

Shabbat Kedoshim 5784 - Campus protests
Rabbi Alex Freedman

Shabbat Shalom.

The past 7 months since October 7th have been excruciating for those of us who love and support Israel. But the last 4 weeks have been doubly painful for Jewish Americans - and triply painful for Jewish American college students - because of the alarming wave of pro-Palestinian encampments and demonstrations across American universities. To date, about 2800 students and others across the US have been arrested for participating in dozens of these. Protesters gather in the name of ending the war in Gaza, but in doing so they are making American Jewish college students deeply afraid for their own safety.

Today I want to share a number of different perspectives on this burning issue, ranging from on campus, to national journalists, to Israeli thought leaders. And I want to begin with Bari Weiss, a Jewish journalist.

In her podcast "Honestly," Bari spoke shortly after the first encampments went up: *"For a second, I want you to imagine a scenario in which black students at Columbia were taunted, "go back to Africa." For a second, I want you to imagine that a gay student at Yale was surrounded by homophobic protesters, and she was hit in the eye with a flagpole by one of them. Imagine if a campus imam told Muslim students that they ought to head home for Ramadan because campus public safety simply could not guarantee their security. There would be relentless fury from the media and condemnation from politicians. This weekend at Columbia and Yale, student protesters did all the above, only it was directed at Jews."*

Bari is correct in that there is a double standard. It seems to be different with the Jews. To be sure, the Jewish community has many allies in the non-Jewish world: friends, neighbors, and politicians. And we are and should always be deeply grateful for their support. We must never convey that *all* non-Jews are against us, for that is false and harmful. But we cannot delude ourselves in thinking that everybody else embraces us, for that is emphatically not true either. No college student, of any background, should ever feel unsafe on campus for being themselves, period. We Jews are not asking for special treatment for Jewish students, just the same protections as everybody else. Nothing more and nothing less. But in this fraught moment, that is simply not happening.

This wave of Jewish students feeling unsafe at school is happening as we speak, even in our own backyard in Chicago. Ellie Goldsmith is a junior at Northwestern, and she grew up here at Beth El. As many of us know her well, and as Northwestern is just 25 minutes away, I asked her to share her front-row perspective as to what it's like being a Jewish college student there today.

In the past month or so, I've felt less safe than ever to be a Jewish college student. As I am sure many of you have seen, students who intend to protest for the lives of Palestinian people have turned to violent anti-Zionist and – much worse – antisemitic rhetoric to get their points across. I never imagined that I would have to avoid certain areas on campus or worry about my safety simply because I'm Jewish. On my way to class, I saw signs proclaiming "Zionism is racism," portraying our Jewish University President with horns, and the Star of David with a giant red X through it. Graffiti read "Death to Israel," and chants of "Long live the Intifada" and "Zionism has got to go!" echoed day and night. Someone even wore a Hamas shirt at the protest. Administrators then came to an agreement with protestors, negotiating with students who just spent 5 days spewing antisemitic slogans in the face of students. Regardless of one's Jewish identity or stance on Israel, these protests are alarming, intimidating, and have no place on any college campus. They're not pro-peace or pro-Palestine; they're anti-Jewish. They're dangerous and targeted, and we must work together to stop them.

I'm deeply disappointed in Northwestern's response and President Schill's decision to negotiate with the protesters, sending a troubling message that antisemitism and hate are acceptable at Northwestern, even welcomed. Additionally, this sets a dangerous precedent that violent disruptions on campus result in getting what you want. Jewish students feel more unsafe than ever. Change is imperative and it must start now. I urge everyone to use their voice and stand up for what's right. Antisemitism has no place on college campuses, and as students, we need everyone's support and help. I hope for better times ahead and peace for all. Shabbat Shalom.

Thanks so much, Ellie. We are all in your corner.

I wrote to Northwestern Hillel director Michael Simon to ask his perspective as well. He adds that: "We are here, and we're not going anywhere, and we are determined to continue working with our University to ensure that it is a place where all Jewish students – and everyone – ...can be their full selves without fear of harassment, threat, and intimidation. And we will work toward that with strength, resilience, and compassion." I love that attitude.

It is appalling to know that Ellie's experience is not an isolated case, but is shared by so many Jewish students across the country in 2024. Not all, perhaps not even most, but

still far too many. Even one student is far too many. I want to pause to say that what's happening at these encampments is not always simple to label. Different Jewish students in different places are having different experiences. Different campuses have different cultures and responses. At these demonstrations, not all protesters are the same or share the same motivations. Yossi Klein Halevi of Jerusalem picks up on this. He writes: "Many, perhaps most, of the campus protesters are likely not antisemitic. They may have Jewish friends or be Jewish themselves. But that is irrelevant: They are enabling an antisemitic moment."

Not every sign must be anti-semitic; not every protester must consciously hate Jews; not every chant must call for the end of Israel for this to be, as Yossi says "enabling an anti-semitic moment." Or, a *platform* for anti-Semitism.

But in far, far, far too many cases, we *do* see protesters calling for the end of Israel. We see protesters being hostile to Jewish students who are not pro-palestinian. We see protesters instilling fear in Jewish students simply for being Jewish. All that is completely unacceptable. There is enough Anti-Semitism at these gatherings - even a little is far too much - that not everybody and every message has to identify as such. The effect on Jewish students is the same. The danger is still the same. If an apple has one brown spot in it, we tend to scoop it out and eat the rest. But if an apple has lots of mealy patches, even if there are some good bites, we throw out the apple and call it rotten.

Bret Stephens wrote something this week in the New York Times that had me nodding my head. Here is Bret: *"I'm all for free speech on campus, including speech I dislike or despise. I'm not for students flouting reasonable restrictions on the time, place and manner of their protests. Or for them seizing, defacing and trashing buildings. Or disrupting normal campus life and commencements and forcing the cancellation of classes. Or blocking other students from walking through campus or clashing with counter-protesters. Or accepting dubious outsiders into their protests. Or ignoring deadlines by the university administrators that ultimately lead to the cops being forced to deal with the unrest. And I'm definitely not for them creating an atmosphere in which so many Jewish students — most of whom surely identify as Zionists, at least insofar as they believe the Jewish state has the right to exist — report feeling threatened and harassed."* With his words, he proves why these protests and encampments are not truly about free speech. That so many universities called in the police to break up these encampments - always after multiple warnings - also proves free speech is not the issue. Even the University of Chicago, which takes great pride in allowing free speech to the maximum extent.

Seeing photos of these protests and reading the poster messages have raised a number of questions in my mind: Where are the protester signs saying “Pro-Palestinian and anti-Hamas”? “Pro Palestinian and pro-two-state solution”? Pro-Palestinian and I demand the hostages be freed”? There's a chance there are some individuals somewhere holding up one of those posters, but we all know it's either very few or none at all. Those posters and chants that say: “Free Gaza, Free Palestine”: most of these are not people calling for a Palestinian state *next to* a Jewish state of Israel, but one that erases the Jewish state entirely.

So what do we do now? Ellie called on us to use our voices and stand up for what's right, and I want to share my thoughts on how to do this:

First, don't label everything as Anti-Semitic. What's happening now is more complicated than that. Not everybody participating is antisemitic, not every poster is either, and it undermines the fight against *real* anti-Semitism when the word is used incorrectly. The ADL knows best, so let's follow their lead on when to call something anti-semitic.

Second, when making Israel's case, don't yell. Doing so - either in a conversation with someone or writing an article or post with an aggressive tone - doesn't convince anybody. Yelling also makes others tune out. Use a reasonable tone of voice to make your points.

Third, absolutely don't use violence. The pro-Gaza encampment at UCLA was shameful, but so was the physically violent response by Israel-supporting counter-protesters. That's never okay, even when the cause is right. I know nobody here would do that, but I want you to hear me calling out violence by Jews wherever it happens as dead wrong.

And now I have a few action steps *to do*. First, do continue to learn about what's happening in Israel now, as well as the totality of Israel's history. This learning takes a real investment of time, but only through the slow, deliberate understanding of how and why Israel came to be can we advocate for it best. There are no shortcuts here.

Second, do support Jewish students on campus. Hillel comes to mind first, and consider donating to your alma mater's Hillel so they can provide today's Jewish college students with what they need now.

Third, do write to your alma mater. Especially if you have donated to them, you have standing as an alum. Write to them and applaud them if you found their response to these protests admirable. And write to them to criticize if you found their response

inadequate. If you feel moved to halt donations to your university, consider giving it to the school's Hillel instead. And if you went to a university that entered into an agreement with the anti-Israel protesters, like Northwestern, be in touch with them in the months to come. Tell them that you are watching.

Finally, do report anti-Semitism if you see it. Unfortunately, these protests have reignited textbook anti-Semitism in many places, and if you see any, report it.

How does all this look like from Israel itself? These protests have *dominated* the news over there even during the war. Alex Sinclair, an Israeli scholar who spoke here a few weeks ago, shared that there are serious implications to these encampments and protests, even beyond making some Jewish students feel unsafe. With all the talk about divestment from Israel, “the financial implications for Israel of colleges divesting would be minimal. But long term, if these people [on campus] are the future leaders of American society, then the danger is massive.”

The anti Israel protesters on campus today, we probably cannot change their minds. But we can each do something to make Jewish students on campus feel safe to be Jewish.

But not feeling scared to be Jewish is the *minimum*, and it's frightening that that's where we are in 2024. Each of us has a role to play in raising *future* Jewish college students to be proud to be Jewish. I'm speaking about today's Jewish teenagers and Jewish children. It's on *us* to share with them why being Jewish is important to *us*. Not merely because some people are *against* us, but because these young people are part of a grand story, the story of our people, which is worth celebrating and taking immense pride. And Israel is a big part of that. That's a key point in the open letter signed by 540 Jewish Columbia students this week.

But Israel's cause, its reason for being - *that* is under attack at the moment in too many places. We must recall it and share it with others - especially Jewish teenagers and children. We all know the words by heart, in Hebrew even. *Lihyot Am Hofshi B'artzeinu, Eretz Zion Yerushalayim*. To be a free nation in our land, the land of Zion and Jerusalem. Nothing more and nothing less.

Shabbat Shalom.

(TY Ellie...If you want to talk to Ellie, she will be around at Kiddush)