

# Open letter to US rabbinical schools leaders: Don't justify terrorism

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**They are unfit for roles of rabbinic or cantorial leadership, and siding with terrorists and frame Israel's self-defense as acts of "racist violence" is one of them.**

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'SERVICE OF the heart': IDF soldiers pray near the Gaza border.

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As Hamas rockets pour down on millions of our brothers and sisters in Israel, we are dismayed that over 100 rabbinical students at your institutions have chosen to issue a statement, "Rabbinical and Cantorial Students Appeal to the Heart of the Jewish Community," in which they side with terrorists and frame Israel's self-defense as acts of "racist violence."

We call on you, the heads of the Reconstructionist Rabbinical College, Hebrew College, Hebrew Union College—Jewish Institute of Religion, Ziegler School of Rabbinic Studies, Hadar Advanced Kollel, Jewish Theological Seminary, ALEPH, and the Academy for Jewish Religion California, to expel the signatories to the statement. They are unfit for roles of rabbinic or cantorial leadership.

It goes without saying that the Diaspora Jewish community is diverse. We subscribe to various political outlooks and have our theological differences. We engage in robust debate about issues affecting our communities at home and abroad. And while we all care strongly about Israel, we have distinct visions for her future. Such debate is the cornerstone of Jewish scholarship and tradition. It has kept our nation creative, vibrant, and alive for millennia.

Yet every debate has its boundaries. None of you would tolerate a student invoking a racial slur or violating your code of ethics. Indeed, your institutions claim to promote an ethos of intellectual, spiritual, and professional excellence in light of timeless Jewish values of scholarship, commitment and compassion. It is incumbent on you to uphold these values against those students who by their actions have chosen to display prejudice and callousness.

We call on you not to tolerate what amounts to treason against the Jewish people at a time of war. We shudder at the thought that in a year's time, 100 congregations and thousands of Jews, looking for guidance in these turbulent times, will be led by such misguided individuals. In the students' minds, Israel is a perpetrator of "racist violence" against Palestinians and deserves to be targeted by terrorists. Without mentioning Hamas or Palestinians, the signatories see the "escalation of violence" as "a part of the same dehumanizing status quo," supposedly committed by Israel. Never do they mention aspirations and goals of Hamas – the eradication of Israel and the genocide of Jews worldwide, even themselves! – as outlined in the Hamas Charter. BY DENYING the realities of Israeli suffering, the signatories dehumanize Israelis and afflict pain on the millions of people around the world, Jews and non-Jews, who sympathize with Israel's plight. This amounts to justification of terrorism and violence.

In the entire two-page statement, the signatories have not devoted a single sentence to acknowledging the plight of millions of Israelis showered by more than 4,000 Hamas rockets, the 5,000 innocent Jews stoned in their cars by Arab rioters, the 700 Jewish homes burned and looted, and the 10 synagogues torched.

Where is their empathy? While claiming to empathize with the Palestinian cause, they have no empathy for two million Gazans living under a dictatorship or the 20 Gazans killed over the past week by Hamas rockets falling inside the Gaza Strip. Their hearts are devoid of any empathy for five-year-old Ido Avigayil, killed by rocket shrapnel, or for wheel-chair-bound Gershon Franko, who died, unable to access a bomb shelter. In your students' worldview, lynch victims like Yigal Yehoshua (killed when a rock broke his skull) and Elad Barzilai, who still struggles for his life after trying to save his students from the mob, are just collateral damage of Israel's own persecution of Palestinians. Ever heard of blaming the victim?

Finally, the signatories claim to follow the injunction of Micah (6:8), "to act justly and to love mercy and to walk humbly with our God." This is a misplaced proclamation for a document dripping with lack of justice in failing to acknowledge the Jewish narrative in the Land of Israel and de facto denying Israel's right to exist, while framing her as a people encroaching on a land "full of human beings who didn't ask for new neighbors."

We, therefore, once again call upon you to remove these students from your institutions and not honor them with rabbinic or cantorial ordination. If the integrity of your institutions is dear to you, if Jewish unity is a value you uphold, if the future of our communities matters, these students have no right to leadership.

American Jewry and our Israeli brothers and sisters deserve better than that.

*Dr. Irving Lebovics is co-chairman of Am Echad, an organization uniting Jews from across the Diaspora and Israel around the shared goals of preserving our 3,000-year-old heritage, upholding Jewish interests around the world, and deepening cooperation among our communities.*