

# “ ‘Twas the Best of Times, ‘Twas the Worst of Times”: Antisemitism, Israel and the Politics of Resentment

CHAIM SEIDLER-FELLER

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Friday nights at UCLA Hillel have developed a reputation for being joyous, celebratory spiritual and social occasions and are usually attended by 125–250 students representing all denominations, as well as the faithless. There are even some non-Jewish students who regularly join in the warm and inviting dinner environment. But one particular Shabbat in November 2018 was different. Coming as it did on the heels of the broadly politicized national conference of Students for Justice in Palestine (SJP) that was held at UCLA, it was an unusually poignant evening. The conference had garnered inordinate attention due to the scheduled appearance of some especially offensive speakers known for their inflammatory anti-Israel/Zionist/Jewish rhetoric, to SJP’s role as the main sponsor and promulgator of the Boycott, Divestment and Sanctions (BDS) campaign on campus, and to the protestations of a variety of Jewish groups demanding that the proceedings be canceled. Even though the SJP gathering passed without incident, campus tensions had mounted and many Jewishly involved students felt battered. There was a palpable desire and need for a comforting Shabbat experience.

And indeed Hillel rose to the occasion by inviting a special guest, UCLA’s chancellor, who made it a priority to attend Shabbat services, together with his wife, and to speak at the dinner that followed. The chancellor was explicit and firm in his condemnation of BDS and of the hateful discourse of many of its supporters, as well as in his affirmation of the university’s commitment to sustaining its numerous cooperative endeavors with Israel’s institutions of higher learning.

He also made it clear that UCLA was not a sponsor of the conference, but it had no right to call off the gathering. The chancellor, himself an identified Jew, was standing with the university's Jewish students in their moment of vulnerability and offering them, through his presence, a healing and calming message of personal concern and solidarity. Yes, Jewish students had felt victimized and delegitimized, but their academic base, UCLA, revealed itself to be their home.

This narrative exquisitely captures the essential paradox of the contemporary Jewish experience on campus. On the one hand, no less than the chancellor of the university offered his public backing and validation. On the other hand, the Jewish students felt that SJP's success at sustaining its political assault on Israel and Zionism in the form of the conference was in and of itself demeaning and delegitimizing, constituting an attack on their Jewish identity and integrity. In a word, at UCLA, Jewish students had power and influence, but, at the same time, they still suffered as victims. And this is the complex reality of Jewish life at the best universities all over the country.

Some years ago, I published an article entitled "A Jewish Golden Age on Campus" (Seidler-Feller, 2012). I stand by the basic argument of that piece, wherein I asserted that, judging by any objective criteria, it has never been better for Jews at the university. Rather than being overwhelmed by darkness, we are actually basking in the light, and we haven't even paused to take notice. Here are some leading indicators of this collegiate Jewish efflorescence:

- There are today more Jewish students attending Ivy League universities, including schools that formerly employed admissions quotas, than at any other time in history.
- There is a preponderance of Jewish academics—approximately 20% of the faculty—at the most prestigious universities.
- Jewish administrators are ubiquitous, serving as deans, department chairs, and provosts in unprecedented numbers. And over the past twenty-five years, Jewish chancellors and presidents have become so common that almost every leading school has had at least one.
- Well-endowed Jewish Studies centers abound at the Universities of Washington, Michigan, Pennsylvania, Maryland, UCLA, Harvard, Yale, Stanford, and many other institutions, offering hundreds of courses ranging from Hebrew language to Jewish philosophy, Holocaust history, Jewish musicology, and American Jewish literature to Kabbalah.
- Newly established programs in Israel Studies have been inaugurated at more than fifteen universities, including UCLA, NYU, and Ohio State. They offer courses on the history and politics of Israel, Zionism, Israeli culture, and the Arab-Israeli conflict. They may constitute the most effective

vehicles for firmly and vigorously sustaining Israel's legitimacy in the academic world.

- Kosher food programs proliferate on campuses as diverse as Stanford, Oberlin, and the University of Vermont.
- Increasingly, Jewish student leaders are actively involved in campus politics and are serving in student government. At UCLA, for example, seven of the last ten student body presidents have been Jewish.
- Orthodox students have become a growing presence at many universities as the Jewish Learning Initiative on Campus, a joint project of the Orthodox Union and Hillel, sponsors daily *minyanim* (services), *havruta* learning (study partners), and regular *shiurim* (classes).
- Jewish donors are among the leading contributors to universities, endowing chairs and research institutes, dedicating campus buildings, and serving on the boards of the institutions that shaped and educated them. They are considered to be the most dedicated cohort of alumni.
- Since 1994, more than seventy-five new Hillel facilities have been built at Columbia, Brown, Stanford, Emory, NYU, Tulane, Northwestern, University of Chicago, University of Pennsylvania, Harvard, Yale, and UCLA, among others. And these are brimming with activity, with the best Hillels boasting that they have doubled or tripled the number of Jewish students involved in meaningful Jewish experiences.

The above reality is a most poignant expression of the incredible story of Jewish achievement in America, of our rootedness in American society, of our commitment to higher education and to the American university, and of our ability to generate a vibrant Jewish life at the intellectual crossroads of contemporary civilization.

At the same time, as is evident from the numerous accounts of confrontations between pro-Israel Jewish students and their detractors on a wide variety of campuses, all is not well in the academy. This was not always the case. Throughout the sixties and continuing into the seventies, Israel was viewed as a wellspring of liberal democracy struggling to establish a secure and self-sustaining home for a historically persecuted minority—all this despite an ongoing occupation, in large part because it was depicted as benign and understood to be temporary. Then, in 1982, following the Israeli invasion of Lebanon—the first war of choice to be fought by the Israel Defense Forces, which included the bombing of Beirut and abetment of the massacre of Palestinians in the Sabra and Shatila refugee camps—the perception of Israel was transformed from a beleaguered state surrounded by intransigent enemies intent upon its destruction into a powerful aggressor and killer of innocents. This judgment, shared by opponents of the Jewish state and

many of its Jewish supporters alike, has only intensified as the occupation of the Palestinians has morphed into the status quo.

On campus, this First Lebanon War brought about a radical change in political alignments whose effects can still be felt today. At UCLA, in particular, prior to Fall 1982 when Prime Minister of Israel Menachem Begin visited Los Angeles, all ethnic minorities, including the Jews, constituted a united front that ran candidates for student government as a bloc. However, during the prime minister's fateful visit, Palestinian students on campus organized a major anti-Israel rally in front of the Student Union. While Jewish activists looked on from their window perches in dismay, all of their erstwhile allies—Latinos, African Americans, Asians, Native Americans, etc.—lined up to join in the public denunciation of Israel. They watched as a political structure that had been painstakingly built over fifteen years crumbled before their eyes. I was personally horrified, jolted by what I realized was a watershed in intergroup relations at UCLA. Campus politics were unilaterally transformed that day on Bruin Walk. As a consequence, Jewish students seeking new allies forged strong ties with the fraternities and sororities. These were the selfsame institutions that had in the past discriminated against Jews, excluding them from membership. Now, the Jews were welcomed as brothers and sisters in the campus struggle for dominance. This move paralleled an earlier break within the Left and between Jews and Blacks following the Six Day War and the rise of the Black Power movement. A conviction was developing, in light of the Middle East reality and the shifting political alignment in the US, that Jews were no longer powerless victims but were, on the contrary, powerful victimizers. This conviction is key to understanding what has played out on campus and, increasingly, within the national Democratic Party over the last generation.

An additional, related factor of major import was that over the past decades the Jews had become "white folks" (Brodkin, 1998). Jews as individuals were gradually accepted into the previously forbidden quarters of exclusive clubs, into all professions at the highest levels, and into the families of the white American elite. As they gained status and eventually emerged to become the most affluent community in the US, they also acquired power and influence. No longer outsiders, Jews evolved into a pillar of the American establishment. This is, by any measure, an amazing American success story.

But there were costs to this metamorphosis. As they accustomed themselves to being categorized as part of the white majority, Jews began to lose their sense of ethnic particularity and distinctiveness, and the glue that had held them together as a collective degraded and broke down. They were now Americans of Jewish ancestry: secure, wealthy, and mainstream, but still manifesting a liberal worldview and actively endorsing a liberal agenda. Overall, Jews enjoyed their new

status and embraced it, as evidenced by the soaring intermarriage rate from the sixties to present.

However, on campus this change created significant problems and generated a major split. On the one side were all the groups with whom Jewish students had formerly been in coalition, those who defined themselves as the victims of mainstream white oppression. And now, on the other, stood the Jews and their newfound establishment partners who together were depicted as the privileged white oppressor class. This was quite a shocking journey for the bewildered Jewish students.

Concurrently, an even more insidious process was taking root at the administrative level. In the eighties, a growing awareness developed that the demographics of the American population were yielding a more diverse society. In response, the university—which had in the past always championed the universal in culture and identity and, therefore, actively discouraged segregation into separate social, religious, and ethnic groups—now acknowledged that this outlook involved a denial of legitimate self-expression and asserted that by seriously considering cultural difference, the community as a whole would benefit from a newly articulated multicultural worldview. In effect, the university's effort at compensating and atoning for decades of neglect resulting from an unmitigated commitment to universalism was now promoting a tribal particularism in its place, heralding the multicultural era. What was insidious was that in the process of group particularization, Jews were officially defined as whites and, hence, excluded from consideration as a bona fide ethnic minority.

Already in 1991, when I proposed a session on the conflict between Blacks and Jews on campus for the annual academic conference on multiculturalism, I was informed that the session was rejected due to the fact that Jews no longer figured in the multicultural discourse. Only upon appeal, and with the support of a few UCLA colleagues, was my proposal eventually accepted. I came away from the experience with a pronounced awareness that universities across the country had invested extensive resources in the creation of a multicultural administrative infrastructure. The three thousand-odd conference attendees included many deans, vice chancellors, chairs of Ethnic Studies centers, directors of special minority services, as well as a smattering of professors, all of whom were employed as advocates for a broad-based multicultural agenda. They comprised the new establishment on campus.

There were, of course, numerous salutary components to this diversity project, such as programs devoted to minority retention, Cultural Studies courses and research concentrations, the explosive growth of Jewish and Gender Studies, a more variegated student population, diverse artistic exhibitions and dramatic performances, etc. All of the above, as well as the changes in traditional syllabi that now included subjects, literature, and personalities that had heretofore been

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neglected, promised to enrich the university's learning environment and to benefit the campus community as a whole.

However, there was one dimension to the enterprise that was troubling: the entrenchment of ethnic and gender groups organized on the basis of their status as oppressed minorities. This constituted a significant negative development in the otherwise largely positive mix and ushered in an era of identity politics with oppressive victimhood emerging both as a badge of honor that granted recognition and as a sword to wield against the new "others" who were designated as the oppressors (Lilla, 2017).

I call this *negative* because it meant that the identity of these historically oppressed student groups was mainly organized around their status as victims, around the hostility directed at them by others, and not around their own distinctive cultural traits and qualities. This robbed them of agency and damaged them psychologically—a self-inflicted wound. When I am I because you hate me, then I will naturally hate you. My victimhood pits me against you and results in a divisive campus environment of "them against us," with the Jews serving as prominent constituents of the evil "them." The campus, thus, stood deeply divided along ethnic fault lines. Moreover, this simplistic configuration flattens the complex nature of Jewish identity. For, although Jews in the US are generally no longer persecuted in the ways they once were and are arguably influential and powerful, they are still victims given the persistence of a vile antisemitism. And just as I would criticize Jewish students for failing to acknowledge their privilege and harping on the Holocaust and their history of victimhood, so, too, am I critical of those who refuse to recognize that one can simultaneously be a wielder of power and also a victim (the Jews) and that even though they (students of color) may be victims who are still struggling against oppressive societal forces they can still be victimizers.

In addition, what is completely lost when deploying the reigning 'victim' framework is the ideological incentive to pursue the common good for the community as a whole. The embrace of particularism by the university and the concomitant insistence on segregation in student political fora of the victims from the victimizers have generated a fractured climate that nurtures self-interest, zero-sum politics, and the absence of a motivating vision of unity and inclusivity. We have lost any sense of commonality that could bind the disparate groups into a community of shared interests. From a Jewish perspective, it is especially irksome that learning to live with the tension between the pursuit of the particular needs of one's community and the universal commitments to all others—a basic Jewish strategy—has not been adopted as an aspirational teaching on campus. As a communal goal, it could provide a means for overcoming the polarization that dominates the intergroup playing field while functioning as a common framework for a constructive discourse on identity.

What is most distressing about the current state of affairs is the seeming abandonment of the quintessentially American idea of pluralism that endorses and promotes distinctive ethnic expression as a contribution to the composite cultural fabric that constitutes our American identity. Rather than amplifying and supporting, or even just appreciating, the efforts of other groups to profess and celebrate their different commitments and focal points of identity, the competitive multiculturalism described above is manifest in the delegitimization of the other's self-expression and deeply-held beliefs. This exclusionary form of political multiculturalism is, in effect, absurdly counterposed to Horace Kallen's visionary cultural pluralism (Kallen, 1915).

In the particular Jewish case, that means propelling a regular barrage of attacks on Israel that questions its right to exist and casts Israel's supporters as racists, the most loathed human category on campus today. The intent is to delegitimize any Jewish claim to be considered victims of bigotry. This political position, lacking all nuance, is often accompanied and buttressed by the argument that the Jewish national program is itself spurious due to the "fact" that Judaism is a religion and that Jewish peoplehood is an invention of the Zionist ideologues who created Jewish nationalism. Unfortunately, this is the precise line of reasoning that underlies the platform of the BDS movement and serves as the ammunition that fuels the campus debate.

It should be apparent that the attempt by one group or coalition of groups to impose its self-serving definition of the other on its adversary is a grave violation of a foundational principle of multiculturalism: the right of each group to define itself. To the extent that this is indeed the thrust of the anti-Israel campaign, then it is a clear and vile example of antisemitism, denying Jews the right extended to all other groups and, ironically, the very right sought by Palestinians themselves (Myers, Seidler-Feller, & Ferdman, 2015).

How are we to understand the profound animosity directed at Jews? Why are the Jews seemingly singled out as reprobate?

In part, this reflects a bitterness due to a perception that now that Jews have transitioned from the status of the ultimate outsiders—a status that they once shared with their current detractors—to the consummate insiders, they have been corrupted by their wealth, by their close association with the social and political elite, and by their support for colonialist Israel, the oppressor of the Palestinians, and no longer empathize with and actively struggle on behalf of those who are disadvantaged. Consequently, the leadership of the "students of color" have concluded that they cannot trust that the Jews, who can pass as "white-ish" or even white, will act as genuine allies. **Therefore, Jewish students are rejected as coalition partners because they are Jews.**

Additionally, the source of some of the criticism is an outspoken cadre of Jewish students who have been alienated by the political stance of the pro-Israel

community and claim that they are the “real” Jews who are upholding Jewish ideals. While rejecting power as a Jewish value, they have prioritized the obligation to care for and love the stranger as supreme. The response of the rest of the Jewish community has been to stigmatize them as “self-hating” Jews. These students, in turn, behave like jilted lovers whose sense of betrayal is intense and virulent.

On a deeper level, the degree of hostility fostered by the pro-BDS forces—as exemplified by the following hysterical Facebook message posted by a past leader of the BDS initiative at UCLA: “The point is, if Let’s Act [the anti-Israel political coalition] does not win a bunch of conservative, privileged, date-rapey frat boys [the Jews] and their friends will repeal divestment”—is comprehensible as an expression of the “politics of resentment.” My contention is that the vehemence of the anti-Israel activism is largely a cover for the more insidious and personal envy and resentment that is the currency of the powerless and the marginalized. Precisely because it is so obviously the *best of times* for Jews, who had in the past suffered indignity and persecution, those who are still struggling against prejudice and discrimination and still seeking recognition are determined to make it the *worst of times*. It is the concrete display of Jewish national power by Israel in alliance with the ‘despised’ American superpower and the very fulfillment of Jewish dreams in the establishment and international recognition of the Jewish homeland—“they even have a state of their own”—as well as the stately architecture of the many imposing and well-endowed Hillel facilities that proliferate across the country, that arouse envy and the suspicion that the Jews, through their “connections,” have manipulated their way to the top. We are seen as dominating the university: “Just look at all the Jewish administrators in prominent positions of authority and control” (heard in student conversation). Hence, according to the perverse rules of the victim discourse, Jewish students have forfeited the right to claim that they are victims of antisemitism since they are now considered among the privileged. And all of the ‘genuine’ victims—the coalition of oppressed minorities, most of whom have no particular interest in the Israeli-Palestinian conflict—feel compelled by ‘intersectional’ logic and political alliance to denounce the “immoral and oppressive” actions of the Jewish state, because the latter is viewed as the ultimate symbol of excessive Jewish power.

This constitutes a hard psychological blow to the Jewish students and is intended to deflate and demoralize them. What’s worse is that, of late, these protests have been accompanied by hateful utterances, vulgar condemnations, and physical threats. This is indeed a worrisome development suggesting an unlikely linkage between the chant of the Charlottesville white supremacists—“Jews will not replace us”—and the unarticulated goal of the underrepresented campus minorities—“they (the Jews) must be replaced.” For the extremists on the right, the Jews are the champions of minority integration who breached the wall of white dominance and facilitated the election of an African American to the

presidency (Ward, 2017), while for the leadership of the minority alliance on campus, the Jews are the embodiment of entrenched white power. This situation should raise red flags for student life deans who ought to be concerned about the growing and more vocal intergroup hostility that may, following graduation, migrate from the campus into the community and could, under extreme circumstances, result in acts of violence. They must seriously consider whether the campus is becoming a breeding ground for ongoing political conflict and enmity and, if so, what the university can do now to address the issue and defuse the animosity while promoting coexistence.

A window onto the dynamic exhibited by the "campus wars" is provided by a study conducted by a group of social psychologists utilizing the stereotype content model (SCM) and the behaviors from the intergroup affect and stereotypes (BIAS) map. The analysis is grounded in the interplay of two emotional and behavioral variables: warmth and competence. Groups like Jews and Asians, who are perceived to be cold (competitive, judgmental, self-serving, cunning, and manipulative) but competent (capable, skillful, intelligent, creative, knowledgeable, ingenious), are, during periods of diminishing resources, resented for allegedly controlling the assets that others want and need. They are envied for their accomplishments and elicit anger for purportedly not sharing cooperatively. In the worst of circumstances, under extreme social breakdown, they are scapegoated and then subjected to attack and violence (Cuddy, Fiske, & Glick, 2008).

As someone who is generally reluctant to blithely exploit the charge of antisemitism, who portrays the chorus that so freely and hysterically yells "Antisemitism!" as Jews who have embraced antisemitism as their new religion, who also considers the threat of BDS to be exaggerated, and who has consistently asserted that Jewish student life is flourishing within a supportive campus environment, I am uncharacteristically troubled and worried by the increasingly widespread reports of ugly incidents that substantiate the "politics of resentment" theory outlined above.

What, then, can be done? How shall campus administrators and Jewish students and leaders respond?

Herewith, five brief suggestions that deserve further elaboration and consideration:

1. Every major university has research faculty working in the area of conflict resolution, some of whom are sought after as consultants around the world. It is time for university administrators to make dealing with their campus conflicts a priority and to call together social psychologists and experts in conflict resolution to work on a program that would address the hatred and hostility in their midst.

2. Hillel and AIPAC, as the most prominent Israel advocates on campus, ought to encourage pro-Israel students to proclaim their unmitigated opposition to the occupation while affirming the right of both Jews and Palestinians to self-determination in their own independent states. Jewish students should seek to partner with Palestinians in promoting this position, which has been termed the “Third Narrative.” It is the most moral and attractive stance and will be perceived as such by neutral third-party campus bystanders who always favor a proposal that aims at achieving a positive outcome. It also has the potential to neutralize the resentment occasioned by non-recognition.
3. On the subject of partnering, Jewish students must make every effort to rebuild coalitions with the very ethnic groups from whom they have been alienated and demonstrate a commitment to working with them on their agenda.
4. Campus professionals and administrators ought to make it clear to community Israel advocates that their countrywide initiative to enact legislation against BDS in state legislatures and in Congress is ineffective and actually counterproductive (Nathan-Kazis, 2018). Each successful passage of such legislation merely serves to reinforce the common perception regarding the Jewish abuse of power. In general, self-congratulating advocacy groups pose a hindrance to the efforts to resolve the student conflict and espouse a program that actually perpetuates the political tensions on campus.
5. Universities ought to organize a task force to evaluate the proposition regarding the divisive impact of the victim discourse. They could then develop an educational framework that promotes a ‘constructive victimology’ which, while recognizing the real lingering effects of oppression, utilizes that very experience to generate a positive and more transcendent and inclusive agenda.

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Years ago, when a group of Arab students proposed a resolution that was critical of Israel to the UCLA student government, the president of the student council recalled that while walking on campus the previous week, she had encountered a table at which were seated both the president of Hillel and the president of the Arab Student Association, who were jointly advocating coexistence in the Middle East. She wisely counselled proponents of the resolution to find the two student presidents and learn from them how they had achieved the mutual respect and recognition that drove them to promote group cooperation rather than divisiveness.

Should we not prioritize the education of student leaders who would embody this irenic principle?

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# Confronting Antisemitism on Campus

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