likeminded members to the council even as fatigue set in among Israel supporters and their attendance at meetings dwindled. At this year's vote to approve the motion of a campus-wide referendum on divestment, proponents felt free enough to voice naked hostility not only to the Jewish state but also to Jews and to Judaism: a faith "co-opted," in the reported words of one outspoken participant, "by white supremacy."

Meanwhile, at Columbia's sister college Barnard, 64 percent of all students have already voted in favor of divesting from Israel. The conventional wisdom is that Columbia's undergraduates are likely to follow suit. (Columbia and Barnard students can take classes at either college, and Barnard students can join Columbia clubs, but each college has its own student government.) While anti-Israel referendums of this kind are typically not acted upon by university administrations, their success notches an ideological victory for enemies of the Jewish state and is often accompanied by the increase of anti-Semitism on campus. Only recently, Columbia's East Campus dormitory was twice defaced with swastikas.

At Columbia, a majority "yes" vote will surely be interpreted as a college-wide consensus, perhaps even a shining example of the "cohesiveness within the entire undergraduate population" that the student council prides itself on fostering in its role of representing student opinion to the faculty and administration. Following up, the council will formally request the administration's Advisory Committee on Socially Responsible Investing to comply with the punitive guidelines provided by BDS.

Why has Columbia, of all places, with thousands of Jewish undergraduates making up almost a quarter of its student population, proved so fertile an environment for anti-Israel and anti-Jewish activism? It's not that pro-Israel students, Jewish and non-Jewish alike, have been silent. But they face a hyper-organized consortium far more dedicated to radical activism than to college studies.

When it comes to the referendum, the anti-Israel coalition enjoys three important advantages. First, clever phrasing. In the wording approved by the student council, the proposal does not argue but simply states as fact the slanderous claim that Israel practices South Africa-style apartheid; uninformed students are more likely to accept the lie by virtue of the council's formal approval. Then the referendum misleadingly asks students whether the university should "divest its stocks, funds, and endowment from companies" that "profit from or engage in" apartheid as defined by the UN. Although BDS is not mentioned explicitly, passage of the referendum would be understood as a win for the global campaign against Israel.

Second, timing. Now that, fortuitously, the leadup to the vote will likely take place solely online, CUAD can deploy to the full its large presence on social media. The Columbia Facebook page for Students for Justice in Palestine boasts over 3,400 likes; Jewish Voice for Peace, 1,500 likes; and CUAD, more than 1,900 likes. On these pages there is no shortage of mis- or disinformation about Israel. As was the case during Israel's military conflict with Hamas in 2014, when images from the Syrian civil war were falsely labeled as scenes from Gaza and "shared" online by anti-Israel organizations, it is much more difficult to dispel such myth-making than it is to reason with individuals through in-person discussion.

Third, and most critically, the anti-Israel camp claims the support of all other social-justice groups on campus—including, to name just three, the black students' organization, the queer students' alliance, and the Native American council—each with its own broad social-media network. Thanks to the appearance of such campus-wide solidarity, most students, as a pro-Israel professional at Columbia confirmed to me, "automatically vote yes to any [such] referendum. Divesting from the coal industry—they voted yes. Divesting from the private-prison industry—they voted yes. It's packaged as a deal."



## II.

But that's not all. In the broad historical sense, the looming success of BDS at Columbia is not some one-off event but rather the latest manifestation of a long-term development, one that provides a natural backdrop to today's drama. As on other American campuses, this is a story whose roots lie in the radical activism of the 1960s: a moment when the energies of the New Left, the anti-Vietnam war movement, the black-power movement, and other signature agitations of the era powered large-scale student revolts, often of a violent nature. With rare exceptions, the rioters met with only the meekest of responses by faculty and administrations, and sometimes even earned the assent or tacit support of their professors.

In 1968, Students for a Democratic Society (SDS), alongside the Afro-American Students Association (ASA), brought life at Columbia to a standstill for weeks as they seized, occupied, and randomly trashed campus buildings in protest against the university's alleged involvement in military research and the proposed building of a new gym on the border with Harlem. The campus police having proved ineffective, the administration was eventually compelled to summon New York City police; in one of the largest mass arrests in the city's history, 700 students were detained and 100 were injured in skirmishes.

But the protesters won, then and later. Within a year, plans for the new gym were canceled and the university's system of governance was overhauled in deference to the rioters' demands. On the 50th anniversary in 2018, the university's current president, Lee Bollinger, would mark the occasion by taking ownership of the rioters' cause and retroactively decrying the then-administration's call for police intervention. "Part of the present-day identity of Columbia," Bollinger averred, "is reinforced by what happened here in 1968."

That is undeniably true.

Among the other cardinal flashpoints of that same era was the June 1967 Six-Day War in the Middle East, which Israel had the effrontery to win. By the following year, European and American liberal elites had embarked on a historic reversal of the hitherto broadly accepted view of the sources and causes of the Israel-Arab conflict, with Israel now flipped into the role of imperialist, expansionist aggressor and the Arabs—and the Palestinians in particular—its innocent victims.

Special to Columbia at this juncture was the presence of a rising young academic star named Edward Said. Born in 1935 and raised in Cairo by affluent parents, Said was educated at an elite American boarding school, followed by Princeton and Harvard. In 1963 he joined Columbia's English department, quickly becoming an object of adulation on the part of innumerable students, including Jewish students, besotted with his charm, his air of sophisticated "otherness," and his comfortably anti-establishment views.

In 1978, Said would publish *Orientalism*, his most famous work: a critique-cum-deconstruction of, and assault on, Western scholarship on the Islamic world. The book was rapturously received. (It was also authoritatively debunked, most notably by the late Bernard Lewis, for its ignorance and shoddy scholarship.) To this day, it commands unparalleled influence in a variety of unrelated academic fields, is assigned reading in hundreds of university courses, and has shaped curricula and professional attitudes not only in Middle East studies but in areas as diverse as literary criticism, political science, and anthropology.

As the European and American left began its turn against Israel, Said proceeded to apply to Israel his "academic" excoriation of the West.

In particular, he came out as a supporter of the Palestine Liberation Organization (PLO), the terrorist group led by Yasir Arafat, and would soon become one of the most prominent members of its legislative body, the Palestinian National Council. A key conduit for Arafat to the West, he translated the PLO leader's speech before the United Nations in 1974. Nor did his anti-Israel orbit stop there: by 1993, he would outflank Arafat on the left, loudly repudiating the latter's "cowardly and slavish" act of signing the Oslo Accords with Israel.

During the second intifada in the early 2000s, Said aroused controversy at Columbia when he hurled a rock from southern Lebanon's border with Israel toward an IDF guardhouse on the other side. Still, though the action was deemed inappropriate, the administration came to the defense of its beloved professor. At home, meanwhile, Said had done much to inspire a group of activist Columbia professors who, after their mentor's death in 2003, would coalesce around the university's venerable Middle East Institute (founded in 1954) and its more recent Center for Palestine Studies (founded in 2010 to "honor the legacy of Edward Said").

The politicized classroom views of these professors quickly grew into a consensus, not to say an orthodoxy. Let's take a passing glance at four leading lights.

Rashid Khalidi teaches Arab history and holds an endowed chair at Columbia in Said's memory. He is the editor of the *Journal of Palestine Studies* and the author of a dozen popular books, of which the most recent is *The Hundred Years' War on Palestine*. In his introductory course on the history of the Middle East, the minds of more than 100 freshmen who arrive each year knowing little or nothing about the region are formed by Khalidi's perspective. Central to this perspective is that Israel is a settler-colonial entity responsible for the "replacement of Palestine," as he put it in a 2018 article in the *Nation*. Khalidi has been described as "slick" and even-tempered, but he is also prone to conspiratorial outbursts against Jews. (A glimpse: in a 2017 radio interview, Khalidi repeatedly railed at the "Jews" who "infest" the Trump administration.)

Joseph Massad, a professor of Arab history to whom we'll soon return, once singled out for vituperation an Israeli student who asked a question at a talk. "How many Palestinians have you killed?" he demanded.

George Saliba, an Islamic scholar, informed a student that she couldn't possibly claim ties to the land of Israel because, unlike him, she had "green eyes" and therefore was not "Semitic."

Hamid Dabashi, a professor of Iranian studies and a contributor to the Egyptian paper *Al-Ahram*, mused in 2004 about the effects that "half a century of systematic maiming and murdering of another people has left" on Israelis' physiognomy, pointing as evidence to the "deep marks on the faces of these people" and the "vulgarity of character that is bone-deep and structural to the skeletal vertebrae of [Israeli] culture."

Anti-Israel statements made inside and outside the classroom by Khalidi and other professors were copiously documented in a chilling, student-made film, *Columbia Unbecoming* (2004). The film elicited sufficient media attention and protests by Jewish organizations to prompt an internal investigation by order of Bollinger. The 24-page report found the academics not guilty of any significant wrongdoing—effectively exonerating them; meanwhile, the students who had divulged their experiences to the filmmakers were charged with acting as "informants." Khalidi told *New York* magazine that he couldn't understand the fear being expressed by these Jewish students. So many people were working for them at Hillel, he expostulated, "it blew my mind! . . . They have ten, twelve paid employees!"

In 2007, Joseph Massad would be denied tenure on grounds of egregiously inadequate scholarship. Two years later, however, for undisclosed reasons, the decision was reversed and tenure was granted. Rarely are professors allowed a second faculty-committee review, but Bollinger ensured that the extraordinary proceedings were held, and remained, behind closed doors.

A Columbia alumnus who has asked to remain anonymous recalled to me the class with Massad that he attended as a senior. An engineering student, he had decided to shop around during his final year at Columbia and learn more about the Middle East. Early on, it became clear to him that Massad was propagandizing more than teaching, and he decided to document the professor's falsifications in a blog. Taking notice, a campus journalist published an article about the blog in the *Columbia Spectator*. At the next class, Massad walked in with a copy of the newspaper. "Which one of you is [student's name]," he demanded. "Please get out of this class." Massad then filed a disciplinary report against him, accusing him of being a spy for the "Israel lobby."

"Going in front of the disciplinary board was scary," the alumnus told me. "I had to find a balance between defending myself and not getting kicked out four months before graduation." Though the charges against him were dropped, and he was allowed to graduate, Massad continued his targeted bullying. Soon an article sharing private details about the student and his family appeared in *Electronic Intifada*, the scurrilous anti-Israel website whose pages are frequently graced by Massad's effusions, some of which have been reprinted by Hamas on its official website.

### III.

The anti-Israel student groups at Columbia conduct themselves in the spirit of these professors, who dominate the teaching of the Middle East and control the discourse around Israel in class. (So far, the Institute for Israel and Jewish Studies, a relatively new addition at Columbia, is on the sidelines.) Outside of class, anti-Israel students dominate activist circles and control the discourse about Israel on campus.

CUAD, through its constituent Students for Justice in Palestine, preaches and practices "anti-normalization," that is, the refusal to recognize or treat Israel as a normal state: a stance inspired by the Arab League's age-old boycott approach. Ofir Dayan, the current president of the pro-Israel group Students Supporting Israel (SSI), explains: "Nobody here talks about settlements. Nobody cares about that. The question around Israel is whether or not it has a right to exist." SJP believes that it does not; therefore, any and all forms of "resistance" to Israel are justified. No one should be seen to be friends with, converse with, or even listen to a Zionist.

Romy Ronen, SSI's vice-president, concurs. "[SJP's] activism consists in not having a conversation. It's about negating and opposing." Citing an SSI event organized to promote Zionism and pride in the Jewish state, she continues: "they came by, stepped on our displays, brought a Palestinian flag, and started chanting and screaming at us." As the two of us sat in a Columbia outlet of Joe, a local coffee emporium, a woman walked by in a "F\*\*\* Israel" t-shirt.

Pro-Palestinian campaigners at Columbia often partake in open anti-Semitism. Last year's poster for Israel Apartheid Week featured a sketch of a Palestinian activist throwing a spray can used for graffiti at an Israeli soldier's head, giving him an odd-shaped bump like a devil's horn.

Why, at an institution of higher learning, do intelligent students feel free to indulge themselves in such outright aggressions against their peers? In

part, surely, because of the license, tacit or explicit, given them by their professors. In part, too, because they are unafraid of a backlash from their peers. None exists.

To the contrary, the aggressors naturally command the support of the university's greatest influencers: the social-justice groups and their crushing weapon of "intersectionality." Indeed, that was precisely the banner under which the Columbia campaign for BDS was first launched. A few months after the summer 2014 riots in Ferguson, Missouri, SJP hosted a panel discussion on black-and-Palestinian solidarity under the tell-all title: "Race, Violence, Resistance—from Gaza to Ferguson." Linking the "long history [*sic*] of solidarity between the struggle for Palestinian liberation" with the "African American struggle" at Columbia, Jeff Jacobs, a former organizer for SJP, declared that he'd been inspired to get involved in BDS by the "tradition [again, *sic*] of grassroots activism throughout our past." His one piece of evidence was Columbia's 1985 support for divestment from South Africa.

In February 2016, SJP joined forces with Jewish Voice for Peace, the second identity-politics group forming CUAD's coalition. JVP's so-called authentic "Jewish voice" is regularly invoked to absolve BDS of the stain of anti-Semitism. Joseph Hier, a Jewish student who attended this year's meeting where the BDS referendum was finally approved, recalled that during the discussion, "anytime a Jewish student expressed discomfort with a club that looks to single out the Jewish state [for opprobrium], a Jewish student from Jewish Voice for Peace appeared to say 'I'm Jewish and it doesn't offend me, so it shouldn't offend you, either.' It provides them with a cover."

BDS soon received the praise of other "victim" groups on campus as well. No Red Tape, an anti-sexual-assault organization, issued a statement "recognizing" the link between sexual violence and the Israeli treatment of Palestinian women. The Student-Worker Solidarity, a labor group campaigning for a campus minimum wage, lauded "the resilience of Palestinian workers" organizing strikes against such early foes as Zionist settlers and British occupiers and such latter-day foes as the Israelis "struck" by stone-throwers in the first intifada.

Being anti-Israel, in short, has become part of a "woke" package that operates as a ticket to popularity on campus. Yaira Kobrin, student president of Columbia/Barnard Hillel, put it this way: "If you come to Columbia and are a liberal, there is a whole checklist of liberal ideologies that you are 'told' to subscribe to. One of these is that you should side against Israel."

## IV.

One might think that on a campus in which these problems have festered for so long, a plan of action would have long been put in place by interested pro-Israel parties—Hillel, alumni donors, and tenured faculty—to support Jewish students. Instead, it appears that most Jewish students, to the extent they haven't completely walled themselves off from the fracas, are confused, uncertain, and/or cowed.

And for good reason: those willing to step up receive little support from influential figures within the university's orbit, and they must also contend with pressure from those who favor the quietist approach.

As early as 1990, Ze'ev Maghen, now a professor at Bar-Ilan University in Israel but then a Philadelphia-bred graduate student at Columbia, diagnosed the underlying problem while attending a talk on campus by Professor Leonard Jeffries of the City College of New York. Jeffries,



an anti-Semite in the most candid and unignorable way, was known for hour-long diatribes about “rich Jews” and their role in the financing of the slave trade and the destruction of black culture. At the Empire State Black Arts Festival in 1991, he calumniated the education expert Diane Ravitch, then serving in Washington as the assistant secretary of education, as a “sophisticated debonair racist” and a “Texas Jew.”

Maghen was perturbed by the fact that Jeffries had been invited to Columbia in the first place. But what really drew his ire, and occasioned a full-length essay, was the response of the campus Jewish community. Outside the talk, Jewish students held up signs expressing their polite mistrust of Jeffries as one whose racial views merited “no place in multiculturalism.” Maghen was shocked at the timidity and the defensiveness. “A man calls you a pig. Do you walk around with a sign explaining that, in fact, you are *not* a pig?” he asked in “How to Fight Anti-Semitism,” disseminated the next day around campus. His words sprang from the page: “Fellow Jews, *where the hell is your dignity?*”

When I met with Maghen recently in Israel, he reiterated his concern about the lack of positive Jewish feeling at Columbia back in the 1990s, and his greater worry now about a deficit in Jewish pride in both Israel and the United States.

Again, however, it’s not as if such feeling is nonexistent. The Kraft Center, the towering student Hillel on 115th Street, built with Jerusalem stone and high windows, is home to a fully stocked *beit midrash* or space for Jewish learning, a staff dedicated specifically to the welfare and flourishing of students, and multiple rooms for student-run events. On any given evening the building pulsates with life—club meetings, religious services and study, a kosher café that does double duty as a place just for gathering to chat and/or work. A few blocks uptown on Broadway is the Jewish Theological Seminary, where many Columbia undergraduates who are enrolled in the two institutions’ joint-degree program avail themselves of classes in Jewish history, literature, and thought.

Outside these precincts, however, one doesn’t have to look far to sense the disintegration of Jewish pride that Maghen was pinpointing back in the 1990s. A friend tells me about a strange incident at her sorority last year. While leading a formal discussion about anti-Semitism, she was asked whether BDS exhibits hatred of Jews. “I said yes, in my personal opinion, BDS is anti-Semitic.” She received no negative feedback in the room, but later learned that a sorority sister had reported her, behind her back, for having politicized the conversation. She was asked not to bring up the topic of Israel again. “It’s sad,” she comments, “that in a group where I’m meant to be at my most comfortable, I have to be careful what I say because I’m worried I’m being political or offending someone.”

Many Jewish students are altogether too afraid to bring up the topic. “If you take on anti-Israel activism you are branded as an ‘Israel person,’” a recent alumnus explains: “no one wants to be that.” Adds Romy Ronen of SSI: “Students are either scared or don’t really feel like actually being participatory and defending their own religion, their own nationality. A big group of Jewish students are in a bubble.”

## V.

But then there are those who, aware of what they are up against, are ready to fight. Rudy Rochman, who graduated in 2018, is one. An IDF veteran,

he enrolled at Columbia after reading that it was the worst college in the United States for Jewish students. He wanted to change that. Recognizing that he was entering an ideological war zone, he took up arms. “Instead of using my hands, I had to use my tongue.”

Rochman was the founder of Students Supporting Israel at Columbia. The group is non-partisan, but its expressly activist stance differentiates it from other Jewish bodies. “If something anti-Semitic happened on campus, neither Jews nor non-Jews were willing to say anything. I proposed that we would not allow that to be the case.” At Columbia, SSI initiated Hebrew Liberation Week, a platform for Jewish students to counter Israel Apartheid Week with their own narrative about the national liberation of the Jewish people.

SSI operates outside of Hillel. Ofir Dayan, its current president, recalled that her own “red line” occurred in 2016 when Hillel decided to host Breaking the Silence—a non-governmental organization that sends veterans of the IDF abroad to spread denigrations of the Jewish state. “As an Israeli who served in the IDF, I felt like it was an attack on me.” For SSI, running events independently of Hillel has allowed a greater focus on engaging non-Jewish students in the pro-Israel cause. Last year they launched a student-led trip to Israel for fifteen non-Jewish leaders on campus. (Hillel operates such trips as well.) Their Hebrew Liberation Week runs once every semester, meaning that Israeli flags are present on Columbia’s quad before the malignant Israel Apartheid Week takes place, typically in early April.

The pro-Israel club operating within Hillel’s orbit is Aryeh, which hosts events, often in partnership with SSI, to educate students on the Arab-Israeli conflict. Recent speakers have included Dennis Ross, the former U.S. diplomat, and Ron Prosor, the former ambassador of Israel to the UN. Some students complain that in light of the high stakes and hot tempers of the debate around Israel at Columbia, Aryeh’s approach is too mellow.

In addition to SSI and Aryeh, other volunteers for pro-Israel activism have come from the Jewish fraternity AEPi and from individuals enlisting of their own accord and willing to put in the time to make a difference.

One notable independent initiative has introduced students to “pay-for-slay,” the Palestinian law guaranteeing financial rewards for terrorists committing slaughter. In a 1996 suicide bombing attack in Israel, the Barnard alumna Sara Duker was murdered alongside her boyfriend, Matthew Eisenfeld, a JTS graduate student, and 24 others. The terrorist who carried out the attack has received almost \$300,000 from the Palestinian Authority as a “salary” for his crimes. Sophia Breslauer is among five students petitioning Columbia and Barnard’s administrations to seek justice for Duker, Eisenfeld, and the other victims by demanding that the Palestinian Authority cease all such inducements to murder. “We’re taking back the narrative. We are reframing who is the villain, who is the victim, and who is the hero,” Breslauer, a junior majoring in political science, tells me.

## VI.

Will any of this influence how Columbia students vote in the BDS referendum? With the vote now detached from the mood on campus, it is hard to say. And in this connection, another wrinkle is worth keeping in mind: some Jewish students don’t regard a “Yes” to BDS as the worst outcome. Indeed, they believe that fighting BDS is a distraction from what

is really important. Yaira Kobrin, paraphrasing her peers, explains the rationale. “If [the referendum] passes, maybe we can just turn our focus to Israel and Jewish-identity programming on campus.”

A larger point lurks in the background here. In order to make a long-term difference at a wealthy and respected institution like Columbia, one has to get through to the administration and other players with clout. As an alumnus formerly involved in pro-Israel activity at Columbia told me, “The fact that on a college campus, students come and go every four years means that, as effective as a student group may be, what they are doing is at best a several-year project. In order to effect real change, we have to engage the administration, the faculty, the donors, and the trustees. It is these people who have a relationship with the university for 35 or 40 years.”

In this area, Columbia’s president Lee Bollinger is the man to convince. The highest-paid private college president in the United States, Bollinger recently issued a statement in anticipation of the upcoming BDS referendum. Voicing concerns about “the risk” of a rising anti-Semitism on campus, and mentioning BDS only in passing as “but a variant on a vast and ever-present debate,” he expressed his specific opposition to the use of divestment proposals as “a means of protest against Israel’s policies.”

There’s little to be gained in quarreling with this last-minute intervention with its artfully muffled formulations. On the merits, it was better than nothing. But it does raise the question of where Bollinger, a respected scholar of the First Amendment, has been for the last seventeen years of his tenure.

Not so long ago, Columbia’s president invoked his commitment to “free inquiry and fearless engagement with all ideas” as the reason for his decision in 2007 to invite to the campus Mahmoud Ahmadinejad, the former Iranian president, and, in 2019, Malaysia’s prime minister Mahathir bin Mohamad. At Ahmadinejad’s talk, Bollinger opened with a staged rebuke of his guest of honor—“I feel all the weight of the modern civilized world yearning to express the revulsion at what you stand for”—and then proceeded to justify the Iranian president’s appearance (which at one point had been canceled and then reinstated) by emphasizing the importance of knowing one’s enemy.

But of course Ahmadinejad had already made himself easy to be known as, precisely, a vocal authoritarian, homophobe, anti-Semite, and proponent of Israel’s destruction. Nothing new was learned from what he had to say that evening, and the same went for the evening twelve years later with Mahathir bin Mohamad, another hater of Israel and the Jews.

In any case, the constitutional rights guaranteed in the First Amendment have already been under assault by students at Columbia who demand trigger warnings and the censoring of ideas they disagree with and by those who rush to “protect” them. And, as we’ve seen, Bollinger’s relation to the First Amendment is at best inconsistent, at worst self-serving. In 2006 he came under national scrutiny for allowing aggressive protesters to shut down a speech at Columbia by an anti-immigration group. Then-New York City mayor Michael Bloomberg issued a series of harsh public rebukes, and Bloomberg was not alone. In the case of *Columbia Unbecoming*, Bollinger altogether ignored the need to protect the rights to free speech of *students*. As the Foundation for Individual Rights in Education made clear in its published research on the issue, the report commissioned by Bollinger arbitrarily decided that professors’ rights superseded students’ rights.

More recently, Bollinger has demonstrated his unwillingness to protect the

free speech of pro-Israel clubs. In 2018, SSI submitted a detailed document outlining the aggressive behavior of SJP and its contravention of university policy with, for instance, its open calls urging members of the Columbia community to join it in disrupting free speech at pro-Israel events. Thus far, the administration has offered only lame excuses for its inaction in response to this report.

At the 2017 Seixas dinner held each year at Hillel, named for the first Jewish trustee (1787-1815) of Columbia College, Bollinger addressed Jewish students directly. He apologized for—or humble-bragged about—allowing his free-speech principles to outweigh his alarm about the anti-Jewish rhetoric employed by some students and faculty members. In his most recent statement, he again makes it clear that protecting his institution comes before tackling the hatred of Jews for what it is. Instead, Bollinger characterizes the suggestion that Columbia is or has become an anti-Semitic institution as “preposterous” and an “absurdity.” One need only consult the openly anti-Semitic remarks made by tenured professors in respected fields, or the aforementioned news that swastikas appeared on campus just as students were vacating because of the coronavirus scare, to wonder on what planet the president imagines himself to be living.

## VII.

Where, finally, is the Jewish community in all of this? In past struggles, the organized American Jewish community was careful always to frame its defense of Jewish rights, and its policy toward anti-Jewish discrimination, in terms of the liberties due to all other Americans similarly under threat. The approach, which had its drawbacks, was logical and justifiable even if not always successful. But whatever its virtues or deficiencies, as a strategy and a policy it is useless in the present situation. No other group at Columbia is under such systematic attack; in this fight, Columbia’s Jewish students are entirely alone.

That the referendum on Israel will likely be taking place online means there will likely also be reduced fanfare surrounding its result. Whatever happens, though, the hardships faced by Columbia’s Jewish students appear destined to endure. Many will continue to opt out of taking classes on the Middle East or in a range of other fields (like anthropology and modern history) because they recognize that, as Ofir Dayan puts it, “as soon as the professor realizes who you are, you are never allowed to talk again.” They will shy away from associating themselves publicly with Israel, be wary in picking their friends, and exercise discretion even among their fraternity brothers and sorority sisters and in their student clubs.

This academic year, for the first time in recent memory, Jewish students at Columbia did not even sing *Hatikvah*—the emblem of Jewish hope, and the Israeli national anthem—at their annual Simchat Torah celebration. No doubt, they refrained out of an “abundance of caution,” as we’re all now learning to say.

It is common knowledge that among Columbia’s major donors are many Jews who are likewise heavily involved in the Jewish community. How bad will things have to become for those with power and influence to take action?



# The Corruption of Biblical Studies

Academic scrutiny of scripture, a discipline prey to intellectual fashion since its inception, is today pursued by many in the service of secular liberal positions.



Pages from a 10th-century Hebrew Bible. Benedek/istockphoto.

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## About the author

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In the 2017 edition of *The State of the Bible*, its annual survey, the American Bible Society reports that more than half of all Americans who regularly read the Bible now search for related material on the Internet. This shift in how the faithful learn about scripture has resulted in unprecedented public exposure to one particular kind of Bible study—namely, the academic kind. Major websites now offer the latest that scholars have to say about the Bible—its authorship, its historical accuracy, its proper interpretation—and those websites attract hundreds of thousands of unique visitors each month. In an age when interest in the humanities is generally waning, the department of biblical studies is providing enrichment to what has become the most popular online branch of the liberal arts.

This is surely a blessed development. Men and women of good faith engage with these study materials in pursuit of that purest religious ideal: the truth. In doing so, moreover, they fully recognize that academic researchers ask important questions and often offer compelling answers by drawing on resources and insights unavailable through denominational venues. For many users, these answers and insights do not merely supplement but may also challenge the traditional Jewish and Christian teachings in which they have been brought up. So the interest in academic scholarship of the Bible increases—and with it the authority of the scholars purveying it. As a Jewish day-school teacher recently put it to me: “Often, I find that students might not be so well informed about the meaning of a scientific or archaeological claim; it’s enough that many academics holding respected titles have advanced a certain way of understanding something.” In today’s climate, the university biblicist, even before he or she speaks, enjoys a deep line of credit.



For Jews in particular, nothing in biblical studies draws so keen an interest as the issue of the origins of the Torah: the Five Books of Moses, or Pentateuch. The scholarly pursuit of the Torah's putative sources and how they evolved into the text we have today is referred to in the academy as "source criticism": the discipline's oldest sub-field and still its largest. And source criticism of the Torah is also front-and-center in the Jewish public eye.

Over the past fifteen years alone, four major projects by Jewish scholars have showcased the methods and achievements of source criticism. I have in mind two books, *How to Read the Bible* by James Kugel and Richard Elliott Friedman's *The Bible with Sources Revealed*; the section on the Pentateuch in the *JPS Study Bible*; and, most recently, the website TheTorah.com, which is explicitly devoted to "integrating the study of Torah with the disciplines and findings of academic biblical scholarship."

It would seem hard to find fault with any of this. Intuitively, readers of all ages know that their rabbis or pastors *have* to affirm the antiquity and accuracy of the biblical accounts. By contrast, the academic biblicalist is duty-bound to "tell it like it is" on the basis of a rigorous scholarly method and rational, humanistic modes of discovery. For many raised with a traditional approach to scripture, this is a breath of fresh air. Here, finally, we find scripture without an agenda, and a method that leads only where reason and data take the faithful researcher. Here, we find the truth.

If only it were so. But the fact of the matter is otherwise. From the time of its inception 200 years ago, the field of biblical studies has never been value-free. Instead, and precisely because of the Bible's unique and central role in Western culture, study of the Bible in the academy has been influenced—and, I would argue, tainted—by a range of cultural and intellectual forces, and repeatedly led astray from its calling as a rigorous mode of inquiry. Never has this been truer than in our own times, when many claims made in the name of the critical study of the Bible have been turned into weapons in a political struggle between liberals and conservatives.

In what follows, I offer an insider's tour of today's field of biblical studies—my field—and question whether some of its central conclusions really deserve the high pedestal on which they have been placed.

## I. Source Criticism and Its Problematic Roots

Let's begin with a brief tour of the historical horizon.

Benedict Spinoza, rightly credited as the father of the modern critical study of the Hebrew Bible, was the first to question systematically the *unity* of the books of Hebrew scripture. This he did at length in his 1672 *Theological-Political Treatise*. Like today's source critics, Spinoza was convinced that the Torah was written by more than one hand. Unlike today's source critics, however, he was equally convinced that it was beyond our capacity to recreate the prehistory of the received text by recovering its earlier versions or parts.

A similar conclusion was reached by Father Richard Simon of France, the most learned biblicalist of the 17th century:

What we have at present is but an abridgement of the ancient records, which were much larger, and those who made the abridgements had

particular reasons which we cannot understand. It is better therefore to be silent in this subject . . . than to search farther into this matter and condemn by a rash criticism what we do not understand.

Although both Spinoza and Simon were convinced that the Pentateuch was a composite work, both also felt that one could no more successfully unravel the prehistory of the received text than one could unscramble an egg.

But now fast-forward two centuries to the late 19th century and the scholar Charles Augustus Briggs, co-author of a dictionary of biblical Hebrew that is considered authoritative to this day. In contrast to Spinoza and Simon, Briggs positively reveled in the ability of scholars to replicate the stages of a text's composition and thereby establish "the real Bible":

The valleys of biblical truth have been filled up with the debris of human dogmas, ecclesiastical institutions, liturgical formulas, priestly ceremonies, and casuistic practices. Historical criticism is searching for the rock-bed of divine truth and the massive foundations of the Divine Word, in order to recover the real Bible. Historical criticism is sifting all this rubbish. It will gather our every precious stone. Nothing will escape its keen eye. . . . As surely as the temple of Herod and the city of the [H]asmoneans arose from the ruins of former temples and cities, just so surely will the old Bible rise in the reconstructions of biblical criticism into a splendor and a glory greater than ever before.

What made Briggs so certain that scholars could recover the prehistory of the received text when figures like Spinoza and Simon gave no credence to such pursuits? What changes between the 17th and 19th centuries is not the *evidence* but the *culture*, particularly through the rise and increasing status of science as a cultural force.

The initiating figure here was none other than Isaac Newton. Just five years after Simon's 1682 *Critical History of the Old Testament*, Newton was formulating the laws of motion and universal gravitation in *Mathematical Principles of Natural History*. The work had an overwhelming impact. Where previously nature had been widely regarded as impenetrable, Newton proposed that it was instead subject to laws that could be expressed simply and precisely through mathematical formulas.

This "paradigm shift" influenced all realms of inquiry, as 18th-century thinkers sought to match Newton's science of nature with a science of what they termed "human nature," which they regarded as similarly orderly, subject to laws, and open to observation and comprehension. A key tenet of Enlightenment thought was that science consists of analysis: i.e., the reduction of vastly complex phenomena to a small number of constituent parts. In natural science, landmark advances would be achieved by the application of this notion; extraordinarily sophisticated organisms were discovered to be systematically made up of cells, ultimately leading in the 1830s to cell theory, and the atomic structure of the natural elements was laid open, allowing John Dalton to publish the first table of the elements in 1803.

The newly founded science of human nature could do no less; analysis, it was firmly believed, would reduce the daunting complexity of historical data to comprehensive, systematic narratives, no matter how conjectural. Thus, theorists sought to define the developmental stages traversed by man in his progress from savagery to civilization. Changes in climate or in modes of sustenance were carefully laid out along a timeline to explain the evolution of moral character.

## In 1753, Jean Astruc, a French scientist and medical doctor, transferred his vocation's new analytical disciplines to his avocation: biblical study.

It is in this milieu that we encounter the first attempt to delineate the putative sources of the Pentateuch. In 1753, a French scientist and medical doctor by the name of Jean Astruc transferred his vocation's new analytical disciplines to his avocation: biblical study. Like Spinoza and Simon before him, Astruc had only the biblical text from which to work. Unlike them, he lived in the confident age of the Enlightenment: all the text needed was a set of laws to explain its inconsistencies, paramount among them being the Torah's use of diverse and seemingly divergent names for the divinity. Already going back to the 17th century, confidence had become endemic to academic pursuits, as in René Descartes's insistence that we accept only knowledge that can be known and demonstrated with certainty. Scholarship of the Bible could be no exception. From Astruc one can trace a straight line to the assertion of Charles Augustus Briggs that "surely will the old Bible rise in the reconstructions of biblical criticism into a splendor and a glory greater than ever before."

A key ancillary step in this process involved the beginnings of "history" itself as an academic discipline—and not only a discipline but, like physics, an exact science: a *Wissenschaft*. (In practice, *Wissenschaft* referred both to science in the strict sense and to scholarship in general or any legitimate field of knowledge.) If, in the 18th century, educated people turned to philosophy to unlock the mysteries of human life, during the 19th century they turned to the putatively "scientific" analysis of the past to provide insight and inspiration in politics, law, economics, morals, and religion.

But how could history become a true "science"? According to the German historicists, by basing its findings on original, authentic *sources*. Traditions had passed down tales about the past, but only by returning to primary written sources, contemporaneous with the events under study, could the historian attain a clear, objective view. Scholars were especially eager to get to the original sources of the writings of Homer and of the Bible—the great touchstones of European culture. Imbued with the confidence of the scientific revolution, classicists and biblicists alike believed that access was available through the careful *literary* mining of the received texts. Identifying irregularities of all sorts within those texts was the key to recovering their precursors.

German historicism, however, ran into a crisis at mid-century, and the course it then took would have enormous consequences for the source-critical study of the Bible. As the natural sciences progressed by leaps and bounds, the putative alliance of the "sciences of the spirit," or liberal arts, with the natural sciences came to be seen as a liability. Practitioners of the human sciences had no hope of keeping up with the refined results achieved by statistical analysis. If anything, the progress of natural science was demonstrating just how *unscientific*—if not *unscholarly*—were the so-called sciences of the spirit.

The humanist solution was to cut loose and declare autonomy. While continuing to claim the mantle of science, proponents of the humanities specified that they operated under a different methodology. Where the natural sciences had developed canons of experimental control, including the rule that theories must be testable and falsifiable, historians placed

a high premium on the intuition and imagination of the investigating scholar.

Which brings us back to investigating scholars of the Bible and, in particular, source critics. Today this large sub-field continues to rely on frankly intuitionist justifications for its methods—a reliance that has led it into confusion and professional crisis.

## II. Source Critics at an Impasse

The nature of the professional malaise is easily stated. Since, inevitably, every scholar has his or her own powers of intuition and imagination, the guild of source critics has been unable to develop a canon of best practices and accepted norms in pursuit of the putative earlier stages of a biblical text's development. The debilitating consequence is that very little is a matter of professional consensus.

Source critics, for their part, have admitted as much. At two major conferences devoted to the source-critical approach to the Torah, one in Zurich in 2010 and a second in Jerusalem in 2013, the most respected champions of the field publicly acknowledged the lack of consensus on a range of core issues. A few representative testimonies:

Each [scholar] operates with [his] own set of working assumptions, each uses different methods, and each produces [his] own results. In every other academic discipline, such a situation would be felt to be untenable.

\* \* \*

Scholars tend to operate from such different premises, employing such divergent methods, and reaching such inconsistent results, that meaningful progress has become impossible. The models continue to proliferate, but the communication seems only to diminish. . . . [Scholars] tend to talk past one another; not to hear what one another is saying, not reading one another's work sufficiently.

\* \* \*

What do we mean when we say *source*? A text? A tradition? A database? A school of thought? A theology? A group of scribes? A literary style? Maybe we just mean a vocabulary and nothing more? I think each of us uses the word *source* to mean precisely what he or she wants it to mean; shades of Humpty Dumpty.

How did source criticism arrive at this state? And why has the crisis engendered no change whatsoever in how its practitioners go about their work? In both cases, the answer has little to do with the individual personalities of the scholars involved. Rather, the fatal inability of the discipline to self-correct is rooted in the field's origins, and is perpetuated by a species of denial.

To be sure, biblicists are not alone here. Similarly disorienting symptoms have afflicted other areas of scholarly inquiry, especially in fields with semi- or quasi-scientific pretensions. A recent example is the stunned reaction among economists in the wake of the 2008 financial implosion, a disaster that so many of them failed to see coming and got so wrong. One outspoken member of the guild, the Nobel laureate and *New York*

*Times* columnist Paul Krugman, suggested afterward that his fellow economists had been led astray by their professional “desire for an all-encompassing, intellectually elegant approach that also gave economists a chance to show off their mathematical prowess.” Thereby, to use Krugman’s own puffed-up terms, the profession “mistook beauty for truth.” If, he concluded, the guild of economists was ever to “redeem itself, . . . it will have to reconcile itself to a less alluring vision” and, above all, “learn to live with messiness.”

Of course, to admit that the economic world is messy is essentially to admit defeat in the long-fought battle to win for economics the status of a science with the power not only to study the past but, crucially, to predict economic performance in the future. And that offers another point of analogy with the predicament of biblical source-critics in their elusive search for the sources of the Pentateuch. In positing the date of a text and the stages of its composition, source critics strive to create an elegant narrative of its history and therefore of the evolution of religious ideas in ancient Israel. For many, this elegance has become a badge of their intellectual identity.

But biblicists, too, are prone to mistaking beauty for truth. The real, harder truth is that the enterprise of dating biblical texts and their stages of growth is messy, much messier than they would like to admit. And the larger truth is that we actually have limited access to the minds and hearts of the scribes of ancient Israel and cannot know the full range of motivations that drove them to compose the texts they did. What may look to our eyes as, for instance, an unresolved inconsistency between two passages may not have bothered the ancients at all.

**Few biblical source critics have reached the necessary conclusion from the crisis in their field: that the precursors of the received text—their holy grail—simply may not be recoverable.**

Consider historical inscriptions left us by Ramesses the Great, who ruled Egypt in the 13th century BCE. To commemorate his greatest achievement, a victory over his arch-enemies the Hittite Empire at the battle of Kadesh in 1274 BCE, Ramesses inscribed three mutually exclusive and contradictory reports, one right next to the other, each serving a distinct rhetorical purpose, on monumental sites all across Egypt. (The longest is full of internal contradictions as well.) This practice is wholly foreign to modern writers, and far from intuitive. Literary conventions are culture-specific.

Will source critics learn “to live with messiness”? The prospect is unlikely. Although some are ready to admit that their field has lost the capacity to make forward progress, few if any have reached the necessary conclusion: that the precursors of the received text—their holy grail—may simply not be recoverable. “It is difficult to get a man to understand something, when his salary depends on his not understanding it,” wrote the American activist and novelist Upton Sinclair. Just so, it is difficult to get a scholar to understand something when his entire scholarly enterprise depends on his not understanding it.

And in the meantime, another corruptive condition has disfigured the field, and the professional conduct, of biblical studies generally.



### III. Left vs. Right

Even as source criticism, the largest sub-field of biblical studies, sinks into self-acknowledged methodological failure, many scholars in that area and others have vigorously taken sides in the culture war that for almost four decades now has been raging in the United States and, with different tonalities, in Europe and Israel. Like so many of their academic colleagues in the humanities and social sciences, biblicists have largely pledged themselves to one side in that war. In today's universities, the practice of critical scholarship of the Bible is dominated, and saturated, by the same postmodern liberal orthodoxies that have undone many another discipline in the humanities.

One unfailing symptom of this malaise is the unspoken denial of its existence. Search the databases of publications in the field, and you will often find reference to one, and only one, ideological orientation. A particular scholar will be described—and thereby just as often dismissed—as a “conservative exegete,” or a particular approach or interpretation will be characterized—and just as often deprecated—as conservative. But you will never come across references, let alone slighting ones, to “liberal” exegetes or interpretations.

**In biblical studies, there are seemingly two types of practitioners: genuine scholars, presumed to be motivated only by the disinterested search for truth; and “conservative” scholars, presumed to be driven by dogma.**

The point: in biblical studies, there are two types of practitioners: genuine scholars, and conservative scholars. The former are presumed innocent, motivated only by the disinterested and rigorous search for truth and guided solely by the dictates of rational inquiry, unmodified and uncontaminated by ideology. The latter are presumed to be agenda-driven, and to have donned academic cap and gown only to achieve a surreptitious panache of legitimacy for their cherished and unreconstructed religious dogmas. To those it wishes to marginalize and delegitimize, the mainstream establishment will apply the label “conservative.”

Scholars can be slapped with the conservative label if they argue one or more of three things. The first concerns the coherence of the biblical text. So-called genuine scholars—source critics, here—underscore the *incoherence* of the text. By contrast, a “conservative”—or, worse, “uncritical”—scholar is one who puts forth evidence for a text's unity and coherence. Such a scholar may readily admit that the text could have a prehistory. But if such scholars—among notable exemplars are Robert Alter and Meir Sternberg, the latter a winner of the coveted Israel Prize—also claim that the received text, which is the only actual text we have, can still be read as a coherent work, and that many of the “problems” that other modern scholars see in it are an imposition of anachronistic aesthetic sensibilities, they will not be spared opprobrium as “uncritical.”

Likewise deemed “conservative” is a scholar who adduces evidence for the historical accuracy of a given biblical account. And the same goes, thirdly, for a scholar who argues for the antiquity of a given account—that is, that its origins lie in a period roughly coterminous with the events and individuals depicted in it. Leading names on the roll of dishonor in these last two categories include Kenneth Kitchen, the undisputed doyen

of Egyptology in the Ramesside period, and James K. Hoffmeier, another noted Egyptologist.

True enough, some scholars in the field of biblical studies do identify themselves as conservative in their outlook. And there are also individuals seeking to prove the Bible's inerrancy, or antiquity, or superiority, or unity who are motivated by confessional concerns. But that is beside the point; if their scholarship should be rejected—as can happen—it should be rejected because it is weak. And why the one-sidedness at all? Is the arcane task of dating the biblical texts and of parsing them into their putative sources always and everywhere a value-neutral and ideology-free enterprise, as the liberal mainstream pretends?

Hardly. Getting down to cases, let's look at three examples of critical scholarship meshed with openly liberal causes.

## IV. Source Criticism in the Service of Religious Pluralism

Many biblicists—Jewish and Christian alike—insist that, whatever their own personal religious beliefs or conduct may be, religious convictions and academic inquiry are two distinct realms, and must be kept apart to preserve the integrity of each. In *Revelation & Authority: Sinai in Jewish Scripture and Tradition* (2015), Benjamin Sommer, a professor of Bible at the Jewish Theological Seminary, maintains that this bifurcation of mind and spirit is both untenable and spiritually dishonest. While fully embracing the findings of critical scholarship, Sommer also embraces the notion of divine revelation at Sinai and of a binding halakhic commitment incumbent upon all Jews. Under this banner he puts forth a theology unifying scholarship and tradition, weaving together biblical, talmudic, and modern philosophical sources. (Among the latter, pride of place is given to Franz Rosenzweig and Abraham Joshua Heschel.)

Nothing quite like this synthesis between scholarship and Judaism's classical beliefs has ever been attempted before, and Sommer's work is breathtaking in its scope. Many readers, especially those to his theological right, will not agree with his conclusions. But any reader seeking to balance a commitment to scholarship with a commitment to Judaism's basic tenets will find in his work an exhaustive presentation of primary and secondary sources, with creative theological options flowing from every chapter.

At the same time, as I've already hinted, Sommer's work has an ideological purpose in mind. In particular, he does not see himself bound to the classical halakhic system of talmudic Judaism; rather, he believes in and defends the legitimacy of *multiple* halakhic systems and communities. This position he bases on scholarly grounds.

Within the text of the final, canonized Torah, Sommer argues, we find multiple and conflicting iterations of the same law. Thus, for example, Exodus 12 rules that Israelites should offer the paschal sacrifice in their own domiciles. Deuteronomy 16, however, insists that Israelites travel to the central shrine in order to offer the sacrifice. For Sommer, the inclusion of both, mutually exclusive iterations of the law within the final version of the Torah reveals that the editor of the Torah—the redactor, in academic parlance—approved of more than one way of observing God's law. Thus, he concludes, intertwining scholarship with liberal theology, modern Jewish

communities may also adopt different rulings on how to follow a given law in the Torah.

Here's the catch, however: Sommer's argument-from-scholarship is partial to a specific interpretation of the evidence. Many critical scholars do *not* see the laws in Exodus 12 and Deuteronomy 16 as contradictory. Instead, they argue that the law in Deuteronomy 16 is a later adaptation and newfound application of the law in Exodus 12. Deuteronomy envisions an age when Israel will have a centralized shrine, or Temple, and when it does, it will be incumbent upon Israelites to offer the paschal sacrifice there. The final version of the Torah retains the earlier version of the law because it is committed to showing how the law *evolved*.

Laws in the Torah are always dated; some are dated to Sinai, some to the trek in the wilderness, and some to the final year of Moses' life. By always specifying the date, the Torah casts the law as developing in accordance with changing circumstance. In this regard, the Torah resembles the U.S. Constitution and its way of adding amendments. The eighteenth amendment of 1919 enacted the nationwide prohibition on the sale of alcohol. The twentieth amendment of 1933 repealed it. Although one prohibits and the other permits, the legal convention of constitutional amendments, whereby both are preserved, allows the reader to follow the law's evolution.

**A double standard permeates the field: when a scholar adduces evidence for the unity of a biblical text, he is liable to be labeled a conservative and dismissed; a scholar advancing an openly liberal agenda runs no comparable risk.**

So it is with varying iterations of the law in the Torah. To these scholars, the biblical redactor does not in the least believe in multiple halakhic systems. Rather, his work demonstrates that law may change over time but that, at any one moment, all of Israel is obligated to obey a single law.

To be clear, my point here is not to invalidate the theology proposed by Sommer, who laudably discloses the interests that animate his work. Rather, I mean to illustrate the double standard that permeates so much of biblical studies. When a scholar adduces evidence for the unity of a text, even if he makes no mention of theology whatsoever, he is liable to be labeled a conservative and the academic form in which he expresses his argument will be dismissed as an impermissible weave of scholarship with the suspect ideology behind it. In *Revelation & Authority*, Sommer explicitly and unabashedly reveals his theologically liberal views, but I suspect he would bristle at being labeled a "liberal scholar"—for to be so labeled would suggest that he lacks impartiality in considering evidence and that his reading of that evidence is driven by his liberal theology. But he need not worry: as things stand in the profession, and in marked contrast to the one-sided employment of the delegitimizing label "conservative," the label "liberal" would never be applied, let alone applied pejoratively, even to a scholar who marshals one side in a scholarly debate to advance an openly liberal agenda.

Indeed, the field of biblical studies would benefit if such labels were abolished altogether.

## V. Pacifism and the Art of Dating Biblical Texts

My second example is *Holy Resilience: The Bible's Traumatic Origins* (2014) by David Carr, a professor at New York's Union Theological Seminary.

Before getting to that work, we need to take cognizance of Carr's immediately preceding book, *The Formation of the Hebrew Bible* (2011), one of the most influential works in biblical studies to appear since the turn of the present century. In that book, Carr took a step that source critics should have taken long ago. Instead of relying strictly on his own intuition and sense of literary unity to trace the Torah's prehistory, he looked outside the Bible to documented examples in the ancient Near East of how an epic or law book expands and changes over time. Carr's study and others that have followed it sound a consistent note: the epigraphic evidence shows that many of the forms of editing routinely hypothesized by source critics of the Torah were not employed anywhere else in the ancient Near East.

This is a convention-smashing conclusion. Time and again, biblical scholars have claimed that simply by analyzing the version we have, we can accurately recreate what earlier versions of the text looked like. That is certainly possible where both earlier and later stages of an ancient text are in fact available—as, for instance, in accounts found in the biblical book of Chronicles that are clearly built on those found in the books of Samuel and Kings. But it would not be remotely possible to recreate Samuel and Kings if you did not know of their existence and all you had in hand was the text of Chronicles. Eggs cannot be unscrambled, and texts cannot be mined for fissures to produce their precursors. Summarizing his findings, Carr asserts in *The Formation of the Hebrew Bible* that the sources and editorial layers so confidently articulated by source critics are likely “nothing but the inventions of their creators.”

### **Eggs cannot be unscrambled, and texts cannot be mined for fissures to produce their precursors.**

With this in mind, let's now turn to *Holy Resilience*. Here Carr undertakes to determine the date of composition for much of the biblical corpus. In his judgment, most of the books of the Bible, the Torah included, were written during the Babylonian exile (586-538 BCE) or immediately following the return of the exiles to Judea, when they lived under Persian hegemony. It was then that, for Carr, the exiles chose to commit to writing the traditions they had long held. The circumstances were ripe: in Babylon, they saw themselves as akin to or indeed as another iteration of the Israelite people in Egypt, the slaves whom Moses would lead out of exile. “Somehow,” he writes, “these traumatized Judeans found healing in stories about ancient Israel and its chosenness.”

There is elegance in Carr's narrative. And it is undoubtedly satisfying to think of Jewish scripture as a form of spiritual resistance, a means by which an oppressed minority struggles to survive against stronger powers. The title of Carr's book, *Holy Resilience*, highlights just that point—and also another, related point: as he explains in the introduction, “Here I tell the story of how the Jewish and Christian Bibles both emerged as responses to suffering, particularly group suffering.” And in the very brief preface, Carr also shares his interest in writing the book: “As a Quaker, I am especially conscious of those who have suffered and are now suffering in war—the war on terror, the war on drugs, and more conventional wars, in Iraq, Afghanistan, and many other places.”

So, in *Holy Resilience*, the theological and the scholarly align perfectly and are braided together as one. If you hold a theology of pacifism—many Quakers renounce the bearing of arms and conscientiously object to participating in war—it cannot but be appealing to think of scripture as itself the creative product of victims rather than perpetrators of violence.

Yet, seductive though this vision is, as a method of dating the biblical text it is open to serious challenge on several grounds. Here I'll mention only two. For one thing, recently found documents from ancient Babylon reveal that the Jewish exiles there were active in trade and actually slave *owners*, which suggests that they were fairly well-off and certainly not oppressed like the Israelite slaves in Egypt. For another, biblical linguists maintain that the Hebrew of the Torah reflects pre-exilic Hebrew—when Israelites exercised autonomy in their own land—to a degree that could not have been mimicked by a scribe living in the exilic or post-exilic period.

Imagine for a moment that Carr had argued for a dating of the Torah to the pre-exilic era in which Israel enjoyed self-rule under Israelite kings, and had prefaced his work by saying: "As a Zionist, I am especially conscious of how periods of ascendancy, autonomy, and power enrich the life of Israel." At the very least, he would have been promptly taken to task for inappropriately conflating ideology and scholarship. My point here, as in the case of Benjamin Sommer, is not to invalidate Carr's theology or his commitment to his Quaker faith; it's not even to invalidate his scholarly conclusions. Like Sommer, he is to be lauded for laying bare the motivations behind his work. Yet he, too, I suspect, would take umbrage at being labeled a "liberal scholar"—though, to repeat, in the field of biblical studies a scholar is never called out for being "liberal" and agenda-driven even when he openly and proudly marries his scholarship to a liberal ideology.

The heroization of victimhood that animates Carr's book finds a highly receptive audience among academics. Consider a single statistic: the annual meeting of the Society of Biblical Literature, held in North America each November, is the largest such gathering in the field of biblical studies. Search the online program of this past year's meeting, at which over 1,700 papers were presented, and you'll discover 326 references to the word "violence," a number far outstripping occurrences of such core biblical terms as "Jerusalem," "Torah," "Covenant," "Moses," or "David." And yet the word "violence" has no direct translation in either biblical Hebrew or in the Greek of the New Testament.

Has the academic preoccupation with "violence" done violence to the critical study of scripture on scripture's own terms? Read on.

## VI. Biblical Studies in the Service of Cultural Warfare

"Could you tell me when scholars say the Torah was written?" The question, posed to me by an Israeli student just after the last class of the day—an hour when most of his peers were heading out for the evening—was voiced by a secular kibbutznik in his mid-twenties who in the classroom had impressed me by his thoughtful demeanor. As we sat down, I began by mentioning the vast range of scholarly opinion on this issue.

"Well, then," he interrupted, "what do most scholars say? What's the consensus?"

Again I stressed the difficulty of defining a consensus, especially in light



of the many scholars who believe that the Torah includes pre-existing traditions much older than the final text. Moreover, I continued, we have virtually no epigraphic attestations to the Torah from the biblical period itself, and the events described in it occurred many centuries prior to our oldest copies, which are copies of copies. “Perhaps the truest answer,” I suggested, “is that we may not be able to know when it was written.”

He pounded his fist on the table. “But we *have* to know!”

Pausing tentatively, I probed. “Why do we *have* to know?”

He pounded a second time. “Because they’re ruining the country!”

Were “they” the Israeli settlers in Judea and Samaria, the Charedim, perhaps both? I was bemused by his apparent belief that if only he could march into the yeshivas of Bnei Brak with “proof” that the Torah wasn’t written by God, the students would chuck their yarmulkes and follow him out like the pied piper. But I was unsettled by his lack of intellectual honesty. He had posed an academic question but was willing to accept an academic answer only if it provided ammunition for his side in the culture wars.

Little did he know it, but my student was executing a move out of Spinoza’s playbook. Spinoza’s comments about the composition of the Bible—the comments that made him the father of biblical criticism—appeared in *The Theological-Political Treatise*. For Spinoza, theology and politics went hand in hand. He believed that the best way to undercut the authority of the Church was to go to the source and undermine scripture itself. By subjecting the Bible to critical analysis and demonstrating its utterly human origins, he wrote, we will succeed in “freeing our minds from theological prejudices and the blind acceptance of human fictions as God’s teaching.”

### **In many quarters today, the critical study of scripture is executed in the wider service of advancing secular liberal positions, and doing so by undermining the beliefs of the faithful.**

In many quarters today, the critical scrutiny of scripture is executed in the wider service of advancing secular liberal positions, and doing so by undermining the beliefs of the faithful. In the United States, you can hear echoes of “they’re ruining the country!” in any number of aggrieved groups who feel that fundamentalists and their Bibles must be reined in—and who, following in Spinoza’s footsteps, see in the field of biblical scholarship itself a source of ammunition with which to wage this battle.

Consider one example from feminist studies of the Bible. It’s plain enough that the Torah views women as subordinate to men when it comes to land ownership and to service in the judiciary, the Temple, and the military, to name just a few areas. But sometimes, in the guise of careful inquiry, feminist critics pursue a cultural knockout.

Thus, an oft-repeated claim is that, according to the Bible, the covenant at Sinai was made with the men of Israel alone. The stakes here could hardly be higher. It is one thing to claim that a law here or there is prejudicial toward women. But if the covenant between God and man—the very core of the Bible—was indeed struck only with “man” and not with woman, then the entire edifice of biblical theology will have been shown to be androcentric: which is to say, rotten through and through. To shame the Bible is to tame it.

Some feminist scholars point to Exodus 19:15, where God commands the Israelites concerning preparations for the revelation at Sinai: “He said to *the people*, ‘Be ready for the third day; do not go near a woman.’” Clearly the address here is to men. Therefore, these scholars conclude, all other uses of “the people” in the account of revelation and covenant-making also refer to men alone.

Conveniently, however, this ignores other verses in the same account where the phrase “the people” unequivocally includes women. Exodus 19:12: “You shall set bounds for *the people* saying, ‘Beware of going up the mountain or touching the border of it. Anyone who touches the mountain shall surely die.’” The following verse explicitly clarifies that any living being—human or beast—that touches the mountain shall surely die. Clearly, then, the term “the people” in Exodus 19 can shift in meaning depending on who is being addressed in a given verse. There is certainly no proof that “the people” here refers to men exclusively.

Needless to add, feminist critics are rarely called out on the charge that their ideology has contaminated the rigor of their scholarship. Nor are they ever dismissed as “liberal scholars.” To the contrary, agendas that underscore grievance on the basis of gender, sexuality, or race are sacrosanct. Plight makes right, and to the alleged victim go the spoils.

## VII. Leveling the Playing Field

The marginalizing and delegitimizing of “conservative scholars” are most prevalent in Scandinavia and in German-speaking countries, where the punitive brand of secularism is a stronger cultural force than in the United States. Nor are non-European scholars exempt, especially if they have spent substantial time studying in Germany.

The bias can take several forms. Recently, one of the leading German publishers of biblical studies, Harrassowitz Verlag, released the work of an up-and-coming scholar. Sight unseen, several major periodicals based in Europe declined to review the book, and German libraries with strong holdings in biblical studies refused to order it. The reason: the author is affiliated with a seminary deemed to be on the conservative end of the Protestant spectrum.

**Recently a leading publisher released the work of an up-and-coming scholar. Sight unseen, several major periodicals declined to review it because the author is affiliated with a seminary deemed to be on the conservative end of the Protestant spectrum.**

Sometimes the bias surfaces earlier, during the review process of a proposed submission to a book publisher or academic journal. Although the authors’ names are routinely hidden for purposes of such peer review, a reviewer will summarily reject, on grounds of supposed hidden motives, a work that appears to espouse one of the three “suspect” categories listed earlier: the literary coherence of the biblical text, the authenticity of its historical account, or the antiquity of its composition. Among academic journals based in Central Europe, years can go by without a single article appearing that argues for the coherence, accuracy, or antiquity of a biblical text.

But the problem is not geographically limited. To the contrary, in many quarters critical study of the Bible today has become weaponized in the service of cultural warfare.

What, then, is to be done? The list is embarrassingly simple to rehearse.

First, delegitimizing a scholar by divining his or her supposed agenda has no place in academic discussion. Biblicists are trained in philology, not psychology—trained to study the prophets, not to become prophets themselves. Nor is a scholar’s motivation any kind of threat. Although the first generation of Israeli archeologists were openly driven to demonstrate the connection between the Jewish people and its land, all would agree that their contribution to the field of historical geography was pioneering and would not have happened in the absence of that ideological agenda. All would similarly agree that scholars with disabilities have shed significant light on the ways biblical texts portray individuals with physical deformities, precisely because of the intimate sensitivity they bring to their reading of the biblical text.

Next, what matters in judging scholarship is the evidence put forward and the cogency and integrity of its treatment. Weak arguments can be formulated by feminists and fundamentalists alike, and it is the responsibility of scholars at all points of the spectrum to subject them to honest critique.

Finally, academic rigor is properly predicated on the airing and robust discussion of multiple viewpoints. When one range of arguments is routinely silenced, the discipline fails its mandate and enters into the service of other interests. It is absolutely true that many religious individuals do try to bolster the standing of the Bible with recourse to weak scholarly arguments. But today we see a counter-bias on the left that is just as corrosive to the integrity of the field. The default *academic* position of the left is to demonstrate the Bible’s incoherence, historical inaccuracy, and late composition. This creates an implicit bias in favor of deconstruction and devaluation that is inbuilt: not a bug, but a feature.

No less true is that there are many fine biblicists who are source-critics, or who argue for late dates of composition, or who doubt the historical accuracy of the text—all with no ideological agenda in mind. And there are many areas of biblical studies—think, for example, of scholarship focusing on comparisons with other materials from the ancient Near East—that greatly enrich our understanding of sacred scripture.

But something is surely amiss when one can scour major European journals in vain for even a mention of responsible arguments in favor of a text’s coherence, accuracy, or antiquity; when only supposedly conservative agendas are labeled as such but never openly liberal ones; when a book or author is effectively blacklisted by reason of affiliation; and when scholars are in agreement that their discipline has fallen into chaos but are incapable of changing course.

The first person in the Hebrew Bible to probe the Torah of Moses was Joshua. To level the playing field today, biblicists should be heeding the divine instruction received by Joshua for the proper execution of his task: “Do not turn from it, neither right nor left.”

# Deeper Reasons for the Bias in Biblical Studies

There is a liberal slant in biblical studies, but it has an older and more persistent source than merely the general liberalism or leftism of today's academy.



Looking closely at the Hebrew Bible. iStockPhoto/tzahiV.

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Joshua Berman's essay, "The Corruption of Biblical Studies," is an insightful and eloquent discussion of some of the outstanding problems in the discipline of which we are both members, and it offers some wise counsel about how, ideally, the discipline can set itself aright. Although I do not dispute his observations about the history that has brought us to this pass, I think the problem is somewhat larger, deeper and, sadly, less amenable to correction than he implies. Let me briefly explain.

Berman's opening comments about the breadth of current interest in the Bible draw attention to the key fact that much of the study of the Bible takes place outside the modern academy. Indeed, the phenomenon of biblical studies, understood as the systematic intellectual exploration of the scriptural text, long predates the emergence of characteristically modern modes of study and their institutional homes. Traditionally, the study of the Bible (Jewish or Christian) took place in religious communities. It was an expression of personal commitment and occurred in tandem with the study of other books essential to the community in question.

There was, in other words, a larger, encompassing affirmation that valorized and energized the whole enterprise, and teachers and students shared the particular life of practice with which the affirmation was inextricably associated. The instructors were not simply sources of information or people from whom to learn a skill; they were expected to be, in one way or another, role models, engaged in the liturgy of the community, observing its norms, and upholding its ethic. For teachers

and students alike, studying the Bible constituted what the historian of philosophy, Pierre Hadot, borrowing from the Jesuit tradition, called a “spiritual exercise.” Certainly, *talmud torah*, the study of Torah (whether Written or Oral) in Jewish tradition, fell into that category.

This was true not only for the older European universities, which were closely associated with the Church, but also for a large proportion of the early private colleges and universities in the United States, which began under religious auspices and, in many cases, maintained an active commitment to the theology of the sponsoring group into the 20th century. A pamphlet from 1643, for example, gives this as the reason the Puritans had recently founded a college (Harvard): “One of the next things we longed for and looked after was to advance learning and perpetuate it to posterity; dreading to leave an illiterate ministry to the churches, when our present ministers shall lie in the dust.”

In a small minority of institutions of higher learning today, vivid, holistic religious commitments of this sort can still be found, but if Berman is right that biblical studies is “the most popular *online* branch of the liberal arts” (emphasis added), most of the people doing the searching are not professional scholars but, as he notes, religiously motivated laymen seeking enlightenment.

Berman is also right to point to the early modern period and figures like Spinoza for the origins of the distinctively modern (“critical,” “historical critical”) mode of biblical study. Further in the background of this momentous shift lay the Protestant Reformation and its rejection of a large part of Church tradition in the name of scripture. Even that development, in turn, owed much to the emergence in the Middle Ages, among both Jews and Christians, of a mode of commentary that sought out the plain sense (*peshat* in Hebrew, *sensus literalis* in Latin) in contradistinction to the more imaginative but less controlled interpretations of the classical traditions.

What distinguishes historical critical study from those distant medieval antecedents is the question of authorship. In a word, whereas the premodern traditions, including the Protestant Reformers, had seen God as the ultimate author of the text (whatever the degree or mode of human mediation), historical critics increasingly came to treat the text as a human artifact, authored by historical figures with their own contingent identities, including linguistic, cultural, social, political, and now gender identities. (Scholars could still believe that God was the ultimate author, but this became a private conviction without operational relevance to the task of the critical biblical scholar.) To interpret the text accurately, the identity of the author and his historical location had to be reconstructed, and this required the dating of the text and, correlatively, its extrication from texts of later or earlier authors with which it had come to be interwoven. Biblical scholars in this newer mode, like scholars throughout the humanities, drew energy from the recognition that texts and religions had *histories*; they were not static and unvarying.

At first glance, the new insight might be taken to be not so new after all. An example that Berman offers in order to make a somewhat different point is instructive here. Berman understands the contradictions between the laws of the Passover offering in Exodus 12 and in Deuteronomy 16 to mean that the Deuteronomic procedure is “a later adaptation and newfound application of the law in Exodus 12.” Thus, “the final version of the Torah retains the earlier version of the law because it is committed to showing how the law *evolved*” (his emphasis).



Whether the version in Deuteronomy is newer or older than the one in Exodus is a nettlesome question, long disputed by historical critics. But even if we assume that Deuteronomy 16 is the later text, it is doubtful that the author(s) of Exodus 12 would have accepted the idea that its procedures were only temporarily valid, to be happily superseded as time went on and circumstances changed. If the admonition, “You shall observe this as an ordinance for you and your descendants forever” (Exod 12:24), refers to the whole rite, then it certainly counts against any such argument for smooth historical evolution rather than diversity of discrete sources.

To be sure, the home-based blood ritual of Exodus did disappear and centralization of sacrifice in the Temple (a key provision of Deuteronomy) came into effect; but to call this “a later adaptation and newfound application” of the same law seems to me to downplay the degree of divergence. And even if Berman is right that “the final version of the Torah retains the earlier version of the law because it is committed to showing how the law *evolved*”—actually, to reconstruct the intention of the final version without a circular argument is another formidable challenge—this evolution is placed by the narrative within the lifetime of one man, Moses, and thus is only a very distant analogy to the sort of historical change that critical scholars trace, a change proceeding over centuries and taking effect only unevenly among various communities.

**In sum,** historical critical scholars are after much bigger fish: not simply the pragmatic adaptation of one unvarying religion to new circumstances but the historical development of a whole religion. To use Berman’s American analogy, most historical critics, at least classically, have conceived of the process not, as he suggests, along the lines of amendments to the Constitution but rather of different constitutions that ultimately come together in a redacted document that privileges none of them: the whole is greater than the sum of the parts.

With the wide diffusion of historical criticism in the 19th and 20th centuries, history thus became the prestige discipline among university-based biblical scholars and, increasingly, among their seminary-based colleagues as well; non-historical, or synchronic, readings came to appear at best non-academic and at worst indefensible. Scholars who read biblical texts as coherent wholes, effectively without compositional histories, seemed naïve because they ignored history, the key category.

Berman objects to today’s labeling of acclaimed literary critics like Robert Alter and Meir Sternberg as “uncritical” for reading “the received text . . . as a coherent work,” but the label makes sense if one understands the specialized use of the word “critical” in biblical studies. Traditionally, critics in the literary sense of the word have read texts synchronically, as a snapshot, as it were, whereas biblical critics have read them as videos, unfolding over time and with alertness on the part of the interpreters to the possibility that discordant materials have been spliced in, as in the case of other ancient Near Eastern compositions.

In this light, one of the more encouraging developments over the past 40 years or so has been the increasing openness of biblical scholars to synchronic readings and, correlatively, to the literary sophistication of the texts. Whereas redactors were once seen as clumsy—after all, they are identified by their errors—there has now emerged a sense that editors can be literary artists in their own right. Still, the fact that a text *can* be read as a unity does not entail that it *must* be so read or is *best* read as a unity for all purposes, including those of the historian. Whereas biblical critics have traditionally begun their inquiries with a keen openness to the

possibility of multiple sources, and literary critics, like ardent religious traditionalists, have usually begun theirs with an assumption of the unity of whatever text happens to lie before their eyes, today I sense that biblical scholars are increasingly seeking to do justice to both dimensions of study—a highly difficult task, to be sure, but also one that is more balanced than the alternatives.

Another factor at work here is that the emergence of the historical focus in biblical studies in the distinctively modern mode corresponded to large-scale changes in the *social* dimension of the field. No longer would teachers and students need to share a religious commitment or even to have one. Now, Jews, Christians, secularists, and others could, in principle, all meet as equals in the classroom, pursuing a sense of scripture that was, ideally, independent of all contemporary commitments.

In other words, whatever religious identity and theological affirmation scholars may have had (or not had) became a strictly private matter, bracketed off from their academic work. Precisely because the scholarly enterprise was restricted to the study of the past—to what the text *meant*, not what it *means*—all could work together in ways they could not in the older, religiously affiliated context. The relation of this new social situation to Enlightenment notions of the separation of church and state and of freedom of religion is obvious and hardly coincidental.

**But the new** context of biblical studies did not supersede the old so neatly as this idealized account suggests, and for very good reason. For one thing, the very term “Bible” is inherently confessional. To what collection are we referring, the Jewish canon of scriptures or the Christian? If the latter, to which Christian canon, the Roman Catholic, the Protestant, or one of the Orthodox canons? Recourse to terms like “received text” and “final version” can only obfuscate this question; they cannot answer it.

The difference canon makes can be easily demonstrated. Suppose the subject is the figure of Abraham, the canon is a Christian one, and the interpreter is practicing synchronic literary study—viewing the text as a snapshot, that is, not as a video. In that case, he must take serious account of what New Testament books like Galatians or Romans have to say and cannot dismiss or sideline them as alien or chronologically later. More subtly, he may be inclined to read the Abraham narratives in Genesis through an early-Christian lens, or at least to highlight the putative continuities rather than the differences. Needless to say, interpreting Abraham within a Jewish canonical context would yield a significantly different picture.

But equally important is the simple circumstance that a high degree of attention to the Bible (under whatever delimitation) is mostly a product of its religious usage, current or historical. And, in fact, the personal origins of most critical scholars have always lain in religious communities, whether they continue actively to affirm theological convictions (as many do) or not. Indeed, much of the work in biblical studies still goes on in seminaries and in religiously sponsored colleges and universities. There is, in short, a tension between the modern methods of study, on the one hand, and the choice of subject and the social reality of the personnel pursuing it, on the other.

For some practitioners of biblical studies, this tension can be relaxed by pursuing their discipline in ways that are often labeled “conservative,” the term here referring not so much to a political as to a religious stance that minimizes the divergence between traditional teaching and the findings of modern scholarship. Thus, these scholars tend to:

- favor the Masoretic text on the assumption (commonest among Jews and usually undefended) that it is the oldest and most reliable in all instances;
- develop arguments for early dating, though not necessarily as early as claimed by the internal biblical chronology and attributions;
- deny or downplay historical change and stress continuity;
- mount cases for the historical reliability of biblical reportage;
- argue for unitary composition of individual texts or large blocks of text;
- uphold the overall coherence of the Bible (including, for Christians, the coherence of the two testaments with each other and their mutual implication);
- argue for the radical distinctiveness of ancient Israel (and, for Christians, the Church and the Gospel as well) against the ostensibly countervailing evidence derived from the massive recovery of ancient Near Eastern and Greco-Roman texts over the last two centuries.

Of course, the key elements underlying the traditional religious claims—the efficacious word, personal intervention, and providential guidance of God in the story told by the text and in the production of the text itself—cannot be confirmed by any historical analysis or textual exegesis. But the “conservative” approach can seem to relieve to some degree the tension between the traditional religious and the academic cultures and to disguise the need for serious theological rethinking about the nature of biblical truth in light of modern discoveries.

To biblical scholars who either have never had a vivid religious identity or are in full flight from one—the former category seems to me to be becoming more common, the latter to have been common for a long time—this “conservative” posture rings alarms, since to them it seems to violate the ground rules of the modern pluralistic academy, recalling instead the pre-Enlightenment situation and the social sectors in which it is still alive today, principally those of Christian fundamentalists and Orthodox or Charedi Jews. For that reason, the default position adopted by these scholars is the one that could be labeled “liberal.”

Berman would prefer that such labels disappear altogether. I fully agree, but I would also caution that the “conservative” positions are unlikely to seem any more plausible if the adjective vanishes. This is partly because of the threat that they seem to pose to the social and intellectual basis of modern (that is, pluralistic and non-confessional) scholarship and partly because the issues are complex and, as always in the humanities (and often in other fields), not very amenable to definitive resolution. Contrary to the use of the word “corruption” in Berman’s title, what we are dealing with here is at most a bias, one that persists in part because of the necessarily non-confessional ground rules of study in a religiously pluralistic framework.

To be sure, a more thoroughgoing pluralism would not privilege liberal or secular positions any more than it privileges traditional religious ones. But to achieve that more genuine pluralism is a very tall order indeed and a goal that, in general, liberals and secularists, like their traditionalist opponents, are none too eager to pursue.

**Given the regnant** secularism and liberalism of the contemporary academy, a less costly mode of relieving the tension between the academic framework and a robust religious identity is to interpret the religious heritage as endorsing views and attitudes that the academy favors. Berman's analysis of recent works by Benjamin D. Sommer and David M. Carr, two of the outstanding biblical scholars of our time, suggests that they are doing just that.

It is certainly true that if Sommer and Carr took positions strongly opposed to those they advocate in the books Berman discusses, their work might be labeled "conservative" and marginalized to a large degree, at least in the elite academy, as a result. But, here again, there is no "corruption" (and Berman wisely does not use the term in connection with them), and, if any argument these two scholars make is to be countered, it will have to be on the basis of "the evidence put forward and the cogency and integrity of its treatment," to quote Berman's words.

Although I do not pretend to speak for Sommer or Carr, it would surprise me if either of these particular scholars thought his work advanced a "secular" perspective or promoted "deconstruction," two terms that Berman finds indicative of the bias of the discipline in general. Rather, the books in question seem to me to be in the service of what we might broadly term "liberal religion." In the minds of most adherents of this kind of religion, work of the sort produced by Sommer and Carr does not devalue the Bible or reduce it to inaccuracy or incoherence, to employ three other terms with which Berman characterizes "the default *academic* position of the left." Nor does the determination of "late composition" (another of Berman's complaints) generally serve to discredit the scriptures for liberal communities, as it does for those on the religious right whose faith stands or falls on the basis of the historical accuracy of the traditional attributions and chronologies.

Rather, in my experience, religious liberals tend to perceive interpretations like Sommer's and Carr's as *reclaiming* the Bible and revitalizing the community's engagement with it. This is not an argument in favor of the particular cases made by these scholars (or by liberal theology overall), but it does caution against the assumption that a given argument must derive from the same motivation and have the same effect across the religious spectrum. What may seem to devalue and discredit the Bible in a heavily Orthodox Jewish institution like Bar-Ilan University, where Berman teaches, can elicit a very different resonance in liberal seminaries of the kinds at which Sommer and Carr teach. The key variables are the theological conception of the Bible and the way that it meets, or declines to meet, the challenges to traditional doctrines that emanate from modern critical study.

**The brunt** of my argument has been that in the case of biblical studies, the liberal bias has a deeper and more persistent source than merely the general liberalism or leftism of today's academy. That source is the social situation that emerges from the non-confessional, pluralistic study of an incorrigibly particular and religiously delimited set of books. In order to participate in the whole enterprise, scholars must learn to bracket the preconceptions deriving from the vivid religious life that most of them have had (and many still have) and to subject them to critical scrutiny. If, ultimately, the scholars re-embrace those conceptions, they must do so on the basis of something like what the philosopher Paul Ricoeur called the "second naïveté." But that move of reclamation and normative affirmation lies outside the domain of historical critical study of the Bible *per se* and in that of theology instead (an area of study in which, increasingly, biblical

scholars have little experience). To the extent that a given interpretation by a given scholar seems to validate the positions characteristic of the “first naïveté,” it will be critically suspect, and other scholars will sometimes overreact to it for reasons that are, ironically, themselves suspect from a critical point of view.

At least in the American context, the political situation on campus at the moment adds more fuel to the distaste for traditional Christian positions, and sometimes Jewish ones as well. That academics, and elite academics all the more so, lean strongly to the left on politics has been true for some time. So has the disproportionate rate of secularity among professors. By contrast, about 80 percent of evangelicals (the most Bible-centered of Christians) voted for President Trump, and the positions such believers espouse, especially on issues of sexuality, are anathema to the left—redolent, it is said, of hatred and violence and not to be tolerated. The old term “liberalism” does not fit this attitude: what is actually at hand is an angry, aggressive radicalism without the respect for personal conscience and the sense of limits characteristic of political liberalism in the past.

As for liberal religious groups, they tend, for the most part, to be in full accord with the new ethos. In any event, being in precipitous demographic and cultural decline, they are unlikely to offer much effective counterweight to the militant secularism and contempt for Bible-based religion endemic (with some exceptions) in the academic world today.

It is hard to predict how far the academy will go in its current direction or how long the present cultural situation will last. But if things continue on their current course, the effect on biblical studies, as on the life of the mind in general, will result in something even worse than what Joshua Berman describes in the most accurate descriptions in his essay.



## “Gaza = Auschwitz”

Holocaust inversion—the claim that Israelis are the new Nazis and Palestinians the new Jews—has come to the American university campus.



*A woman demonstrating against Israeli action in Gaza outside of the Holocaust Museum in Washington, DC. Photo by MANDEL NGAN/AFP/Getty Images.*

MARTIN KRAMER

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### About the author

Martin Kramer is a historian at Tel Aviv University and the Walter P. Stern fellow at the Washington Institute for Near East Policy. He served as founding president at Shalem College in Jerusalem.

Five years ago, during an earlier Israeli operation in Gaza, the British novelist Howard Jacobson explained why “call[ing] the Israelis Nazis and liken[ing] Gaza to the Warsaw Ghetto” goes far beyond mere “criticism” of Israel:

Berating Jews with their own history, disinherit[ing] them of pity, as though pity is negotiable or has a sell-by date, is the latest species of Holocaust denial. . . . Instead of saying the Holocaust didn’t happen, the modern sophisticated denier accepts the event in all its terrible enormity, only to accuse the Jews of trying to profit from it, either in the form of moral blackmail or downright territorial theft. According to this thinking, the Jews have betrayed the Holocaust and become unworthy of it, the true heirs to their suffering being the Palestinians.

Experts call this Holocaust inversion. Based in the claim that Israel now behaves toward the Palestinians as Nazi Germany behaved toward the Jews, it originated in post-World War II Soviet propaganda, and from there spread to the Soviets’ Arab clients. It is now fully embedded in the Arab-Muslim world, where it grows and mutates in symbiosis with outright denial that the Holocaust occurred or a radical reduction of its genocidal scale, ferocity, and number of victims. Holocaust inversion has a graphic omnipresence in cartoons all over the Arab and Iranian press, where Israelis are regularly portrayed in Nazi regalia. Elsewhere in the Middle East and beyond, it has surfaced in the rhetoric of populist demagogues and the media. In Turkey’s new president and long-time prime minister, Recep Tayyip Erdogan, it now has a champion in a head of state. In Europe, Holocaust inversion is busy spreading beyond its original locus of infection and finding a home among intellectuals and activists, especially on the Left.

Thankfully, the disease is still rather hard to find in America, where it festers in only a few dark places. Some of those places, regrettably, operate as institutions of higher learning, and in one of them—Columbia University—a number of professors, mainly instructors in Middle East studies, have distinguished themselves in the black art of defaming Israel as a Holocaust emulator. Only a decade ago, Columbia was compelled to investigate departmental instructors who had been accused of intimidating their students with extreme anti-Israel diatribes. Not only did the university absolve its professors, however, it even granted tenure to the one faculty member against whom its own investigators found a student's claims to be "credible." Encouraged by this green light, the extremists have been tunneling under Morningside Heights ever since, fortifying their positions and waiting for a signal to emerge firing.

**The recent war in Gaza** has supplied the signal. Columbia now boasts three American exponents of the process described by Jacobson as "habituation to a language of loathing."

The first is Hamid Dabashi, the Hagop Kevorkian professor of Iranian studies and comparative literature. Almost exactly ten years ago, Dabashi sized up the security personnel working at Israel's Ben-Gurion airport—a "fully fortified barrack," he called it—in these words:

Half a century of systematic maiming and murdering of another people has left its deep marks on the faces of these people, the way they talk, the way they walk, the way they handle objects, the way they greet each other, the way they look at the world. There is an endemic prevarication to this machinery, a vulgarity of character that is bone-deep and structural to the skeletal vertebrae of its culture.

Now, ten years later, Dabashi hasn't lost his capacity for demonizing Jews. In an [article](#) entitled "Gaza: Poetry after Auschwitz," Dabashi borrows a title and what he imagines is a license from the post-Holocaust theorist Theodor Adorno to make his key point:

What are Israelis? Who are Israelis? They are Israelis by virtue of what? By a shared and sustained murderous history—from Deir Yassin in 1948 to Gaza in 2014. . . . After Gaza, not a single living Israeli can utter the word "Auschwitz" without it sounding like "Gaza." Auschwitz as a historical fact is now archival. Auschwitz as a metaphor is now Palestinian. From now on, every time any Israeli, every time any Jew, anywhere in the world, utters the word "Auschwitz," or the word "Holocaust," the world will hear "Gaza."

Once again, there is the conflation of Israel with "murder"—and not just murder but, in a new step for Dabashi, a "sustained murderous history" that has finally achieved Holocaust-class status: in Gaza, he writes, Israel has created an Auschwitz. As a "historical fact," the real Auschwitz—the one where 500 totally innocent Jews perished for every single innocent or guilty Palestinian killed in Israel's recent operation—is now merely "archival." Now, the world's most infamous death camp has become a "metaphor" for a place where, as it just so happens, the population grows by almost three percent per year. Such is the abyss of ignorance, bigotry, and casual mendacity inhabited by Columbia's chaired professor of Iranian studies and comparative literature.

Next up is Joseph Massad, associate professor of modern Arab politics and intellectual history and the man who, having compiled the clearest record of classroom intimidation at the very time he was being considered for promotion to permanent faculty status, stood at the center of

the last Columbia scandal. Then, in his struggle for academic survival, Massad had protested to the university's investigating committee that the "lie . . . claiming that I would equate Israel with Nazi Germany"—the essence of one student accusation—"is abhorrent. I have never made such a reprehensible equation." In a moment that won't be remembered as Columbia's finest, President Lee Bollinger and his board, succumbing to the bullying of radical faculty members, granted him tenure.

By 2009, after another Gaza flare-up, Massad no longer had any need for dissimulation. The professor who had found "reprehensible" the equation of Israel with Nazi Germany published an article entitled "The Gaza Ghetto Uprising." Illustrated by the famous image of a surrendering child in the Warsaw ghetto, the article invoked an alleged Israeli plan to "make Israel a purely Jewish state that is *Palästiner-rein*," and characterized the Palestinian Authority—or, rather, "the Israeli-created Palestinian Collaborationist Authority"—as "the *judenrat*, the Nazi equivalent" in this scenario. *Al Jazeera* ran a pathetic response by an American Jewish critic of Israel who scolded the author for damaging the Palestinian cause.

Last year, Massad penned another effort, "The Last of the Semites," carrying the equation back in time. It was, he, postulated, their "shared goal of expelling Jews from Europe as a separate unassimilable race that created the affinity between Nazis and Zionists all along." Massad ended the article by anointing the Palestinians as the true "heirs" of the pre-Holocaust Jewish struggle against anti-Semitism. So great was the revulsion caused by this piece of Holocaust inversion that its publisher, *Al Jazeera*, pulled it for a time.

Massad views each Israeli-Palestinian crisis as an opportunity to extend the range of his "language of loathing." The Nazi analogy no longer sufficing, he has now seized upon the latest conflict in Gaza to promote yet another loaded trope: Israel as the international Jew engaged in child sacrifice. In an piece devoted to the role of foreign volunteers in the Israeli military, Massad slips in a crucial phrase denouncing these "international Zionist Jewish brigades of baby-killers."

There's an irony here, and a tragic one. During Columbia's investigation of the complaints against him, Massad was most vigorously defended by an unlikely student supporter, who once showed up on campus in a sandwich board inscribed "I served in the Israeli army. I love Massad." The student, who insisted that "nobody calls me a baby-killer when I go to office hours," later committed suicide, and is memorialized at Columbia through a summer travel scholarship for students in the Middle East program. With Massad's own airing of the "baby-killer" canard, the professor has now betrayed the ghost of his most ardent Jewish defender.

And then there is Rashid Khalidi, holder of the Edward Said chair of modern Arab studies and a professor of a somewhat higher class. While Dabashi and Massad find it difficult to place their effusions in publications other than the death-to-Israel *Electronic Intifada* or the angry-Arab *Al Jazeera* and *Ahram Weekly*, Khalidi has entrée to the elite liberal New York press. He also knows enough not to try his editors' patience with naked examples of Holocaust inversion. Yet here he was, in a piece for the *New Yorker*, creeping up to the edge. Decrying the "collective punishment" being meted out to Gaza, Khalidi introduces his telltale allusion: "The truth of ghettos . . . is that, eventually, the ghetto will fight back. It was true in Soweto and Belfast, and it is true in Gaza."

Soweto and Belfast? Where's Warsaw? It's there, hovering in the background, as was pointed out by two political scientists examining the

increasingly popular use of “the language of genocide and the Holocaust with reference to Gaza”:

An example of this trend [they write] is a growing use of the word “ghetto,” a term associated directly (but in no way exclusively) with the Holocaust to describe the Gaza Strip. . . . While [Rashid] Khalidi does not directly compare the Gaza violence to the Holocaust (he uses the examples of Belfast and Soweto), the image of a fighting ghetto is strongly associated with the Warsaw ghetto.

Indeed, a few days after his article appeared, Khalidi confirmed just which ghetto he meant by denouncing “the siege, the blockade, the starvation of these people” in Gaza. The Nazis did indeed starve the Warsaw ghetto, and famine killed thousands. But not a soul has died of starvation in Gaza, and if stunted growth in childhood is a measure of poor nutrition, Gaza’s rate is lower than that of any Arab state but Qatar. Philip Gourevitch, also writing in the *New Yorker*, characterized Khalidi’s ghetto-referencing piece as an instance of “magical thinking.” He was being charitable.

**Beyond these three cases**, another Columbia-related episode is worth noting. Probably the cleverest of the anti-Israel lot on Morningside Heights is Nadia Abu El-Haj, associate professor of anthropology at Barnard College. A few years back, she, too, won a bruising tenure battle. But in her case, the outcome was never in doubt because (unlike Massad) she trod lightly. “I’m not a public intellectual,” she said at the time. “I’m drawn to archives, to disciplines where the evidence sits for a while. I don’t court controversy.” This, despite the fact that her entire “academic” project is aimed at casting Zionism as the fabrication of a totally specious national identity. “Israel is a *settler*-nation,” she writes, “that is, a project of European colonial settlement that imagined and believed itself to be a project of national return.” Those deceiving Zionists—they even duped *themselves* into thinking they were going home!

Much too smart to indulge in Holocaust inversion, Abu El-Haj hit upon an alternative in a recent contribution to the *London Review of Books*:

The IDF’s tactics [in Gaza] recall the logic of the British and American firebombing of German and Japanese cities during World War II: target the civilian population. Make them pay an unbearable price. Then they will turn against their own regime. When Israel attacks hospitals in Gaza, when it wipes out extended families, when it mows down children running on a beach, it is engaged in a premeditated act.

No Auschwitz or Warsaw ghetto for Abu El-Haj. But Dresden and Tokyo—why not? So what if Israel, unlike the Allies in World War II, warns civilians of impending strikes and, again unlike the Allies, eschews area bombardment and incendiary bombs? So what if one night of bombing over Tokyo killed 50 times as many as Israel’s month-long campaign in Gaza?

When you see four boys dead on a Gaza beach, Abu El-Haj wants you to “recall,” with her, the 40,000 civilians killed in Hamburg. (Sorry, the actual figure was 42,000—but what’s another 2,000 here or there? Either way, the entire toll in Gaza fits into the margin of error of one firebombing in World War II.) Might the Israelis, in their targeting, ever commit something as human as a mistake, even a negligent one? No, they’re far too inhuman for that: when they kill, it’s always “premeditated.” “Nothing Unintentional” is the delicate title of Abu El-Haj’s article, which might as well have been called “Baby-Killers.”

There is such a thing as legitimate criticism of Israel, and there is such

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a thing as crossing the line into demonization and, to put it plainly, Jew-baiting. The analogies spewed by Columbia's tenured professors are of the latter kind, and are obscene. Jew-baiting covers a wider range than anti-Semitism, and Holocaust inversion is its favorite technique. Jew-baiting is the demand that Israel and its supporters explain why Gaza *isn't* like a Nazi extermination camp or a starved ghetto for the doomed, or why a targeted air campaign *isn't* just like the incineration of Dresden. That it should be practiced so openly by tenured professors at New York's Ivy League home is a scandal, and a warning.



# The Herd of Independent Minds

What does it mean to be pro-Israel on campus today? A new novel tells the tale.



A graduation procession at the University of Toronto. © Sampete | Dreamstime.com.

RUTH R. WISSE

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## About the author

Ruth R. Wisse is professor emerita of Yiddish and comparative literatures at Harvard and a distinguished senior fellow at Tikvah. Her memoir *Free as a Jew: a Personal Memoir of National Self-Liberation*, chapters of which appeared in *Mosaic* in somewhat different form, is out from Wicked Son Press.

At a Jewish literary retreat I attended this past summer, at the height of the Gaza war, fault lines opened between those anxiously following news from Israel and others apparently indifferent or professing concern for the “suffering on both sides.” Asked to report on our current writing projects, one of the Israelis in the group admitted to being distracted by worry; he had not been able to write since the crisis began. But others balked at the intrusion of political concerns into a discussion about literature. Were writers obliged to shoulder public responsibilities, or did they serve society best by resisting political engagement?

Arguments over the proper relation of politics to literature will never be resolved through consensus, and those who practice the craft of writing have notably traveled in different directions. Take the plot device of a woman who is cramped by the expectations of bourgeois marriage. Gustave Flaubert used it in *Madame Bovary* (1856), a novel often upheld as the archetype of morally and politically disinterested fiction. Take, by contrast, Nikolai Chernyshevsky’s *Chto Delat?* (“What Is to Be Done?”) (1863), built on a similar premise but providing an archetype of a diametrically opposite sort. The book’s heroine, Vera Pavlovna, escaping family constrictions and an arranged marriage, sets out to construct for herself a personally satisfying and socially useful life. In the answer it gives to the large question asked in its title, this novel changed the course of Russian history by helping to galvanize reformist sentiments that Lenin would later harness for the Bolshevik Revolution.

And now take a new novel by the Canadian writer Nora Gold, who uses a variant of the same plot device to address tensions of the kind that surfaced at our Jewish literary retreat this past summer. The heroine of *Fields of Exile*, Judith Gallanter, has returned from Israel, where she had been working in programs to foster mutual understanding between Jewish and Arab teenagers, in order to tend to her widowed father in his final illness. He extracts from her a promise that she will complete her education in Canada; and that deathbed promise, plus the presence in Toronto of a steady and steady boyfriend, persuade her to register locally for an ad-

vanced degree in social work before resuming her determination to settle and make a life for herself in the Zionist homeland. The conflict of loyalties that this decision generates—what is home? And what is exile?—grows more acute when she comes up against anti-Israel hostility and must choose whether and how to engage it.

Registering at suburban Toronto's (fictional) Dunhill University for a master's degree in social work, Judith finds returning to school almost as hard as returning to Canada. Her mind wanders from classroom lectures by imperfect teachers to the lessons in Hebrew and sex taught her by the lover she has left behind in Israel. Yet she perseveres. Something of a leftist herself, a member of Friends of Peace, Judith at first fits in with the school's ethos and expectations: at an orientation session, she receives approving nods when she announces her professional goal as working to "bridge differences." She makes friends among the students, forms a special relationship with a professor who offers her a teaching fellowship, and seems well launched toward her academic goal.

But politics intervene. A coalition of self-defined "progressives" within Dunhill's Social Work Anti-Oppression Committee (SWAC) concentrates its activism in mounting campus-wide demonstrations against the Jewish state, confronting Judith with anti-Semitism in its new and improved anti-Zionist configuration. Though, when it comes to particular aspects of Israeli policy, she herself is riddled with qualms and hesitations of the kind that routinely afflict intelligent Jews, the status of Israel is never in question for her. She never falters in her attachment to the Jewish state or doubts its right to flourish in the Middle East. A practicing, knowledgeable, and morally confident Jew, she knows why Israel cannot be held responsible for the suffering that Palestinians bring on themselves or for the political pathologies of their fellow Arabs—and she steadfastly maintains not only the apartment she has purchased in the country but her intention of returning to live there permanently.

Yet, in a contest that anyone who has spent time on a campus will instantly recognize, Judith's reasoned arguments are no match for the demagogic slogans of SWAC's anti-Israel ideologues. As she grows ever more embattled, she finds herself abandoned and shunned by her fellow students, and is literally sickened—made ill—by the betrayal of the professor she mistook for an ally. In a climactic moment during a mass anti-Israel rally on campus, she becomes the physical casualty of a hatemonger she confronts in an effort to "nail" his lies once and for all, and lands in the hospital.

**There is no denying** the trickiness of the subject tackled by Nora Gold in *Fields of Exile*, or the complexities entailed by the choices it imposes on her heroine. When Judith begins to appreciate the scale of hostility that she faces, she Googles "anti-Semitism and anti-Zionism," hoping to learn something more about its spread in the land of her birth. Impressed by what Jewish community organizations have been doing to expose the scourge, she is nonetheless loath to join or appeal to them. "She has always felt, even in high school, alienated from the mainstream Jewish community. It was too straight for her. Too conservative and conventional, too bourgeois and right-wing." Her idea of independence thus keeps her from enlisting in groups that alone might help her mount an effective resistance and gain her the solidarity of like-minded peers, even as her continued determination to defend Israel unequipped and on her own ensures her further isolation and ostracism. In this she typifies many in the "herd of independent minds" that makes up today's Jewish student body.

Nor is there a way out of her conundrum. Students and faculty who find

themselves asking “What Is To Be Done?” might want to read this novel to its troubling conclusion. Unlike Chernyshevsky, Gold offers no solution to her heroine’s plight. In the future, Judith will undoubtedly be less surprised by the sheer, anti-Semitic ferocity of anti-Zionism or by the treachery of those who allow it to flourish and sometimes join its ranks. But neither has she found a means of undoing it. Maimed in her struggle, Judith at the end takes deeper pleasure than before in the bourgeois Jewish life she once spurned, and it is disturbingly unclear whether, as one living in the West with her heart in the East, she will continue to soldier for Israel from abroad.

As it happens, Judith Gallanter’s biographical time line in this novel pretty much coincides with that of the author. A social worker before she turned professional writer, Nora Gold remains an associate of the University of Toronto’s Center for Women’s Studies in Education even as she edits the web magazine *Jewish Fiction*. Like her protagonist, Gold settled in Israel before returning to Canada where she married and raised a son without forgoing her attachment to the Jewish state. As it also happens, she was an undergraduate student of mine at McGill University. While this is not an autobiographical novel, it is minutely informed by Gold’s own personal experience, as well as by her wit and grit, and ablaze with a heightened Jewish consciousness that would have put off half the participants at that literary parley I attended this past summer.

Depending on their political and literary inclinations, some may find this novel too tendentious, others not programmatic enough. I am grateful for a work of fiction that honestly animates what is all too actual and true. Indeed, so far as I know, *Fields of Exile* is the first fictional portrayal of a situation that faces Jews everywhere in North America. Although, as Judith discovers, some organizations have fielded programs to counteract anti-Semitism on university campuses, Jewish *writers* have so far averted their eyes, preferring to focus on safer subjects like the Holocaust or life in imaginary Polish shtetls—fictional venues in which the good guys and the bad guys have long since been determined and are in any case dead. Nowadays, when political correctness requires that Jews and Israel be blamed for the aggression leveled against them, it seems that writers are as docile as college professors in obeying its dictates.

# The Exodus Project: A Jewish Answer to the University Crisis

American Jews feel betrayed by the very institutions they helped build. It's time for young Jews to go to colleges and universities that welcome and embrace them.



*Students hold a rally in support of Israel and against anti-Semitism at Columbia University, February 14, 2024. Andrew Lichtenstein/Corbis via Getty Images.*

ERIC COHEN

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## About the author

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The rival images emerging from universities across our land reveal a great struggle for the American soul. It is a tale of two cultures, with Jews and Israel at the center of the story. At Columbia, a mob of students, faculty, and professional activists camp out for days calling for the annihilation of Israel; they violently take over university buildings and intimidate Jewish students and teachers, all while the university's leaders coddle and "negotiate" with the masked vandals for days. At the University of Florida, meanwhile, Jews gather together in strength, filling an entire university arena for a Passover seder, where President Ben Sasse proudly joins this transcendent celebration of Israelite freedom and actively works to expand the university's academic program in Jewish civilization. At Rutgers and Northwestern, university leaders appease extremist demands for more pro-Hamas programming and professorships, while the entire campus lawn at Southern Methodist University is lined with hundreds of Israeli flags. At Yale, one of Tikvah's student leaders is stabbed in the eye, while at Hillsdale College (where I was recently invited to speak about the Jewish meaning of the West) Christian students celebrate the Jewish people as their "elder brothers in faith" and see Israel as a heroic defender of good against evil.

For many decades, Jewish ambition and Jewish resources flowed into the most elite American universities. Jewish parents and Jewish educators devoted great energy to helping their kids get into the top-ranked colleges, and discussions of how to succeed in the admissions sweepstakes dominated many Jewish dinner table conversations. Jewish parents aimed to give their sons and daughters access to the finest professors, smartest peers, and best credentials; and they wanted their children to live the American dream of earned success on every playing field of American life. For much of American Jewry, the universities were our temples, and



we affixed college stickers on the back of our cars like mezuzahs on our doorposts: outward symbols that we had fully made it in America.

After October 7th, the Jewish conversation suddenly changed. We felt betrayed by the very institutions that we helped build and long revered. Jewish parents began wondering whether their children would even be safe on campuses—walking among building named for generous Jewish donors—that were now being overrun by Jew-hating activists. They watched Jewish kids hiding from riotous protestors calling for blood, kids barricaded in libraries (as they famously were at Cooper Union), kids taking classes in undisclosed locations because campus security could not ensure their safety. In response to these video clips and media reports, many Jews were angry at their alma maters—institutions they once loved and long supported—for tolerating Jew-hatred and abandoning the culture of meritocracy that long enabled American Jews to succeed in college and beyond. They felt guilty rather than proud for sending their kids to schools like Columbia—or still wanting to send their kids there—given the anti-Semitic environment that now festers. Many Jews no longer knew what to do or how to think. They just knew that something was deeply wrong.

As so often in history, Jews are once again the messengers of deeper civilizational troubles. Our challenge is not simply keeping Jews safe or fighting against anti-Semitic discrimination by classifying Jews as another protected group of vulnerable victims. Safety alone is a feeble aspiration for a great people and a great nation, and Jew-hatred is not merely a form of discrimination but a radical ideology that seeks to rid Western civilization of the Hebraic spirit by delegitimizing the Jewish people and wiping the Jewish state off the map. The Jewish experience in recent days is simply the most vivid demonstration of why the existing citadels of elite American culture are broken beyond repair. They indulge mob rule over ordered liberty, revolution over civic piety, appeasement over principle, and utopian fantasies about social justice over the weighty work of preserving civilization. The moral and intellectual degradation of our most prestigious universities is not a new problem. But the rot has now spread so far throughout the teaching faculty and so deeply into the elite corners of academia that the whole edifice has finally collapsed. As Jews and as Americans, we can no longer avert our eyes. We need a new strategy.

Since October 7th, American Jews have been mugged by reality, and we will need to choose how to respond: will we accommodate the demand to shed all Jewish and Zionist attachments as the progressive price of admission at the elite universities, or will we live bravely in opposition within these broken institutions? Will we separate ourselves as a people apart within America (as many Orthodox Jews already do), or will we abandon the American project entirely for Israel? Will we declare that the golden age of American Jewry is over, or will we take responsibility—as proud Jews—for helping renew the American experiment? The case for an exodus from the corrupt quads of Columbia and Harvard seems both urgent and clear. The question is: an Exodus to where and for what purpose? To save ourselves as Jews or to help save America from those who seek to destroy us?

For Jews who care about the American future, I believe the best strategy is to marshal Jewish energy, talent, and money to create centers of excellence within those colleges and universities that value Jewish civilization, respect Israel, and celebrate the Hebraic spirit of America and the West. We can build new honors programs at supportive institutions that put Jewish ideas at the center; we can create scholarship funds that attract the most talented young Jews to these new places; we can train a new generation of



professors who understand the Jewish meaning of the West and the hard-won lessons of Jewish history; and we can launch new Jewish colleges that prepare young Jews for the weighty responsibility of preserving American liberty. We need, in other words, a new Exodus Project.

## I. How We Got Here

Our first mission is understanding how we got here and what is at stake in the current crisis of the universities. As citizens and as Jews, we care about higher education for serious reasons. At their best, universities teach the rising generation about the meaning of being human. The great books that once stood at the center of a true liberal education were meant to instruct young men and women about the heights of human greatness and the limits of human will, the possibility of love and the reality of death, the moral norms that sustain civilized societies and the ever-present threat of disorder and decay. The earliest American colleges were founded to transmit and perpetuate the religious identities and God-fearing vocations of their students. They were Christian to the core. This mission eventually expanded to prepare young men and, eventually, women of myriad faiths to live as responsible citizens and public-spirited leaders of the American republic, and then expanded still further to create engines of scientific ingenuity and technical training to advance American industry and promote American progress. These different aims did not always fit easily together, giving rise to the modern mega-university. But they all still pointed towards a positive purpose: the preservation of American civilization and the dignified exercise of American liberty.

Then came the ideological assault that reached full force in the 1960s: the family was repressive, America was evil, and God was dead. During the early days of this new adversary culture—which coincided with the high-point of the cold war—the universities persisted as engines of scientific and technological progress. They still trained engineers, analysts, and practical men and women of affairs. Yet the radicals were given their spoils, with a new generation of academics taking ideological control over nearly all the humanities and social science departments. Eventually, in their hands, the soul-shaping and citizen-forming purpose of the universities was turned upside down, celebrating nihilists who believe in nothing and anti-citizens who looked upon America as a nation of sin rather than a land of hope, or as a supermarket of rights rather than a sacred inheritance.

During this assault on American civilization, many Jews were tempted to play along or look away. After decades of informal quotas that limited Jewish access to the most prestigious universities, Jews were the eager newcomers at the Ivy League reception. Some Jews even bought into—and helped advance—the radical ideology of dismantling everything in the name of “liberation.” Maybe America would be better—and maybe the Jews would be better off—if the last vestiges of the once-Christian character of our universities were deconstructed into oblivion. Maybe the embrace of secularism was the price of admission for Jewish success in America. Or maybe we could simply keep our heads down and focus on getting from Harvard and Penn to the blue-chip firms and first-tier graduate schools, paying little attention to the ideological assault on American civilization happening all around us.

Then came the reckoning that finally reached its climax in the months following October 7th. We woke up and realized that the universities had long since turned against the Jews: in admissions, where Jewish numbers at our most elite schools were in stark decline, and in the suffocating application of an intersectional ideology gone mad, which made Israel the paradigmatic enemy and Jews the embodiment of “white privilege.”

Universities that believed their purpose was to create dreamlands of pluralism degenerated into the worst forms of tribalism and acrimony. Universities that prided themselves on creating “safe spaces” for their students believed it was necessary—even noble—to tolerate gangs of pro-Hamas activists calling for the genocide of the Jews.

Tragically, many upside-down Jews actively celebrate the perverse ethos of the intersectional university and join hands with these pro-Hamas activists and their progressive apologists. Such Jews believe that Jewish tradition is oppressively patriarchal and thus needs to be overthrown; they believe that Zionism is a form of colonialism and that Israel is an “apartheid state”; they believe that America is racist and that Jews are part of the white privileged class. They proudly march against their own people—sometimes alongside those who seek the total annihilation of Israel—in some perverse drama of Jewish self-expiation for the sin of Jewish exceptionalism. There is little to say—and little to do—to help such Jews. One simply mourns for them and everything they have lost.

The Jewish accommodationists are very different and far more numerous. They have no grand ideological project. They are pragmatists focused on upward mobility and professional success, and the more hard-nosed among them see themselves as realists who simply accept that the spoils system of the elite universities is an inescapable reality of American life. In their minds, it is much better to be on the inside rather than the outside of our most prestigious institutions. And so the accommodationists coach their children to focus their ambitions on practical fields like engineering, medicine, and business. They condition them to avoid ideological conflict with their enemies. In humanities courses, the accommodationists submissively write papers that progressive professors want to read; mindlessly mouth slogans that progressive professors want to hear; and compliantly play the pronoun games that progressive administrators want to play. Some parents broadly agree with these progressive ideas, and many children come to embrace them after four years of accommodating their own indoctrination. Others think the whole game is silly or misguided, but they see no reason to make trouble. Better to check the progressive boxes and, prestigious degree in hand, move on to McKinsey, Goldman Sachs, and Apple.

For many Jewish accommodationists, October 7th was a wake-up call. They realized, for the first time, that the rules of the game are now stacked against them; and they came to believe, for the first time, that hiding their sympathy for Israel or minimizing their Jewish identity to appease the progressives in charge was simply too undignified to continue. And so they demanded that universities treat Jews fairly, which means ensuring that Jews are equally protected against hate speech and violence. They demanded greater fairness in admissions policies, where Jews have suffered unjustly for many years as collateral damage of the affirmative action system. They wanted their children to feel comfortable attending their own alma maters, because they could still never imagine the possibility—or the imperative—to create something better. They disliked being singled out for being Jewish—and yet they suddenly felt more Jewish (and fiercely so) than ever before in their lives. They began to wonder whether they had done enough as parents to impart a real Jewish and Zionist identity to their kids before sending them off to college.

Along the way, Jewish activists—and their allies in public life, like Congresswoman Elise Stefanik—forced the high-profile resignations of presidents Claudine Gay of Harvard and Liz Magill of the University of Pennsylvania for their pathetic equivocations on how to respond to overt calls for the annihilation of the Jews on campus. There was a brief sense

that maybe we could return to a better version of the old normal, especially if Israel's war against Hamas reached its end. Maybe the universities would become better—more Jew-friendly—versions of themselves, remorseful for their anti-Semitic excesses and practical enough to satisfy the demands of generous Jewish donors.

And then the latest round of encampments began at Columbia and UCLA and Northwestern and Princeton and dozens of other campuses. Classes, final exams, and in-person commencement ceremonies were cancelled. Jews were told to stay away from certain buildings. Public-safety alerts were sent out to students warning them of on-campus threats. Physical fear fed a renewed sense of moral outrage. And moms and dads on listservs everywhere were finally saying: maybe the golden age of the elite American universities is truly over. Maybe it was time, once and for all, to leave. Some even wondered whether the golden age of American Jewry had truly ended. Maybe the Jewish experience in America would turn out to be just as bad as it was in Europe a century ago.

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In response to this crisis, I believe there are four clear strategies that honor Jewish dignity, each worthy of consideration and understanding: (i) living in opposition (“the dissident”), (ii) living in isolation (“the separatist”), (iii) moving to Israel (“the Zionist”), or (iv) using Jewish energy to help renew the American project (“the Americanist”). My own energies are focused on the fourth strategy, recommitting as proud Jews to the revitalization of the American soul. Yet each option deserves its due.

## II. The Dissidents

The first option—a near-necessity for current upperclassmen in college, who are unlikely to transfer—is to live as Jewish dissidents; to stay and fight at places like Columbia and Penn; to live in opposition at places like UCLA and Harvard. It is to confront the widespread campus assault on Jews, Israel, and America with a proud and courageous defense of our people, our nation, and our civilizational inheritance. The brave young Jews at these campuses surely also seek to preserve the practical advantages of their prestigious degrees, which they worked so hard in high school to access and in college to realize. They appreciate the handful of good teachers that they still have, and they love their college friends and fellow comrades-in-arms. But such students now recognize that they are dissidents, standing up for Jewish dignity against an academic culture that disparages them, and living with actual physical threats as pro-Hamas activists become ever bolder and more violent.

I am proud that many of the dissident Jewish leaders on campuses across America are Tikvah students and alumni. To name just a few of them: Dore Feith, David Lederer, and Michael Lippman at Columbia, Sahar Tartak and Gabe Diamond at Yale, Alex Orbuch and Darius Gross at Princeton, Sabrina Soffer and Alex Lucero at George Washington, Eitan Moore at MIT. These Tikvah students—and hundreds more like them—have organized counter-rallies, written articles in the national press describing the assault, penned public letters to their university presidents detailing the absurd double-standards on their campuses, testified before Congress as witnesses to the moral madness, and organized reading groups of fellow Jews interested in the real study of Jewish and Zionist history. At a recent pro-Israel rally at MIT, the Tikvah student Shabbos Kestenbaum declared: “To my professors who support Hamas, who support the Houthis, who support Hizballah, who are

chanting ‘globalize the intifada’ and ‘resistance is justified,’ no keffiyeh nor mask will be able to cover your unvarnished Jew-hatred.”

His words cut to the heart of the matter: the problem is not simply radical student groups and morally confused college presidents. The problem is that the intellectual lifeblood of our elite universities—the teaching faculty—promotes, sympathizes, and encourages the perverse ideology that brings progressive radicals and pro-Hamas activists together to call for the annihilation of Israel and the overthrow of America.

There is surely great nobility in being a Jewish dissident. It requires courage, boldness, and moral conviction. Such students ought to be praised, supported, and encouraged; and their struggle is offering them an education in moral bravery that will serve them well as future leaders. But no sane parent would actively choose to send his son into the underground or entrust his daughter’s education to madmen and frauds—all for the perverse tuition price of \$90,000 per year. And no great civilization can educate its future leaders by forcing them to live entirely in opposition within the very institutions whose purpose ought to be the pursuit of wisdom and the formation of American citizens.

Yes, Jewish donors should fight back against the corruption of their alma maters, pulling their money in the hope that it will lead to meaningful reforms. But the dream of reform seems remote and unlikely, with symbolic victories that obscure the deeper truth: these institutions have no desire to change, and they have enough other sources of money to shrug their shoulders at Jewish pressure. Jewish donors, having already built the laboratories and libraries upon whose walls the Hamasniks project their calls to intifada, do not have enough leverage to change the strategic direction of any elite college in America. These colleges are controlled by true believers. Their faculties and administrators enthusiastically embrace the very worldview—call it “intersectionality,” call it “critical race theory,” call it “wokism,” call it “DEI,” call it “social justice,” call it whatever you want—that nurtured the civilizational assault that now treats the Jews and Israel as target number one and America itself as the big game. Later this month, after all the controversy of the past six months and all the phony gestures toward remorse, Harvard’s commencement speaker will be the Nobel Prize-winning journalist Maria Ressa, who compares Israel to Nazi Germany. The great restoration, alas, is never coming.

### III. The Separatists

For the most religious Jews in America—who come from the so-called yeshiva world—the current madness at our universities is not very surprising; it simply confirms, in their mind, their own isolationist or semi-isolationist approach to Jewish life and culture in America. Yeshiva Jews are a relatively small part of American Jewry but also the fastest growing. They decided long ago to separate themselves from the secular (and secularizing) institutions of American higher education. Culturally, Jews from the yeshiva community see the university world as a threat to core Jewish values: sexual modesty; different roles for men and women; observance of Jewish ritual life, the sacred calendar, and the laws of *kashrut*. Intellectually, yeshiva Jews enshrine the study of Jewish law as the highest form of higher learning, and they emphasize practical vocational training over classical liberal education. So they built citadels of their own—like Ner Israel in Baltimore and Beth Medrash Gohova in Lakewood—with thousands of enrolled students.

To the extent that yeshiva Jews access the American university system at all, they do so in very transactional terms, at arms-length and from the cultural security of yeshiva homes rather than from co-ed dormitories or fraternity houses. And while many yeshiva Jews love America—especially for its devotion to religious freedom and economic prosperity—they do not see the fate of America as their responsibility; and they do not believe that renewing America is central to their calling as Jews. America to them is a safer and gentler form of exile—or so it has been for a long time. But America is not, in Lincoln’s phrase, an “almost chosen people,” and if America succumbs to the rising culture of Jew-hatred, the yeshiva Jew will either erect higher walls or leave America entirely for the last and only refuge for God’s chosen people: Israel.

A few months ago—after October 7th but well before the latest round of riots—a colleague of mine taught a group of Modern Orthodox Jews as part of their gap-year studies in Israel between high school and college. Most of these students were not raised to be a people apart in America; and most of them are slated to attend schools like Columbia, Princeton, the University of Maryland, and Yeshiva University. Here is how he described their attitude toward the United States:

What I learned is that, of these 30 or so young Americans, all on the spectrum between Modern Orthodox and perhaps a shade to the right of Modern Orthodox—virtually *none* care deeply about America. Don’t get me wrong: they don’t wish America ill. But they are simply not inspired by the American story, or feel much obligated to American loyalty, and they have been taught from a very young age that they are always *potentially Israeli*. It’s as if they didn’t even grow up in America; they grew up instead in a community called “potentially-Israel, but for the time being Lawrence/Baltimore/Teaneck/Los Angeles.”

The sad spectacle of progressive America’s response to October 7th will only push many such Jews—and perhaps many secular American Jews, with deepened Jewish pride and collapsing faith in American exceptionalism—to make their lives in Israel. In other words: farewell Columbia and Harvard; Jerusalem and Tel Aviv await.

## IV. The Zionists and the Americanists

Every Jew should celebrate when young Jews in the diaspora decide to move to Israel; to marry their lives and destinies to the re-born Jewish state; to raise Jewish children who will serve in the Israeli army, speak Hebrew as their first language, and live in the sacred land of our ancestors. And we should especially admire those young American Jews whose response to the war against Israel is to join the Israeli army, to hear the call of Jewish history, to trade the well-trodden path of American college life for the underground tunnels of Gaza and the dream of marrying under a *huppah* in Jerusalem.

In the last few months, the major Israeli universities have launched active campaigns to recruit American students—offering English-language BA programs, with three-year degrees at a lower cost than their American counterparts. They are betting that American students will be attracted to the ancient heritage of the Jewish people and the start-up nation culture of innovation, and to the promise of attending college in an environment that celebrates Jews and Israel rather than attacking or discrediting them. It is a compelling case, marrying the pull of appealing to the deepest yearnings of the Jewish soul and the push of Jewish self-doubt about the viability



and security of American Jewish life. The deeper message is clear: Israel is—and should be—the ultimate destiny of the Jewish people. No Jew—lucky enough to live in the age of Israel re-born—can question that Zionist summons.

Yet in this moment of civilizational crisis, American Jews should also understand and appreciate the unique importance of the United States—as a nation, as an idea, as a force for good in shaping the future of the world. Without a strong America, Israel will potentially face enemies it cannot overcome—or be forced into great power alliances with China or Russia that risk compromising its highest values. Without a strong America, tyrants and madmen—eventually armed with nuclear weapons—will hold civilized peoples hostage. Without a strong America, the Hebraic vision of the world will lose its greatest defender. Without a strong America, the renewal of Western civilization is doomed. America remains the indispensable nation, and a strong America means a more Hebraic America: a nation that returns to its covenantal roots. This is why America needs the Jews—including our “Old Testament” wisdom, clarity, and toughness—more than ever. And this means that American Jews have a grand purpose—a sacred call to help redeem the American project—if we choose to accept it.

## **V. The Exodus Project**

To heed this call, American Jews will need a paradigm shift in our political, moral, and civilizational imagination. We will need to build deeper friendships and alliances with patriotic Americans—especially Christian Americans—who love Israel, share our Hebraic values, and seek our guidance in renewing the moral center of American culture. We will need to relocate in large numbers to new and more welcoming parts of the country—including the Southeast, the Southwest, and other more conservative regions of the country that protect religious freedom and promote religious education. We will need to regain the confidence that we—as Jews—can help build new centers of academic, scientific, and professional excellence and accept that many of the old ones are irredeemable. And we will need to reassert, for ourselves and for our children, that being Jewish matters, that being Jewish is a majestic inheritance, that being Jewish is a great responsibility, that being Jewish is an invitation to play a leading role in the center of the human drama.

As a central part of this effort—and our boldest answer to the current campus crisis—American Jews ought to inaugurate and invest in a new Exodus Project, encouraging young Jews to matriculate en masse to colleges and universities that welcome and embrace us. American Jews should see this communal imperative as equivalent in scope and significance to Birthright Israel: a large-scale effort to steer young Jews to colleges and universities that meet very clear standards of Jewish excellence and Jewish purpose. University by university, we should identify those places (i) that value the unique contributions of the Jewish people to Western civilization; (ii) that celebrate the study of Israel and encourage students to study abroad in the Jewish state; (iii) that offer core courses on Jewish thought, history, and culture that probe the great questions of human life and the great leaders of Jewish history; (iv) that have zero tolerance for student groups whose purpose is the delegitimization and destruction of Jews and Israel; (v) that celebrate religious freedom and encourage students of every tradition to deepen their faith commitments; and (vi) that believe their purpose is to educate loyal American citizens and leaders, who will carry our nation forward as a force for good in the world.

The Jewish community should ensure that every worthy university with these values builds the basic infrastructure of Jewish life: places of worship, kosher dining houses, rabbis-in-residence, higher forms of Jewish culture and spirited forms of Jewish friendship. We should create honors programs that put Jewish civilization at the center, and we should invest in scholarships that encourage the most talented and most knowledgeable young Jews to be pioneers in schools that will welcome them with open arms. These pioneers will form the nuclei of Jewish life, attracting more and more students in admissions cycle after admissions cycle. In fields like medicine, law, and engineering, Jewish donors can help these universities attract the best professors and best students, by investing heavily in the infrastructure and human capital that create oases of creativity and excellence.

Alongside strengthening important institutions like Yeshiva University and Touro, we should also endeavor to build new Jewish colleges of our own that put greater focus on the political and moral lessons of Jewish history, on the meaning of Jewish nationalism, and on the role of Jewish ideas in shaping Western civilization. We need a core curriculum that focuses on the great books and great leaders of Jewish civilization, on the Hebrew Bible and the rabbinic tradition, on thinkers like Maimonides and Samson Raphael Hirsch, on novels like *Daniel Deronda* and writers like Sholem Aleichem, on leaders like Herzl and statesmen like Ben Gurion, on the meaning of the Six-Day War and the culture of start-up nation.

In truth, the first rumblings of this exodus of American Jews is already afoot, with more and more Jewish students heading to major universities in states like Texas, Florida, and Alabama. We simply need to celebrate and encourage the new exodus; and we need to help make the best of these schools into true exemplars of academic excellence. “Wow Harvard!” should give way to “Why Harvard?”. We simply need the nerve to build anew in new places, and we need the clarity to recognize that our true friends—the ones attending our seders in Florida, flying Israeli flags in Texas, and seeking Jewish wisdom in rural Michigan—need us as much as we need them.

## VI. Jews and the American Soul

Throughout the 20th century, Jewish talent, energy, and ambition helped build many of the most important institutions of American life—in business, science, media, and the academy. And, going back to the American founding, the spirit of the Israelites shaped the very meaning of America as a land of exile from tyranny, as a nation devoted to religious freedom, and eventually as a great power that could proclaim and defend liberty throughout the world when it came under its greatest assault.

In their response to the current crisis, many Jewish leaders have focused on the imperative of Jewish safety and the defense of free speech. These are worthy aims, and no doubt young Jews will be safer and more respected in places like the University of Florida and SMU than at Columbia and Harvard. Yet these aims alone—safety and free inquiry—are far too limited if we take our high calling as American Jews seriously. The purpose of a great American university is not to let every ideology have free rein, however discredited by fact and history. The purpose of a great American university is the perpetuation of the best of our Judeo-Christian civilizational inheritance and the formation of young men and women who seek to preserve and renew our way of life. That leaves great room for free inquiry and civil disagreement, as we seek together to uncover the mysteries of the world and to make sense of the difficult challenges

of living well within history. But free speech and free inquiry are not gods; and even in an academic culture that has succumbed to a perverse form of progressive thought-control, we should not allow our devotion to academic freedom to empower those who seek to destroy the very moral and political foundations of ordered liberty. The issue is not fear of evil speech or the need for safe spaces; it is contempt for evil itself—and the confidence that we, as Jews and as Americans, still know the difference between civilization and barbarism.

The current assault against the Jews is not driven by irrational prejudice. It is deeper and more purposeful. The Jews represent everything the enemies of American civilization seek to destroy: the *moral code of the Hebrew Bible*, which the anti-Jews seek to replace with woke secularism or radical Islam; the *culture of meritocracy*, which the anti-Jews seek to replace with the false justice of the new “diversity, equity, and inclusion” regime; and the *belief in national sovereignty*, which the anti-Zionists seek to destroy in the name of UN-style utopianism. As go the Jews, so goes the West. The radical activists and their academic apologists understand this deep civilizational truth—and so must we.

American Jews are a twice chosen people, chosen by God and chosen by history. If, as Jews and as Americans, we still believe that America matters for the fate of mankind—and that the fate of America itself now hangs in the balance—then we should commit ourselves to the project of American renewal. We should focus not simply on our safety in America but our responsibility for America. Are we up for the challenge? Shall the new exodus begin?

*This essay was adapted from a speech given at Tikvah in May 2024.*

