BOOKS BY DEBORAH LIPSTADT

Beyond Belief: The American Press and the Coming of the Holocaust, 1933–1945
Denying the Holocaust: The Growing Assault on Truth and Memory
Denial: Holocaust History on Trial
- The Eichmann Trial
Holocaust: An American Understanding

DEBORAH LIPSTADT

ANTISEMITISM
HERE AND NOW
TOXIFYING ISRAEL

Dear Professor Lipstadt:

I didn't plan on writing to you so soon after our exchange about Holocaust denial. But something disturbing happened to me recently that seems to exemplify much of what you have been saying, and now it's up close and personal. I don't want to sound melodramatic, but I am a bit shaken by what I experienced.

I was visiting a friend at a large public university. The campus was astir. The previous night a lecture on Israel had been canceled or, more properly put, shut down. The Israeli lecturer—a professor at Hebrew University—never got to speak. He was shouted down by students from various groups, including Students for Justice in Palestine. These students could not have disagreed with what he said because he never got to say anything. He was Israeli, and that was reason enough to deny him the right to speak. The next night my friend and I went to what we anticipated would be a pleasant party. Most of the people there were social activists involved in various progressive causes—including environmental and women's issues—that I'm passionate about, too. I was hanging out with a small group consisting of both Jews and non-Jews, students whom I knew from previous visits to this campus. I was probably the most strongly identifying Jew in this rather congenial group, where the conversation flowed freely.

Someone brought up the incident with the Israeli lecturer,
and I responded by criticizing the protesters’ behavior and their failure to adhere to the fundamental notion of civil discourse. I suppose that in a democracy people have a “right” to shout at a speaker, but the university, I argued, should be a venue for the free exchange of ideas. These protesters, I contended, were not interested in that exchange. The other students seemed taken aback that I was in favor of the Israeli speaking on campus. Not only were they highly critical of Israel’s treatment of Palestinians, which was certainly their right, but they also began to say some disturbing things, such as “Israel is an illegitimate, non-democratic country. A state should not be founded on religious identity. It’s an anachronism. It’s racist.” Then something even more disturbing happened. The loudest person among them, a guy I hardly know, began to move from trashing Israel’s policies to associating me with them. “You Jews don’t belong there, running everything. Zionism is what’s at the heart of the problem. You Zionists have got to recognize that Israel is a colonizing state.” Most painful was when he said, “If you can’t accept the truth about Israel and Zionism, you’re not a progressive.”

In his eyes, I, as a Jew, was directly responsible for whatever Israel did. He used the terms “Israelis,” “Jews,” and “Zionists” interchangeably. Moreover, he seemed to have only the foggiest notion of what Zionism was and of the history of the Jews in the region. He had no trouble concluding that because Israel was a Jewish state, it was ipso facto racist and colonial. I was so taken aback by what he was saying, I was unable to pull my thoughts together to reply to him. Then things got worse. A few other students chimed in with statements like, “Of course we’ll never have a real conversation about Israel in this country because you all have such control of the media, Congress, and American foreign policy. The Jewish lobby decides what it wants and gets it.” They went on like that for a while, mentioning AIPAC and wealthy pro-Israel American Jews. These were not people situated at the far left of the political spectrum, from whom I might have expected this. They were just ordinary college kids who seemed to be echoing what they had heard elsewhere, which made what they were saying even more frightening. What should I have done?

Yours,
Abigail

Dear Abigail and Joe:

It seems that in the space of a few days, Abigail, you have actually lived much of what we have been writing about in these letters. I wish there was something I could say that would ease your discomfort, but you have encountered some attitudes that are very real and very disturbing. Sadly, the rhetoric that you encountered is not just a university-based phenomenon.

That verbal assault on the Israeli speaker is not unique. In 2016, protesters at London King’s College disrupted a talk by Ami Ayalon, the former head of Shin Bet, Israel’s version of our FBI. Students from a pro-Palestinian group chanted, threw chairs, smashed windows, and repeatedly set off the fire alarm in the room where Ayalon was speaking about the two-state solution to the Israel/Palestine situation, which is something he strongly supports. In 2015, representatives from the Palestinian Solidarity Committee of University of Texas—Austin entered an event sponsored by the university’s Institute for Israel Stud-
ies. They refused to sit, listen, or leave and stood there chanting "Long live intifada." That same year Moshe Halbertal, a distinguished Israeli law professor and world-renowned philosopher, was scheduled to speak at the University of Minnesota on the moral challenge an army faces when it is engaged in fighting "asymmetric wars," which are defined as conflicts between professional armies and resistance or insurgent movements. Halbertal is known for his position that the army must always "err on the side of protecting" civilian insurgents, even if this threatens its soldiers’ well-being. As his lecture began, protesters stood up and began to shout him down. When the police finally ejected them from the room, they situated themselves outside the building in a place where their chanting could be heard, making it difficult for those in the hall to listen to the lecture.2

These tactics are not new. They have been used against Israeli speakers in the past and are part of the broader effort known as the Boycott, Divestment, and Sanctions movement, or BDS. Founded in 2005 by Palestinian organizations, it advocates for the following: (1) boycotting Israeli-made products and services, as well as public events in which Israelis participate; (2) the divestment by governments and private institutions of investments in Israeli companies; and (3) the establishment of international sanctions against Israel. Its goal is to punish Israel for what it terms Israel’s "apartheid" policies toward Israeli and Palestinian Arabs. But Arab-sponsored boycotts against Israel go back decades, to the pre-state Jewish community in Palestine, international supporters of the Zionist movement, and Jews in general. In 1945, before the United Nations vote on the partition of Palestine, before the establishment of the Jewish state, the Arab League prohibited its members from doing any business with "Zionists/Jews" and with companies that did business with Zionists. Eventually they expanded the boycott
to encompass "anything Jewish." In the 1950s the Saudi Arabian government established a boycott of all businesses throughout the world that were owned by Jews, did business with Jews, or employed Jews.3 After the establishment of the State of Israel in 1948, the Arab League prevented anyone whose passport bore an Israeli stamp from entering most Arab and Muslim-majority nations. When I was a student at Hebrew University in 1967, I had to have a "clean" American passport—one without any Israeli visa stamps—in order to visit Lebanon, Syria, and Jordan. When I hesitantly explained to the clerk at the American embassy in Athens what I needed, he replied, rather matter-of-factly, "Oh, we get that request all the time."

The boycott in the academic world today against Israelis has its roots, in some measure, in the 2001 United Nations-sponsored Durban World Conference Against Racism, Racial Discrimination, Xenophobia, and Related Intolerance. There were actually two gatherings in Durban—the official United Nations conference and one sponsored by a group of about three thousand nongovernmental organizations (NGOs). The discussion about Israel at both meetings was vituperative and overshadowed all other issues on the meetings’ agendas. The final declaration adopted by the NGO forum laid the groundwork for the BDS movement by equating Zionism with racism and calling for a boycott of Israel.

One of the stated goals of the BDS movement is establishing a right of return for Palestinians throughout the world, which in practical terms would result in Jews being in the minority in Israel, and its end as a Jewish state.4 The statements that form the foundation of the BDS movement are, as some critics have noted, "the antithesis of a call for peace and reconciliation between two people in a compromise situation."5 One of the founders of the BDS movement, Omar Barghouti, has explicitly
stated, "We definitely oppose a Jewish state in any part of Palestine." He told the Electronic Intifada, "I am completely and categorically against bi-nationalism because it assumes that there are two nations with equal moral claims to the land." Ignoring these statements and his call for the "right of return to 1948 lands," he nonetheless insists that BDS has "consistently avoided taking any position regarding the one-state/two-state debate." But some BDS organizers do call for the creation of "one secular and democratic state for all those living in historic Palestine."

BDS-inspired academic and cultural boycotts can be inconsistent and capricious. Some BDS advocates argue that only Israeli academic institutions should be boycotted and not individual Israeli scholars.10 If Israeli academics attend a conference without institutional support and their research has been done independent of their institution, they are welcome. But this is a false distinction, designed to make BDS appear reasonable and to give the impression that it is not a blacklist. Scholars generally attend academic conferences with their institution's financial support. Even if they were to pay their own expenses, their research has been conducted as part of their university work. Restrictions against scholars who have been supported by Israeli institutions would a priori eliminate all scientists who conduct laboratory research in Israel. It would also eliminate those who use university libraries or university-issued computers. And what about Israeli Muslim, Christian, or Druze scholars who teach at Israeli institutions? Are they included in the boycott? Or Israelis who teach at American institutions with branches in Israel, such as New York University?

In 2006, some BDS organizers proposed that only those Israeli academics who support their government's "apartheid" policies be boycotted. Unsurprisingly, no official protocol for creating this loyalty test was ever established. But that didn't stop individual academics from implementing this policy on their own. At the 2012 South African Sociological Association convention, an Israeli who was about to participate in a panel discussion was asked by a professor from a South African university to "denounce Israeli apartheid" as a precondition of his participation. When the Israeli declined to do so, an association board member invited the other panelists and the audience to leave the room and reassemble at a different venue, so that the Israeli was free to exercise his freedom of speech and present his paper—to an empty room.11

In 2015 the American Jewish pop star Matisyahu was disinvited from appearing at Rototom Sunsplash, an annual international reggae music festival held in Spain that was, ironically, devoted to "the promotion of peace, equality, human rights and social justice." He was told by festival organizers that the pressure to disinvite him came from BDS members, and that if he made a public statement in support of Palestinian statehood and against Israeli "war crimes," he would be able to perform.12 When he refused to do so, his performance was canceled and Rototom Sunsplash issued the following statement:

Rototom Sunsplash, after having repeatedly sought dialogue in the face of the artist's unavailability to give a clear statement against war and on the right of the Palestinian people to their own state, has decided to cancel [his] concert.

Even though Rototom Sunsplash's other goals included examining the "rise in Islamophobia in Western countries, as well as the situation of the prisoners in Guantánamo," no European performers were required to denounce expressions of Islamophobia in their countries, and American perform-
ers were not required to share their views on the United States policy toward prisoners in Guantánamo. After an international outcry at the festival’s assertion that an American Jewish musician was answerable for Israeli government policy, the invitation was reinstated. Rototom Sunsplash apologized for the disinvitation and stated that it “rejects antisemitism and any form of discrimination towards the Jewish community.”

But it’s not only Jewish performers who have been subjected to such pressure. When Taylor Swift expressed interest in performing in Israel, Ramah Kudaimi of the U.S. Campaign for Palestinian Rights told the Daily Beast that if she did so, it would “help Israel whitewash its denial of Palestinian rights” and would threaten her career. Other artists have been subjected to similar threats.

In 2002, Mona Baker, a professor of translation studies at the University of Manchester Institute of Science and Technology and the publisher of two scholarly journals—Translator and Translation Studies Abstracts—dismissed Gideon Toury, a professor at Tel Aviv University, from the advisory board of Translator. She also dismissed Miriam Shlesinger, a lecturer in translation studies at Bar-Ilan University, from the advisory board of Translation Studies Abstracts. Ironically, both Toury and Shlesinger oppose the Israeli government’s policies vis-à-vis the Palestinians. The late British physicist Stephen Hawking, who had previously visited Israel on several occasions, canceled a planned appearance at the President's Conference in Israel in 2013 because he had “come under heavy pressure from activists who favor an academic boycott of Israel, both within Britain and outside it, [and] decided to listen to his Palestinian colleagues and stay home.”

But BDS has not only targeted those visiting Israel. In 2009, the Melbourne International Film Festival scheduled a screening of Looking for Eric, a film by British director Ken Loach. When Loach learned that the Israeli embassy was a sponsor of the festival, he canceled the screening in protest of Israel’s “illegal occupation of Palestinian land, destruction of homes and livelihoods.” In 2012, American author Alice Walker refused to allow a new Hebrew translation of her novel The Color Purple to be published in Israel, “which is guilty of apartheid and persecution of the Palestinian people.”

There are, of course, academics, filmmakers, artists, and intellectuals who continue to participate in events in Israel. But the growing list of those joining this boycott effort is disturbing. There are artists and scholars who, without making any public statements, simply decline invitations to appear in Israel. In the academic world, BDS often operates in a covert, unofficial fashion. A particular graduate student may not be accepted, a job applicant not considered, a paper rejected, or a conference invitation not issued because the person in question is Israeli.

A particularly cruel irony inherent in the targeting of Israeli academics, artists, and intellectuals is that a disproportionate number of them publicly oppose many of Israel’s settlement policies. Instead of encouraging their efforts, BDS lumpsm them in with the very people and policies that they oppose. All this does is bar Israeli advocates for change from participating in the larger conversation with like-minded Palestinian individuals, and instead empower extremists on both sides. British sociologist David Hirsch rightly observes that “much of the important communication between Palestinians and Israelis has been conducted via academic engagement.” If one wants to resolve this political situation, efforts should be made to “facilitate communication, not exclusion, [to] listen, not close down voices.”

Ultimately, however, the personal politics of those affected by BDS are irrelevant. Law professor Martha Nussbaum notes
that nobody should be fired for a political position, left or right. Boycotts are “blunt instruments.” They assume that all those associated with an institution hold a singular view. A central tenet of academic freedom is that a scholar’s academic work and politics are separate and distinct from each other. In America in the 1940s and 1950s, men and women who were fired or blacklisted from jobs in academia and entertainment because they had in the past been members of the Communist Party were victims of the same type of discrimination. How ironic it is that leftist BDS supporters have adopted the tactics of right-wing McCarthyites.

A boycott strikes at the free exchange of ideas, which is why the American Association of University Professors (AAUP) firmly opposes it. The BDS movement is a direct descendant of Marxist antisemitism and anti-Zionism. BDS activism on the college campus is a deliberate challenge to the liberal Jews—students and academics—who may strongly disagree with Israeli government policies but who oppose the idea of a boycott on ethical and political grounds. They often feel their only option is silence. I hope that won’t be your response.

Yours,
DEI.

BDS: ANTISEMITISM OR POLITICS?

Dear Deborah:

This is all very enlightening—and very disturbing. But one question remains. However antithetical to academic freedom BDS may be, can it truly be called antisemitic? Whether its proponents publicly advocate for a “two-state solution” or a single “bi-national” Jewish and Arab state (putting aside for the moment the question of how viable that option may be), do they truly fit into any of our previously established categories of antisemites?

Yours,
Joe

Dear Joe and Abigail:

I begin with a deeply unsatisfying answer to Joe’s question: It depends.

First, I separate the BDS movement from many of its followers. Though that is generally a false dichotomy, in this case I believe it applies. BDS supporters who are critics of specific Israeli government policies believe this protest movement will result in Israel’s relinquishing control of the West Bank, which
will then (together with Gaza) become the State of Palestine, which will peacefully exist alongside the State of Israel, and everyone will live happily ever after. But if they were to seriously examine BDS's founding documents or some of the statements made by its founders (such as those of Omar Barghouti that I quoted in a previous letter), they would find that its objective is in fact the dissolution of Israel as a Jewish state, which is what would occur if the more than seven million Palestinians currently living outside of Israel were granted Israeli citizenship and permitted to exercise their right of return.¹

There are anti-Israel activists who take matters further by propagating the Arab and Marxist charge that Zionism is a form of racism. In actual fact, Zionism is the national liberation movement of Jews. To argue that only Jews, among all the peoples in the world, are not to be permitted to have a national home (or, more precisely, to return to their national home) is to deny Jewish peoplehood. The negation of Jewish nationhood is a form of antisemitism, if not in intent, then certainly in effect. This is particularly so today, when the State of Israel, which was created by a United Nations resolution in 1947, exists. To have debated the efficacy of a Jewish state prior to its establishment was one thing. To advocate for the dissolution of a state that is now home to seven million inhabitants is something else entirely. Policies that will lead to the end of Israel as a Jewish state constitute, in the words of progressive essayist Ellen Willis, "an unprecedented demand" for an existing democratic state, "one that has a popularly elected government, to not simply change its policies but to disappear."² This may explain why people such as Ken Livingstone always talk about their opposition to Zionism rather than to the existence of Israel: It's easier to oppose a movement than it is to call for the end to a nation-state.

Many anti-Israel advocates contend that the fact that Israel is a country with an established state religion renders it archaic, and this justifies its dissolution. They are strangely silent on the validity of the nondemocratic Islamic theocracies in the same neighborhood. And the fact that Great Britain, Denmark, Greece, and Monaco have official state religions doesn't seem to bother them, either.

Ultimately, however, the BDS campaign is not about divestment. As one Stanford University professor observed when the issue was debated on that campus in 2015, even the proponents of the effort knew it was not going to happen. Why, then, bother to fight for it? Because "the actual goal" is not "the stated goal."³ BDS supporters aim to convince students that Israel is the sole impediment to peace in the Middle East, if not the world. Nussbaum describes BDS as a "symbolic" boycott that is intended to make a "public statement" about opposition to Israel's policies. ⁴ It's another example of the attempt to toxify Israel.

In response to an attempt in 2016 by the American Anthropological Association to sign on to the BDS initiative, the Harvard professor Steven Pinker issued a public statement that eloquently sums up the situation:

[Are Israel's] policies really so atrocious, so beyond the pale of acceptable behavior of nation-states, that they call for a unique symbolic statement that abrogates personal fairness and academic freedom? It helps to put the Israel-Palestine conflict in global and historical perspective—something that anthropologists, of all people, might be expected to do. . . . Why no boycotts against academics from China, India, Russia, or Pakistan, to take a few examples, which have also been
embroiled in occupations and violent conflicts, and which, unlike Israel, face no existential threat or enemies with genocidal statements in their charters? In a world of repressive governments and ongoing conflicts, isn’t there something unsavory about singling the citizens of one of these countries for unique vilification and punishment?³

Nor do these critics of Israel acknowledge that there is virtually no Muslim state that treats its minority populations—Christians, Jews, Buddhists, Yazidis, or any other religious group—with equality.⁴

When BDS was hotly debated by students at Stanford, more than one hundred and fifty faculty members issued a statement decrying the "one-sided condemnation of Israel" and the "single minded ferocity" of the BDS campaign. (Rarely do faculty members criticize a student resolution.) Professor of history Steven Zipperstein observed that in his thirty years at Stanford, "no issue has captured as much attention" at the school Zipperstein put it bluntly: "That’s bizarre." It is bizarre unless one acknowledges that something else is hovering beneath the surface. Equally bizarre were the responses given by those professors who led their academic associations in support of BDS resolutions. After the American Studies Association (ASA) voted in 2015 to adopt BDS and boycott Israeli academic institutions, the president of the organization was asked why it had done so, given that it had never before called for an academic boycott of any other country, "including many of Israel’s neighbors, which are generally judged to have human rights records that are worse than Israel’s, or comparable." His stunningly simplistic answer: "One has to start somewhere." Equally strange was the answer given by University of Texas professor Barbara Harlow when she was asked why she was advocating an academic boycott of Israel and not any other country accused of human-rights abuses. Her response: "Why not?"³

The proponents of these campaigns would vigorously deny that their singling out of Israel in this way is antisemitic. But their myopic focus on Israel is antisemitic in consequence, if not in intent. There are those who use traditional antisemitic stereotypes to demonize Israel, as Mark Yudof, president emeritus of the University of California writes:

[T]heir rhetoric corrupts the language of human rights and expropriates the words historically used to demean the Jew, focusing instead on the Jewish state... For example, at the University of California at Berkeley, a professor who attended the BDS debate reported to me that Israeli soldiers were accused of deliberately killing women and poisoning wells. In an age of exquisite sensitivity on some campuses to microaggression, or language that subtly offends underrepresented groups, the ironic toleration of microaggression against Jews often goes unnoted.⁵

But it seems to me that this response doesn’t typify most of those engaged in this debate. There are supporters of pro-Palestinian causes who do not wish to see the destruction of Israel and who believe that their participation in movements such as BDS may genuinely lead to Israel changing those policies that adversely affect Palestinians. It seems unnecessary to point out that many Israeli citizens also oppose some of these policies. While some BDS supporters may not knowingly engage
in the demonization of Israel I described above, the movement they support, with its singular and imbalanced view of Israel and its support of the dissolution of a Jewish state, does.10

The impact of BDS on Jewish students is quite real. Jewish students running for office in student government have also been uniquely targeted by Israel-bashers. Jewish candidates have been asked by other students to sign pledges not to travel to Israel or affiliate with student groups considered pro-Israel. A candidate for Stanford’s student government, a Latina Jew, sought the endorsement of the university’s Students of Color Coalition. During her interview, she responded without incident to a multiplicity of questions concerning campus issues. She was then asked: “Given your Jewish identity, how would you vote on divestment?” The student, “taken aback by the question,” inquired about what the students interviewing her were “really asking.” According to this student candidate, her questioners told her that they saw “that I had a strong Jewish identity, and [wondered] how that would impact my decision.” When the student candidate said she opposed divestment, there was “an awkward silence, and the interview ended a minute later.” She did not receive the endorsement. (The student group claims this exchange never happened, but it’s hard to believe the student would have fabricated such an exchange.) Equally revealing of the atmosphere on campus is that prior to her campaign, this candidate had felt compelled to remove all her pro-Israel posts from her Facebook page. Her campaign manager explained, “We did it, not because she isn’t proud [to support Israel]—she is—but the campus climate has been pretty hostile, and it would not be politically expedient to take a public stance. She didn’t want that to be a main facet of her platform. Of course, she was going to be honest if she was asked about her stance on divestment.”11

I often hear the argument that the BDS movement can’t be considered antisemitic because many of its supporters are Jews. And, just as often, I hear the counterargument that these people are, simply, “self-hating” Jews—a term that I find unhelpful and inaccurate. It is sadly true that one of the most pernicious results of prejudice is when members of a persecuted group accept the ugly stereotypes used to characterize them. As Anthony Julius has observed, “contempt for Jews, when sufficiently widespread, can foster self-contempt among Jews.” It can convince Jews that unfounded, inaccurate accusations leveled against them or, by extension, against the Jewish state, are true.12 Anti-Zionist Jews who are opposed to Israel’s existence believe that they are expressing universalistic Jewish “values,” such as support for the downtrodden and for victims of injustice. It’s unfortunate that they have bought into the anti-Israel narrative and are proud of the fact that they have the “courage” to counter what they feel is a deluded, omnipotent, organized Jewry. I feel sad and frustrated that these people have internalized these antisemitic motifs. They may not personally be antisemites, but they facilitate it. On the other hand, I wouldn’t consider them antisemitic. But organizations such as BDS that negate the existence of a Jewish state most definitely are.

Yours,

DELA
CAMPUS GROUPTHINK:
NOT-SO-SAFE ZONES

Dear Deborah:

While we're on the subject of on-campus activity, there's another recent development that I find troubling and would like to discuss with you. It may seem a bit off our topic, but in my gut, I feel that it is in some way related to it.

In a speech Salman Rushdie gave at Emory in 2015, he remarked that "these are not good days for liberty. . . . Freedom seems everywhere in retreat." Given his personal experience, one might have expected that he was referring to Islamist extremists. He was, but he was also referring to the North American university campus, which he described as becoming an "insult-free zone." He condemned the fact that threats to freedom of expression in America

[are] beginning to be the greatest where they should be the most defended, that is to say within the walls of the academy. . . . And the people most willing to sacrifice, or limit, this fundamental right are young people. . . . To equate social good manners, the way we interact with each other, with the liberty to say what one thinks, even if people don't like it, is to make a false comparison. . . . Ideas are not people. Being rude about an idea is not the same thing as being rude about your aunt . . .

What you don't have is the right to use your alleged offended-ness as a reason to stop other people from speaking.

Students on American college campuses seem to have taken notions of political correctness, as well as ideas about "inclusivity," "exclusivity," and "safe space," to a point where they trump freedom of speech. In 2015, a student theater group at Mount Holyoke, after seeking student feedback, canceled their annual production of Eve Ensler's groundbreaking play, The Vagina Monologues, because transgender women do not have vaginas, and the play therefore "offers an extremely narrow perspective on what it means to be a woman." Responding in Time magazine, Ensler pointed out that "inclusion doesn't come from refusing to acknowledge our distinctive experiences, and trying to erase them, in an attempt to pretend they do not exist. Inclusion comes from listening to our differences and honoring the right of everyone to talk about their reality, free from oppression and bigotry and silencing." (She also noted that she has in recent years made available an optional monologue based on interviews she'd conducted with transgender women.)

Am I wrong to see a connection between these trends and the silencing of pro-Israel speakers on campus?

Yours,
Joe
Dear Joe and Abigail:

No, Joe, you're not wrong. Before the Free Speech Movement of the mid-1960s, it was campus administrators who decided what constituted "acceptable" public speech for students and faculty. How ironic it is that nowadays, it's left-wing student groups who are attempting to establish rules delineating what types of public speech are permissible. As the chancellor of the University of California at Berkeley observed, "Free speech has become controversial." In 2017, students there objected to appearances by Milo Yiannopoulos and Ann Coulter, both of whom hold a decidedly right-wing perspective on world events. The students—assisted by Antifa groups from outside the university—rioted until the events were canceled, ostensibly because the university could not guarantee the guests' safety. That was wrong. However reprehensible their pronouncements are, if Yiannopoulos or Coulter have been invited to speak on campus, their right to do so must be respected (unless, of course, they are inciting violence). As Berkeley professor Robert Reich observed, "How can students understand the validity of Coulter's arguments without being allowed to hear her make them, and question her about them?" I am convinced that if the students who object to her so-called "ideology" were to listen to her for two minutes, they would understand she has none, just a series of well-honed insults.

Even more disturbing is how some faculty members have been responding to free-speech controversies. In 2017, Wellesley faculty who are part of the college’s Commission on Race, Ethnicity, and Equity issued a statement, in the aftermath of an appearance by a professor who maintains controversial views on sexual violence on campus. They expressed concern over "the impact of speakers' presentations on Wellesley students who often feel the injury most acutely and invest time and energy in rebutting the speakers' arguments." Students, they seemed to be suggesting, should not be exposed to ideas that might challenge their comfort zone. But isn't the university experience all about challenging one's comfort zone? And how long would it be before a speech about technology developments in the State of Israel would be placed in this discomfort zone by Israel's opponents?

For several decades, Evergreen College in Olympia, Washington, had been observing a "Day of Absence" each April, during which students and faculty of color did not come to campus, to demonstrate what an all-white society would look like. In 2017, the organizers decided that, instead, "white students, staff, and faculty [were] invited to leave campus for the day's activities." Biology professor Bret Weinstein expressed his objections in an email to faculty and staff:

There is a huge difference between a group or coalition deciding to voluntarily absent themselves from a shared space in order to highlight their vital and under-appreciated roles, and a group or coalition encouraging another group to go away... On a college campus, one's right to speak—or to be—must never be based on skin color.

During a subsequent student protest, Weinstein was surrounded and verbally assaulted by students outside his classroom. When he was threatened with violence, the university administration told him that the campus police could not protect him. He and his wife resigned their faculty positions in September of that year and left the area.

There are, however, times when university administra-
tions take the necessary and appropriate action in these situations. In 2017, the American Enterprise Club, a conservative student group at Middlebury College, invited Charles Murray to speak on campus. His controversial 1994 book, The Bell Curve, implied that innate intelligence differences between the races, rather than discrimination, explained the disparity in the socioeconomic achievements of blacks and whites in America. When the book was published many people objected, myself included, to its implied racism. In all likelihood, I would not have invited Murray to speak at my campus. But the American Enterprise Club did, and, to its credit, it created a program in which a left-leaning professor would engage Murray in conversation after his lecture, for a potentially hard-hitting exchange. Nonetheless, some students, together with off-campus protesters, prevented the program from proceeding.

Prepared for this contingency, Middlebury had arranged for a backup site from which the conversation between Murray and the professor would be broadcast. The protesters learned of the site's location and physically attacked Murray and the professor, who ended up in the emergency room. But in this case, Middlebury's president, Laurie Patton, unequivocally condemned the protesters and subsequently called for an "embrace of freedom of expression and inquiry as an educational value for everyone, regardless of their background or political views." She acknowledged that "controversial speech is especially difficult" but considered it imperative that we "move beyond the false dichotomy between free speech and inclusiveness." In her view, "an educational institution does not become more inclusive by limiting freedom of expression. Nor does it achieve greater freedom by reducing its commitment to building an inclusive, robust, brave public square where all students are equally welcomed and valued."10

The University of Chicago took an equally strong stance. In 2014, president Robert J. Zimmer and provost Eric D. Isaacs tasked a faculty committee on freedom of expression with drafting a statement "articulating the University's overarching commitment to free, robust, and uninhibited debate and deliberation." The committee acknowledged that there will be ideas that members of the campus community might find disturbing; nonetheless, the university's commitment was to open and free inquiry. The committee cited the observation of a past president of the university, Hanna Holborn Gray: "Education should not be intended to make people comfortable, it is meant to make them think. Universities should be expected to provide the conditions within which hard thought, and therefore strong disagreement, independent judgment, and the questioning of stubborn assumptions, can flourish in an environment of the greatest freedom."11 (When I read that statement, I couldn't help but be reminded that Gray's family fled Nazi Germany in 1933.) Jay Ellison, dean of students at the College at the University of Chicago, subsequently made this position very real in his letter welcoming the class of 2020. Addressing the infamous "trigger warnings" now prevalent on so many campuses, which require faculty to warn students if anything in their lectures or the readings might make students feel "unsafe" or "excluded," Ellison wrote, "Our commitment to academic freedom means that we do not support so-called 'trigger warnings,' we do not cancel invited speakers because their topics might prove controversial, and we do not condone the creation of intellectual 'safe spaces' where individuals can retreat from ideas and perspectives at odds with their own."12

So, going back to your question, Joe, how is all this related to what we have been discussing? First of all, throughout history, Jews have thrived in societies with robust freedom of expres-
sion and strong democratic institutions. They have faced far less felicitous conditions in societies that curtailed free speech. This has been true of both right-wing and left-wing governments, the best examples being Nazi Germany and the Soviet Union. Second, authorizing any institution or group of people—be they government officials or fellow academics—to decide what is and is not acceptable speech, whether that refers to speech that is antisemitic, anti-Islamic, racist, homophobic, sexist, etc., is dangerous. What troubles me even more is that there are today some Jewish organizations that believe legislative bodies, including the United States Congress, should pass legislation defining antisemitism and determining when anti-Israel speech crosses the line into antisemitism. If such laws are passed, pro-Israel Jewish students will be further marginalized, as they will now be associated with suppressing, rather than answering, speech they don’t like.

The irony is, of course, that most pro-Israel students on campus probably don’t agree with an approach that would repress freedom of expression. But the pro-Israel students don’t yell as loudly as the off-campus Jewish groups fighting “for” them.13 If those who oppose the right of Israel to exist were to be labeled antisemitic, would that mean that anti-Zionist ultra-Orthodox groups such as Satmar Hasidim would be included in such a definition? These proposals open a Pandora’s box of absurdities and orthodoxies. Some of what we are currently seeing on campus—shouting down of speakers, faculty calls for invitations only to speakers who do not make students feel uncomfortable, and physical attacks on speakers—are a piece with the attacks we have been seeing on Israeli speakers.14 I have no doubt that, should these restrictions on “offensive” speech be formally enacted on college campuses, those who speak on Israel’s behalf would soon find themselves disinvited because they might make some students “uncomfortable.”

Using the law as a means of silencing those with whom we disagree is misguided and dangerous. I say this from not just a professional but also a personal perspective. David Irving tried to use the law to silence me when he sued me for libel in the British courts. Antisemitism must be fought, but that fight must be strategic. Many of the more militant off-campus advocacy groups that have taken up this fight against “offensive” speech call for the defeat of the “other side” and insist that there be no exchange of ideas with them. For them it’s a zero-sum game. There are, of course, groups with whom an exchange of ideas is impossible. (I would include in this category deniers, who, as we demonstrated in court, are liars and falsifiers of history.) But it’s in the free exchange of ideas that extremists are revealed to be what they are. And it’s in the free exchange of ideas that the truth is brought to light and prejudice and intolerance are revealed for what they are. How sad it is that on some college campuses today, there does not appear to be room for that conversation.

Yours,
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