

Let My People Go...To College
Shabbat Chol HaMoed Pesach 5784

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In my column for the cover of the April Temple *Chronicle*, I reflected on the challenge of celebrating Passover in this difficult year. “The Seder,” I wrote, “is not intended only to mark an event in our people’s mythic past. Instead, this dramatic liturgical meal has the goal of inspiring us to action.”

Most often, we have advocated for freedom for others. Throughout my own lifetime, we had the luxury to forget “that Jews, too, can still be oppressed because we are Jews. The quintessential strangers of history, we can find ourselves as outsiders in the world in our own day. The last six months have provided a reminder that none of us wanted.”

The harshest reminder, of course, was in Israel, on October 7—and now, over two hundred days later, with more than one hundred thirty Israelis still held hostage in Gaza. I went on to say that Jews in the United States, accustomed in recent years to mounting antisemitism from the extreme right, are now also facing antisemitism “thinly cloaked in opposition to Israel.”

I heard from a former member who still reads our *Chronicle* loyally. He asked me why I would only reference “the extreme right,” when, in his estimation, the greatest threat to American Jews today is from the extreme left. Without comparing threats from the extreme right and left, I thought I had acknowledged both, but I went back and reread what I had written, and he was right. I had not used the phrase “the extreme left” to describe a grave antisemitic threat to American Jews and our people around the world.

I rise tonight to correct that error.

Let me be clear: A narrative that existed on the left long before October 7 began metastasizing on October 7, before Israel had cleared Hamas terrorists from its internationally recognized borders or begun any retaliation in Gaza. The mindless left insists that any people who have less power, less wealth—and who are, by their faulty estimation, less white—are, by definition, oppressed. The argument goes on to insist that behavior that would normally be reprehensible—the brutal murder, sexual assault, and hostage-taking of October 7—must be understood as an act of desperation by oppressed people with no other option. By contrast, any group that is more powerful, wealthier, and perceived to be whiter is the oppressor. By this measure—uncorrupted by critical thinking or acknowledgement of complexities, Israel is the oppressor, and the Palestinian

people are oppressed. Those who seek justice, this logic goes, must stand up for Palestinians and condemn Israel.

The situation in Israel and the Palestinian territories, though, is complicated. Many Israelis and progressive Zionists everywhere support neither the Netanyahu government nor continued West Bank Occupation. As I have described on this *bimah* in the past, West Bank Occupation is brutal and inhumane. I had hoped to speak tonight about the second-class status of Israel's Palestinian, Druze, and Bedouin citizens, many of whom have valiantly supported the Jewish State since October 7. I have rescheduled that subject to May 31.

As for the Palestinians, Abba Eban said it best, decades ago: They “never miss an opportunity to miss an opportunity.” Rejecting one peace proposal after another, and turning repeatedly to corrupt leaders and terrorism, Palestinians in the West Bank and Gaza share responsibility for their pitiful, stateless condition. Arab nations, too, have made self-serving that have deepened Palestinians' suffering.

None of that complexity is reflected in the anti-Israel encampments at Columbia and several other campuses.

Protestors at Columbia ripped an Israeli flag from the hands of Jonathan Lederer, a Jewish student, and set it afire. “They were pushing and shoving me,” said Lederer. “They threw rocks at my face. At that moment, my life was totally threatened.”ⁱ Protestors' free speech rights entitle them to call for their universities to divest of their ties with Israel, financial and otherwise, and probably even to chant, “From the River to the Sea, Palestine will be free.” The right to free speech, though, does not extend to assault. Nor ought free speech protect incitement to violence, such as the protestor holding a sign reading, “Al-Qassam's next targets,” with an arrow pointing at Jewish students. Al-Qassam is Hamas's “military” wing. Other demonstrators proudly proclaimed, “We are Hamas!”ⁱⁱ A banner at the university of Michigan reads, “Long Live the Intifada” with chants of, “Globalize the Intifada.” The student president of Michigan Hillel explained that she felt particularly threatened by that terminology, as Intifada implies violence targeting Jewish civilians.ⁱⁱⁱ

Free speech also does not permit what Netanel Crispe, Yale University's “only Hasidic undergraduate,” encountered. *New York Times* columnist Bret Stephens describes the scene: “On Saturday evening, [Crispe] and his friend Sahar Tartak...paid a visit to the university's ... Plaza, where pro-Palestinian demonstrators had set up an encampment. ‘I was wearing my black hat; I was very identifiably Jewish,’ Crispe said. ‘I was yelled at, harassed, pushed and shoved numerous times. Every time I tried to take a step, someone confronted me inches

from my face, telling me not to move.’ Tartak said she was hit in the left eye by a Palestinian flag held by a demonstrator. She ended up in the hospital, luckily without a permanent injury. ‘Thank God, there was a small sphere at the end of the pole,’ she told [Stephens].”^{iv}

One American college campus where Jews feel unsafe—or worse, **are** unsafe—is one too many. Still, it’s important to emphasize that, while protests are widespread, the majority are confined to constitutionally protected speech, and most colleges and universities remain safe, if not always entirely comfortable, for Jewish students, faculty and staff.

As most of you know, both of my sons are university students. This week, the President of Brandeis University, Daniel’s college, reminded the world that it was “founded in 1948 by the American Jewish community to counter antisemitism and quotas on Jewish enrollment in higher education” and that it remains “committed to protecting the safety of all its students.” In response to the current crisis, it extended its deadline for transfer applications, enabling students at schools with threatening demonstrations “to seek the learning environment of [the Brandeis] campus.”^v

Robert is a graduate student at the University of Rochester. Early in the week, he told me about a tiny pro-Palestinian protest encampment there. The protest never threatened Jewish students, but it was in the way of an annual campus celebration planned for today until the administration convinced them to move to a benign location yesterday. Protestors unsurprisingly declared victory, and *Newsweek* bought it—hook, line, and sinker—without seeking comment from the university. The headline screamed, “Pro-Palestinian Protestors Claim Win Over One College’s Ties To Israel,” specifically that Rochester would consider divesting itself of both financial and academic connections to the Jewish State. In response, the university issued a clear and emphatic statement that it had agreed to no such thing, proclaiming instead, “University administrators made clear that neither demand[—that the University call for a ceasefire and divest of ties with Israel—]was on the table.” The statement continued, “There has not and will not be any commitments about future ... divestment.” Later in the day, *Newsweek* updated its article to include the university statement deep into the article, contemptibly leaving the inflammatory, false claims and headline intact.^{vi}

Passover was, of course, observed in ancient Israel, but the Seder was developed later, by our rabbinic sages, at a time when Jewish people lived in exile—oppressed and impoverished. Indeed, for most of Jewish history, Jewish people have sat down to their Seder tables in the face of persecution or at least discrimination. Most of us alive today are not accustomed to that, but here we are,

praying for the release of Israeli hostages at our Seder tables and worried about homegrown antisemitism from both political extremes.

Our sages prepared us for times like these, and worse. They also taught us to open the door to Elijah, symbolizing our faith that we **can** bring the world ever closer to messianic redemption, with God as our partner. Micah imagined a day וְיָשְׁבוּ אִישׁ תַּחַת גִּפְנוֹ וְתַחַת תְּאֵנָתוֹ וְאִין מִחְרִיד “when all shall sit under their vine and fig tree, with none to make them afraid.” לֹא יִשְׂאוּ גּוֹי אֶל גּוֹי חֶרֶב וְלֹא-יִלְמְדוּ עוֹד מִלְחָמָה, “Nation shall not lift up sword against nation, nor shall they learn war anymore.”^{vii} Even Micah, though, could not have imagined: We can offer that prayer in Hebrew, in English—and yes, in Arabic, too. Perhaps the dream is messianic: Let these be the words, the chants, and the songs heard on college campuses across America.

Amen.

ⁱ Ron Lee, “Jewish students fear safety amid pro-Palestinian protests at Columbia University,” *Spectrum News*, April 22, 2024, <https://ny1.com/nyc/manhattan/news/2024/04/22/jewish-students-fear-safety-amid-pro-palestinian-protests-at-columbia-university>.

ⁱⁱ Embedded video in George Solis, Dennis Romero and Yasmeen Persaud, “Columbia to hold classes virtually as Jewish leaders warn about safety amid tensions over pro-Palestinian protests,” *NBC News*, April 22, 2024, <https://www.nbcnews.com/news/us-news/columbia-hold-classes-virtually-jewish-leaders-warn-safety-palestinian-rcna148733#>.

ⁱⁱⁱ “Calls for intifada at Michigan ‘particularly triggering’: Hillel Leader,” *News Nation Now*, <https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=Fiy1NMI-U2Y>.

^{iv} Bret Stephens, “To Be (Visibly) Jewish in the Ivy League,” *The New York Times*, April 23, 2024, <https://www.nytimes.com/2024/04/23/opinion/university-jewish-antisemitism-ivy.html>.

^v Ron Liebowitz, President of Brandeis University, letter to the Brandeis Community, April 22, 2024, <https://www.brandeis.edu/president/letters/2024-4-22-extending-transfer-application-deadline.html>.

^{vi} Matthew Robinson, “Pro-Palestinian Protestors Claim Win Over One College’s Ties to Israel,” *Newsweek*, April 25, 2024,

^{vii} Micah 4:3-4.