

Remarks at Moriah Congregation Deerfield

by Elan Karoll on July 14th, 2018

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Shabbat Shalom. Thank you Rabbi Kramer for asking me to speak this Shabbat morning. My nickname on Birthright was actually Rabbi. The other students called me Rabbi Karoll. I received this unexpected nickname because I was the only student who could lead Shabbat services. I led Shacharit and helped conduct the Bnei Mitzvahs of five fellow students. We called them to the Torah for their first aliyah. We gave them Hebrew names. We even presented them little gifts from Ben Yehuda Street. It is one of my favorite memories from Birthright.

Some of you may have seen Birthright in the news lately. Three weeks ago, a Birthright trip was derailed by a far left wing Jewish organization called IfNotNow. I am going to come back to this story, and explain what happened, later on.

But first, a different story, a personal story.

This past March, most of my fellow students at the University of Illinois were studying for midterm exams. I was helping to organize a counter campaign against BDS. For the second year in a row, anti-Israel groups had introduced a BDS referendum to the student body. Over a 48 hour period, all 44,000 students on the Urbana-Champaign campus could vote, yes or no, to divest the university's funds from Israel.

Our anti-BDS campaign began a month earlier. We developed strategy, messaging, marketing, and planned events. Almost 100 brave students, Jewish and not Jewish, stepped up to help our efforts. I am so thankful for them.

March 8th, 10:00pm; two hours remain for voting. I have slept 4 hours in the past two days. I was running on coffee, pizza, and adrenaline. For our final push, I joined a few other volunteers

to canvas outside the local bars. We met students waiting in line to get drinks and talked to them about BDS. We worked the bar lines until nearly midnight.

At the end of the night, we started walking back to our makeshift headquarters to celebrate the end of the campaign. A red compact car seemed to be following us. Someone said they saw a camera flash from the car window. Out of caution, we ducked inside a coffee shop for a few minutes, then continued walking.

Moments later, a man appeared in front of us. Young-looking. Wearing a red hoodie. "You two go that way," I told the other students, pointing south, "you three come with me," I said to the others. We split up and began jogging. He threatened us and followed us.

Pro-Israel student leaders today receive training to deal with these types of situations. I am thankful for that training. Everyone kept calm. I dialed 911. The other students filmed on their phones for documentation.

Campus police responded within two minutes. Our stalker ran off when he saw the lights and sirens. He was not caught that night, although we did identify him from the video. He is a former Illinois student and member of Students for Justice in Palestine, known as SJP, the leading anti-Israel student group in North America. He was back on campus to lead their BDS efforts.

Spoiler alert: we defeated BDS by a 2-to-1 margin with over 3,100 votes.

But how did SJP know where to find us? How did they follow us?

Our campaign had a master schedule of the locations and times of our activities. It listed exactly where our volunteers would be and when. Trusted student received copies of this document so they could help our efforts.

What we did not know was that two students had sent that master schedule to the leaders of BDS. Thereby putting our personal safety, and our campaign, at risk. By the way, it was two Jewish students did this.

This is what I am here to speak about. We know that BDS hurts our campus communities. You have heard that speech before. However, there is a new, ever bigger threat: the co-opting of social-justice-minded Jewish college students to carry out the anti-Israel agenda on campus.

Now, back to Birthright. One month ago, five normal-seeming Jewish girls left with about 30 of their peers for a free trip to Israel. Most of the students went on Birthright to pray at the Western Wall, eat falafel, hike Masada, and dance in Tel Aviv.

These five girls went on Birthright with a different agenda. From day one, they attempted to disrupt speakers and feed misinformation to other participants. On the trip's final day, the five girls staged a public protest and left the group. They met up with an Israeli organization called Breaking the Silence, composed of ex-IDF soldiers who, quote, "speak out against Israeli war crimes." Together, they toured Hebron to witness, in their words, "the Israeli apartheid."

This was all streamed live on Facebook to hundreds of thousands of viewers. The girls gave statements to the international press. They said they left Birthright because of its, quote, "radical political agenda" to "whitewash the Israeli occupation."

Those five girls belong to a fast-growing organization called IfNotNow. This stunt is part of the organization's new campaign against Birthright called "Not Just a Free Trip."

IfNotNow began in 2014. Their stated mission is to end American Jewish institutions' support for Israel, to force Israel to withdraw from the entire West Bank, and to free Palestinian prisoners. They call themselves, quote, "the new future" of American Jewry.

Many of their founders were former leaders in the Open Hillel movement, which seeks to end Hillel International's support for Israel.

IfNotNow's name is a perversion of the famous passage by Hillel in Pirkei Avot: "If I am not for myself, who will be for me? If I am only for myself, what am I? And IfNotNow, when?"

Their first campaign involved crashing conventions of major Jewish and pro-Israel organization. After gaining entry, IfNotNow proceeded to recite the Mourners Kadish on behalf of Palestinians. Next, they went after Jewish elementary and high schools for teaching Zionism. Their anti-Birthright campaign, "Not Just a Free Trip," is their latest effort. They are actively recruiting more young Jews to disrupt even more trips. They are also intercepting Birthright groups in Israel to distribute flyers which call upon participants to cause disruptions.

IfNotNow's newest target is Jewish summer camps. They are training counselors to teach anti-Zionism to the young campers. Their goal is to hit Camp Ramah, Young Judea, Habonim Dror, and Bnei Akiva camps. Some of you connected with Ramah Wisconsin may be aware of their ongoing mass email campaign against the camp.

To understand why and how this is happening, we must first understand the history of the anti-Israel campus movement.

In the 1970s, small student clubs of mostly Arab students began pushing Palestinian Nationalism. In the past two decades, those clubs have grown significantly in size and funding.

The first BDS vote was held in April 2003 at Wayne State University in Michigan. It passed. To build off this success, the anti-Israel movement realized they needed help. To run campus-wide BDS campaigns, they needed more students in support. So they expanded.

They formed and joined coalitions of minority and progressive causes on campus. This phenomenon, known as intersectionality, is based on the philosophy that oppressed groups must unite against empowered groups. Through a quid-pro-quo system of support, anti-Israel forces multiplied in numbers. They have launched over one hundred BDS campaigns in the past 10 years.

The most successful counter-argument against BDS on campus in recent years has been that BDS is anti-Semitic. "How can we get around this problem," the anti-Israel movement asked themselves? Their creative solution is to use a tiny minority of Jews to speak loudly in support of BDS, to whitewash the anti-Semitism of groups like SJP, and to claim that Jewish institutions like Hillel and Chabad do not represent them. This is the new phase of anti-Israel on campus.

There were 22 BDS campaigns at U.S. universities this past year. The majority were sponsored or co-sponsored by groups claiming to represent Jews, like IfNotNow. The majority of these BDS votes passed.

So, who are these young, Jewish anti-Israel activists? They are progressive minded and care about social justice. Some of them believe they are doing the right thing to help Palestinians, who are in legitimate need of help. Some of them know the larger agenda and are fully complicit. Regardless, they either stumble upon these anti-Israel groups or are intentionally recruited for their inside knowledge of the Jewish community. They are offered comfortable lies and a community of like-minded peers. They are propagandized and ultimately used as political pawns in a larger chessboard that is the global anti-Israel alliance.

You may think that these young people are few and fringe. However, many of them actually come from strong Jewish backgrounds. Many come from our own community. In fact, one of the top IfNotNow activists in Chicago is my former classmate at Solomon Schechter and Chicagoland Jewish High School. She was also a counselor at Camp Ramah.

The leaking of our anti-BDS campaign materials, the hijacking of a Birthright trip, and the new trend of whitewashing campus anti-Semitism are just a few examples of this dangerous phenomenon. The co-opting of young, liberal Jews is happening across the country and this is just the beginning.

The greatest strength of the Jewish People is our unity. Anti-Israel forces know this, so they try to drive a wedge between us. This is why the threat is existential.

The question now is what can we do. In my mind, the problem stems from a crisis of Jewish identity among young American Jews. According to the latest figures from Pew Research, only 33% of American Jews aged 18-29 years old say that "it is very important for them to be Jewish." For the same age group, only 55% say that they "feel any attachment" to Israel.

After three plus years of leading the fight against this trend on my campus, here are five strategies that I have found actually work.

One, we need to bridge the gap between high school and college. High school students must be taught about the climate of anti-Semitism and anti-Israel hostility that exists on most college campuses. They must be equipped with basic tools to confront these issues. Most importantly, they must be connected with Jewish resources on campus before move-in day.

Two, much more engagement. The fact is, Jewish and pro-Israel groups on campus are only reaching a small percentage of the Jewish students. There are 3,500 Jewish students at the University of Illinois. Our Hillel and Chabad will host about 200 students, combined, for Friday night dinner. That is 5%, and we are considered a leading campus.

Three, empower students to be leaders. I have served on the executive board of IlliniPAC for three years. We are consistently recognized as one of the top pro-Israel student organizations in the country. How are we so successful? We give our members responsibility, resources and

lots of encouragement. They accomplish amazing things.

Four, update to the 21st century. Traditional Jewish institutions in the campus space are not using the right tools to reach millennials. I am talking about social media and video. We are way behind in this space.

Five, a grassroots approach. Students are the solution. We cannot depend on Hillel staff and Chabad Rabbis alone to solve this problem. We need more strong Jewish student leaders on campus to lead the charge. We also need more progressive voices for Israel.

How do I know this works? I will conclude with a short, final story. Back to my Birthright trip, I met a girl named Irene. She had never been to Israel before. She knew no Hebrew. She grew up in an area with few Jews. She had a limited Jewish education.

Irene was one of the most engaged and enthusiastic students on my whole trip. I could see it in her eyes: Israel ignited in her a passion for Judaism. She had the potential to be a great leader in our community. I decided, when we returned to campus, to help her do just that.

The next semester, Irene joined IlliniPAC executive board. The semester following, she ran for Hillel President, and won. She has made such a huge impact with her leadership and I am so proud of her. She is one of my best friends in the world. She is also my roommate this year, which is pretty cool. She is the success story.

So here is my final call to action. Parents, your students are the solution. You have blessed them with a strong Jewish foundation. Now, help them become the Jewish leaders on campus and beyond that you know they can be. Our future depends on it.