

The American Campus and the Jews
(Rosh Hashanah 2022/5783)
By Rabbi Ammiel Hirsch

On Rosh Hashanah, Rabbi Ammi Hirsch addresses the proliferation of antisemitism on college campuses across America: “Antisemitism — even when it calls itself anti-Zionism — is a stain on the academies of higher learning and a stain on the Western liberal tradition.”

What’s going on at Harvard?

When I refer to Harvard, it is shorthand for the American campus in general, especially those universities with the most glittering academic reputations. But there was a specific event last spring at Harvard that caught the attention of the Jewish community because it happened there, the academic training grounds of America’s best and brightest — and it triggered deep concern on what, if anything, it said about the future of the American campus and the Jews.

Last spring, the student newspaper, the Harvard Crimson, endorsed the anti-Israel, anti-Zionist Boycott, Divestment and Sanctions movement against Israel, reversing its long-held previous position that comparisons between Israel and South African apartheid were “offensive” and “repugnant.”

Like all good opponents of Israel, the Crimson assured us that supporting BDS is not antisemitic — “and, by the way, we are against antisemitism”. After all, some of the 87 students who sit on the editorial board are Jews themselves. The pundits wrote that they are well aware that antisemitism does show up on what they called “the fringes of otherwise worthwhile movements.” That was a relief for me, that these high-IQ future elites of American society fully understood the age-old perils of antisemitism, and their reassurance that they have the issue well in hand — that antisemitism might be only at the fringes of BDS and other anti-Zionist groups — was heartwarming and comforting to me. After all, when have intelligent people ever been wrong?

Characterizing BDS as a “living breathing movement of great promise,” the students wrote: “It is our categorical imperative to side with — and empower — the vulnerable and oppressed.” “As a board, we are proud to finally lend our support to...BDS — and we call on everyone to do the same.”

It has been a while, but I remember studying Immanuel Kant’s categorical imperative. Kant viewed Judaism on a lower scale of development than Christianity because he thought that Judaism is a mere nation-political entity, whereas Christianity teaches spiritual and ethical obligations based on pure love. Our people were so often on the receiving end of pure Christian love that we would have been very happy had we not been the focus of so much affection and tenderness.

But you know what? Basically, I am just a simple Jew. I have a very basic, unsubtle, uncomplicated, unsophisticated approach that has guided me throughout my life: If a theory is antisemitic, it can't be moral. If a theory leads to antisemitism, whether intended or not, it can't be moral. If a theory denies Israel's right to exist and seeks to dismantle the world's only Jewish state, it is immoral — no matter the Kantian justifications or assumed categorical imperatives. That is my starting point, and from there, I work my way backwards. I concede that I am not neutral on the Jews or on Israel. But do you expect — or even want a rabbi, your rabbi — to be neutral on Judaism, the Jewish people or the Jewish state?

I embrace the sensitivity to injustice expressed in the Harvard Crimson editorial. I assume that it comes from a good place. I agree with the students that the Palestinians deserve dignity and freedom, and I have spent much of my career supporting these aims. But they are utterly wrong to write that “the Boycott, Divest and Sanction movement [is] a means to achieving that goal.” The BDS movement seeks, not coexistence with Israel, but Israel's destruction; not a two-state solution but one Palestinian state. And BDS considers armed struggle against Israel a legitimate means to achieve this end.

The Crimson editorial was published after weeks of ferocious terrorist attacks in Israeli cities and towns. Dozens of Israelis — Jews, Arabs, Muslims and Christians — were shot, stabbed, run over and threatened for the high crimes of walking the streets, shopping, sitting at cafes, bars and restaurants —and, more generally, just for being Israeli. The Crimson editorial referred to — and came on the heels of — the annual campus Israel Apartheid Week organized by the BDS-promoting Palestine Solidarity Committee. They erected what they called a “wall of resistance,” intended to symbolize the security barrier bordering the West Bank — admittedly, a depressing gloomy structure, but one constructed to prevent mass murder perpetrated by Palestinian terrorists. That security barrier has saved innumerable lives. Before its construction, thousands of Israeli civilians, Jews and Arabs, Muslims and Christians, were killed and maimed in restaurants, buses, shops, hospitals, and synagogues, including a particularly gruesome mass slaughter at a Passover Seder. It was a crazed insane spasm of mass rage, supported by wide swaths of Palestinian society — an expression of hatred hardly at “the fringes of the movement” of resistance against Israel.

On the Harvard wall of resistance — that the Crimson described as a “provocative art display” — was a mural proclaiming that “Zionism is Racism, Settler Colonialism, White Supremacy, Apartheid.” Wow. So many nasty descriptions of Israel, as if they couldn't decide what specific evil to accuse Israel of so everything including the kitchen sink of trigger insults was thrown into the bubbling cauldron of the world's worst moral accusations, intended to produce a boiling stew of emotional repugnance.

Now I know that there are many, including some in our congregation, who strongly disagree with my views. I know that we have a legitimate debate in the Jewish community and American society whether anti-Zionism is, by definition, antisemitic. If I were to have a philosophical discussion, I would say that anti-Zionism is not necessarily antisemitic. There are plenty of anti-Zionist Jews. And furthermore, I accept that many people who boycott Israel do so because

they want to change Israeli policies, and, looking to South Africa, they think that boycotts are effective political tools. Some of them do not even consider themselves anti-Israel, let alone, anti-Jewish.

However, in practice, what is the point of being anti-Zionist today? Opposing Israeli policies, even by applying strong economic pressure, is one thing. But what does anti-Zionism even mean 74 years after Israel's founding? Out of Israel's population of 9 million, 6.5 million are Jews. Where would they go? What to do with them? We should ignore Jewish national aspirations — and the will of Israeli citizens themselves — and create yet another (the 22nd) Muslim-majority country in the Middle East, none of which are democracies — at the expense of the world's one Jewish and democratic state?

Why? Because some American students and professors tell us that it is a categorical imperative: that Palestinian dignity categorically requires, not coexistence, but Israel's elimination? That, as BDS has said, "a Jewish state in any shape or form [contravenes] the basic rights of the...Palestinian population?" It is not Israel's policies they are attacking, it is Israel, itself. Ask them, and they will tell you: "Palestine Free from the River to the Sea." They consider Israel to have been born in original sin. Israel is irredeemable. Remember, "Zionism is racism, settler colonialism, White apartheid."

The irony is that Israel is one of the most multicultural places on earth. If all you did was stand on a street corner in any Israeli big city, within 30 minutes you would observe practically every hue of skin color under the sun, and people who came to Israel from virtually every corner of the world. If you walked into an Israeli hospital, you would see that 17% of Israel's physicians, 24% of its nurses and a majority of its pharmacists are Arabs. Israeli Arabs sit in the Knesset. An Islamic party served in the previous government. Arab judges adjudicate in Israeli courts, including its highly respected Supreme Court. Muslim and Christian Arabs are part of practically every sector of Israel's economy. There is still much work to do; there are many severe problems and challenges in Israel — but this is not apartheid. There are real blemishes on Israeli society; you don't have to make up lies and libels.

Jewish folklore tells of a Jewish student who poured all his intelligence into a Talmudic tractate. After many hours, he lifts his head and proclaims: "I just came up with a magnificent answer: Now, if I only knew the question!" The anti-Zionists of the Western world came up with what they consider a magnificent answer: Israel has no right to exist. But they don't ask the right question. The question should be, not "How shall we get rid of the one Jewish state in the world?" But, "How shall we promote coexistence?" If that is the question — how to ensure that two peoples live side-by-side in peace — to eliminate one of them cannot be the answer.

We give a wide berth of tolerance for free speech in our country, including, especially, speech we do not like. That's the point of the right to free speech. Nonetheless, we should be honest with each other: Anti-Zionism often leads to antisemitism, especially on campuses. Everyone now knows this. Those who protest, protest too much. We may still permit such speech

because of the nature of our Constitutional system, but we should at least acknowledge the reality.

Are you following what is happening in our backyard — at CUNY? CUNY, in the heart of New York City! Dozens of Jewish students and faculty reported that they were afraid to return to CUNY campuses this month. Many on the faculty report a hostile work environment that, according to them, the university administration does not take seriously. Some Jewish students report a climate of such stifling hostility that they hide outward signs of their Jewishness.

Are you following events at USC, now under investigation by the U.S. Civil Rights Office for allegedly failing to protect a Jewish student from discrimination and harassment because of her support for Israel? The student reported receiving a barrage of hateful messages on social media focused on her Jewish identity. Multiple USC friends wrote to her asking whether she felt it was safe for them to return to campus. She said she received hundreds of messages from Jewish college students throughout the country who felt similarly attacked.

Jewish students report a sharp increase of intimidation against Jews on campus, and a direct connection between the routine vilification of Israel and anti-Jewish sentiments and actions. Jewish students are regularly accused of complicity in genocide. Imagine that: the grandchildren of the remnants of the people who barely survived the Holocaust are themselves accused of complicity in genocide. The effect of equating Israel with Nazism is to exonerate Nazism, to render it not so bad and not so different from what other people do, including the Jews, when they only have the chance.

According to an ADL-Hillel survey from 2021, 32% — practically one of every three Jewish college students — said they personally experienced antisemitism directed at them from a member of their campus community within the past year. Such anti-Jewish messages were conveyed virtually, through social media, but also through logos, swastikas, antisemitic symbols and vandalism against Jewish cultural centers. All together 43% of Jewish college students — almost half — say they experienced personally and/or witnessed antisemitic activity within the past year. According to the USC student, “If it was any other group that this was happening to, it would [be] shut down immediately.”

Of course, she is right about that. Two Harvard students, responding to the Crimson editorial, made the same point. They wrote:

“It is hard to imagine that any other national entity would be subject to seminar after seminar informing them that their own national aspirations are uniquely illegitimate.” “The departments that produce future politicians, journalists and members of the intelligentsia — especially Harvard’s Divinity School, Kennedy School and Graduate School of Arts and Sciences — have become fortresses of anti-Israel ideology.” “If hatred of the Jewish state becomes the default position across campus,” the students wrote, “do Jewish students have a future at Harvard?”

In other words, leaving aside the philosophical discussion of whether anti-Zionism by definition constitutes antisemitism, the effect, if not the intent, of anti-Zionism, is to generate intense hostility to Judaism and Jews themselves. That is one key reason why former Harvard president, Larry Summers, protested the Crimson editorial, saying:

“The BDS movement [is] taking positions that are basically anti-Semitic, immoral, poorly thought-out and very damaging if actually acted on. I was appalled by the content [of the editorial], and really troubled that a usually serious and thoughtful organization like the Harvard Crimson would enthusiastically endorse [the BDS positions].” “It is clear to me that antisemitism is being practiced in both intent and effect.”

It shouldn't surprise anyone that centuries-old antisemitic myths about Jews malleably shift shape into anti-Zionist myths about Israel. Why is it surprising that a hostile obsession with Jews would lead to a hostile obsession with the Jewish state? Jews are accused of everything and its opposite: that we are weak and that we are strong; that we are White and that we are enemies of the White race; that we are capitalists and that we are communists; that we are rootless, disloyal and conspiratorial. The common denominator uniting right-wing antisemitism and left-wing antisemitism — religious Jew-hatred and secular Jew-hatred — is the accusation of Jewish immorality: that Judaism and Jews are morally inferior.

It is not a great leap to go from, “it's all about the Benjamins for Jews,” to, “it's all about the Benjamins for Israel.” It is not a great leap to go from “Jews poison the wells” to “Israel poisons Palestinian water supplies.” It is not a great leap to go from “Jews kidnap children to drain their blood for matzah” to “Israel harvests Palestinian organs for transplant.” It is not a great leap to go from “Jews are wicked” to “the Jewish state is wicked.”

This is the reason why anti-Zionist groups focus on the moral failures of Israel — some of them real, many exaggerated, and often completely made-up. The point of the movement to boycott Israel is not really to bring the Israeli economy to its knees. If it was, it would be considered a colossal failure. Israel's first-world economy is stronger and more diverse than ever. Israel now trades with the Arab world, having completely broken the back of its long-standing economic embargo.

Rather, the point of BDS is to undermine Israel's moral standing, thus in the long-run delegitimizing Israel's existence. It feeds into the age-old accusations of the moral failings of the Jew. The Israel-Hamas war in the spring of 2021 was depicted as an apocalyptic struggle between good and evil, with Hamas representing the good David fighting against the Israeli Goliaths. Consider the moral hypocrisy: Terrorists launch thousands of missiles on Israeli cities and towns, Israel responds to stop the missiles, as any country in the world would and should, taking extreme care to avoid harming innocent civilians, as no other country would — and democratic Israel is accused of ethnic cleansing, while terrorism is whitewashed as freedom fighting and rationalized as a categorical moral imperative.

The entire anti-Zionist struggle in the West and on campus in particular, is conducted above and beyond the actual people on the ground. It is about theories divorced from realities. That was the central problem with the letter of close to one hundred liberal seminary students released in the middle of the Israel-Hamas war. Aside from the appalling emotional distance from, and disregard for, the lives and safety of fellow Jews from future leaders of American Jewry, it was disconnected from the realities on the ground.

We cannot be more loyal to theories than to real people. There is something distastefully elitist about ignoring actual people in service of an academic proposition. Soda Stream purposely established its factory on the West Bank so that it could employ many Palestinian workers; the company paid them generously and equally. Palestinian workers supported their families with dignity. Western anti-Zionists insisted on boycotting Soda Stream without regard to the pleas of these workers. Soda Stream moved its factory, and Palestinian workers lost their high-paying jobs.

I am reminded of what was said about the graduates of the elite French schools of diplomacy and international relations:

“They know everything. Unfortunately, that is all they know. They don’t know anything else.” Do anti-Zionists think that Israel’s right to exist is theoretical for Israelis and Jews? That we can introduce some resolution at the Oxford Debating Society: “Does Israel deserve to exist?” and debate whether Western students think that is a good idea?

The Israeli-Palestinian conflict is not one of race or skin color or colonial oppression, or apartheid, or ethnic cleansing. It is not intersectional with, and an extension of, American social justice struggles. People and societies are much more complicated than that. You cannot simply clothe all of the world’s conflicts with the same garment. And by the way, most Israeli Jews are Jews of color. They are not European and are not white. They are refugees and descendants of refugees from the Middle East, persecuted by Islamic rulers for their beliefs, and arriving in Israel with nothing but the clothes on their backs.

And even most of the Europeans who made their way to Israel were fleeing persecution, pogroms and oppression. They were emaciated refugees, the miserable surviving remnants of the genocide of our people. My mother arrived from Bergen Belsen on the first boat to reach the newly declared state of Israel on May 15, 1948. She was whisked straight from the boat to the front lines of the War of Independence, a war of annihilation launched by surrounding Arab countries that refused to accept the international plan to create a Jewish state and an Arab state.

I am always amazed that people who do not live in the Middle East, might never have been to Israel, perhaps can’t even find it on a map, do not speak Hebrew, do not understand Israeli or Palestinian society in-depth, can be so certain about how to solve the Israeli-Palestinian conflict — and end up supporting those who seek, not coexistence, but Israel’s destruction. They are

proud to lend their support to BDS, and call on everyone to do the same. These are some of the smartest people in the world.

As a lifelong liberal, I recoil from the illiberalism of BDS. Liberals believe in coexistence and reform. We believe in social progress — *tikkun olam* — repairing the world, not breaking it. We have a tolerant mindset — and a tolerance for debate and competing views, because we know that it is only through disagreement and deliberation that we can evolve into a better society. Liberals respect facts. We value truth. We do not simply make things up, or lazily mischaracterize and misapply flawed and false analogies: “Guard your tongue from evil and lips from deceitful speech,” the Bible warns. “You shall seek, interrogate and inquire thoroughly,” the Torah urges.

Liberals do not think in all-or-nothing categories. The chair of the Jewish Studies Department at CUNY’s Brooklyn College quoted an email he received from the CUNY working group on racism and colonialism addressing the Israeli-Palestinian conflict: “There are not multiple perspectives on this topic. There is only resistance or complicity to genocide.” (Tablet, July 1) Liberals do not think this way and engaging people who do is highly frustrating for us. They are impervious to logic or reason. They will not change their minds and will not change the subject.

If the bitter Israeli-Palestinian dispute was easy to resolve, it would have been resolved by now. Neither side is going anywhere. For liberals, conflict resolution can never be about “I am right and you are wrong; I am for freedom and you are for genocide.” Liberal elite students should be the first to recognize the illiberalism of anti-Zionism, no matter the veneer of virtue. When they say, “Palestine Free from the River to the Sea” they mean the ethnic cleansing of the Jews. Are anti-Zionists and their supporters against ethnic cleansing, except when it comes to the Jews of Israel? It is easier to ethnically-cleanse Jews from the land that bears their name if you believe the libel that they are racist, settler colonialists, White Supremacy apartheidists.

How is it possible that downright antisemitism seems virtuous to so many people? Antisemitism, even when it calls itself anti-Zionism is not virtuous. It is a stain on the academies of higher learning and a stain on the Western liberal tradition.

The intensifying inhospitable climate towards Jews on American campuses seemed to have come upon us overnight. But we are deceiving ourselves. Many have been warning us for years. It might seem to us that it all happened so quickly, but that is because we have been so slow. We are like the turtle who limped into the sheriff’s office lamenting that he had just been attacked by three snails. The sheriff asked the turtle to tell him what happened. The turtle shook his head and said: “I don’t know, it all happened so fast.”

It is late, but not too late. Most Americans are still supportive of Israel. Most American Jews and most liberal American Jews still say that identification with Israel is an important component of Jewish identity. However, the younger the generations, the weaker the commitment to Israel. The sophistication and effectiveness of the unceasing hostility towards Israel, compounded by the widespread Jewish illiteracy of our youngsters, is causing mounting damage. If we do not

start moving quickly — and if we do not respond effectively — what we see today will be mild in comparison to what will be. Twenty years from now we may look back at today's campus and consider it to have been nirvana.

For those of you who disagree with what I said today, contact me and set me straight. Let me know why you think I am wrong, and try to convince me.

For the rest of you, I hope you are proud that our synagogue is launching a comprehensive and vigorous campaign called Amplify Israel to push back against anti-Zionism, reimagine how we educate our children, and re-center the Reform movement that is dangerously drifting away from its self-proclaimed central values. We will build literacy around, and pride for, Judaism and Israel. We aim to influence all American Jews, but especially younger Jews, and to provide them with the knowledge, understanding and vocabulary to support Israel and recognize the difference between legitimate criticism and antisemitism.

Rabbi Tracy Kaplowitz, our new Marilyn G. and Joseph B. Schwartz Israel Fellow, will be leading our efforts. This fall we will launch workshops for young Jews and parents to counter what many are experiencing in high schools and even middle schools. We will develop curricula and learning tools. Our synagogue will hold gatherings and symposia to encourage collaboration with other Jewish organizations and leaders eager for support and partnership. We will initiate meetings with school administrators to sensitize them to the Jewish community's concerns.

We have already increased dramatically our social media and online presence. Last spring we launched bi-weekly podcasts that are already reaching many thousands of listeners who never engaged our synagogue before. We will convene a two-day Reform rabbis' conference in May to discuss the future of our movement, and how to counter the declining commitment to Israel among Reform rabbis and rabbinical students. I expect that our sanctuary will be packed with rabbis and lay leaders from every part of the United States and Canada. We are working with partners in the Jewish community to launch an intensive one-year national mentorship program for up to 15 newly ordained Reform rabbis who seek comradery, support and in-depth Zionist education in order to upgrade their skills and maximize their effectiveness in leading synagogues and Jewish organizations.

For all the many thousands of you who now follow us online from all over the world and ask me regularly how you can help — this is how:

Spread our message. Leverage our reach to your contacts. Be advocates. And give money. Be generous. Give a lot of money. Our opponents do. They realize that public advocacy is expensive; that education is a long-term and costly endeavor, and that we need to support those who reflect our values. There is no other way. The influence we have is in direct proportion to the numbers of people who are willing to support us. We do not operate in a vacuum. We exist in an environment of competing ideologies. We are in this mess in the first place, in part, because our opponents have been much more committed, much more determined and much more generous. And I must confess to you — while liberal Jews are no

less generous than conservative Jews — they do not donate as much, proportionally, to Jewish institutions, let alone entities that advocate for Israel. We need you. And you need us.

One final word to American Jewish youth:

I admire your generation. In many ways you are better than we were at your age. I love that you are so open to diversity; that you are so willing to accept differences. I admire your insistence that people should be treated equally no matter how they identify or express themselves. You are quick and creative and have good values. You believe deeply in social justice. You have so much potential to improve the world.

You are not the first generation of Jews to endure anti-Jewish animosities. You will not be the last. Do not begrudge these years; they can make you better. Nothing inspires us more than the fight for principle. Moral sentiment and grim resolve lift the heart and stiffen the spine. We get better through moral struggle. Rediscover your Jewish pride. Fight back — and fight back hard. Fight as hard as our opponents. You will find many allies, both Jewish and non-Jewish. Do not ignore the outrages perpetrated against you and fellow Jews on American campuses. We have learned throughout Jewish history that if we allow these anti-Jewish mindsets to fester, eventually antisemitism worsens. To ignore antisemitism is to allow the culture of Jew-hatred to settle in institutions, rendering its eradication much more difficult. Antisemitism devastates not only Jews, but also the institutions and societies that allow or encourage it.

There are many organizations that will help you both on campus and in the broader Jewish community. If university administrators refuse to take anti-Jewish hostility on their campuses seriously, if they consider the discomfort of their Jewish students less compelling and less urgent than the discomfort of every other minority group on campus seek to influence them in every way you know how — including legal action if you believe that anti-Jewish incitement rises to the level of violating Constitutional protections. Several American universities are now under federal investigation for allegedly tolerating anti-Jewish discrimination.

You are the future. My generation will continue for a while longer, but it is you who will determine the destiny of American Jewish life. Whether you are ready or not, whether you even want it or not, we will soon hand the Jewish torch to you, as we received it from our parents. The reason there are Jews in the world today is that the Jews of yesterday willed it and bequeathed Judaism to us. I feel blessed for the privilege of spending a few years in the sun, linking your generation with generations past in our eternal quest for meaning.

When you reach mid-life, Israel will be celebrating its centennial. I hope I will be there with you. In 2048, we expect that two-thirds of the world's Jews will be living in Israel. There will still be plenty of anti-Zionists. Israel will still have enemies seeking to destroy it. But Jewish anti-Zionism will be an anachronism. The historians of tomorrow will view today's anti-Zionist Jews as the historians of yesterday viewed past fringe Jewish movements: A streaking comet blazing through the skies of Jewish life, making a dramatic impression in the crazed intensity of these times, but soon disappearing into the vast nothingness of Jewish time.

This is the irony: the struggle against Israel waged by some American Jews, is not really about Israel at all. Israel will survive and prosper with or without them. It is about you. It is about the future of American Judaism. We cannot survive separated from the vast majority of our people. Jews who tell you otherwise are deluded.

I hope that you stand strong against those who harbor animosities against our people. It is not a new phenomenon. All Jewish generations experienced the discomfort of standing against the mob. Sometimes it is hard to be Jewish. Study Jewish history. For some reason, God has decreed a rocky and thorny road for our people. Looking back through the centuries, it has been a long, hard, tragic march from Sinai. But the journey has also been filled with exhilarating accomplishment, transcendent meaning, and noble purpose.

I hope you feel this, sense this, and are empowered by it. I hope that you, too, will do what our ancestors did: Walk the long and winding Jewish road with faith in the ultimate redemption of our people and all people.