

Barnard senior, a Black-Native American Jew, has some words for pro-Palestinian peers

As a Jew of Color raised in a kosher home, Columbia University student Noa Fay feels compelled to respond to groups accusing Israel of offenses such as colonialism and apartheid

By [CATHRYN J. PRINCE](#) 14 December 2023



Columbia University student Noa Fay speaks at the Washington, DC, March for Israel rally, November 14, 2023. (Screen capture/YouTube)



Pro-Palestinian, anti-Israel demonstrators rally near Columbia University in New York on November 15, 2023. (SPENCER PLATT / Getty Images via AFP)



• Barnard College senior and student activist Noa Fay speaks at a press conference outside the Columbia University gates in early October 2023. (Courtesy)



• A demonstrator holds a sign at the 'All out for Gaza' protest at Columbia University in New York City on November 15, 2023. (Photo by Bryan R. Smith / AFP)



• Barnard College senior and student activist Noa Fay addresses the March for Israel on November 14, 2023, in Washington, DC. (Courtesy)

NEW YORK — When Barnard College senior Noa Fay hears students on campus chanting “Globalize the Intifada” or describing Israel as an example of settler colonialism she finds it both ironic and offensive.

“The people not buying that Jews are indigenous to Israel? I don’t know how they can say that or justify that,” said Fay, who is Black, Native American and Jewish.

Fay has often found herself speaking out against the open antisemitism that erupted on campus after the Hamas-led massacre of October 7. She’s spoken at a press conference outside the Columbia University campus gates in early October, she’s given interviews on air, and, on November 14, she spoke at the “March for Israel” demonstration in Washington, DC.

“I’ll speak to whoever will listen in these dark times. It’s not in my spirit to silence myself,” the 22-year-old political science major said, in conversation with The Times of Israel in the courtyard of the School of International and Public Affairs.

When Fay, who grew up in a kosher home in Brookline, Massachusetts, applied to Barnard College, friends and family warned her about the school’s reputation: There was the yearly apartheid wall put up by the Columbia Students for Justice in Palestine, along with frequent demands that the university divest from Israel and sever ties with Tel Aviv University. A professor’s office was vandalized with antisemitic graffiti not once, but twice, and a swastika was found on the steps of Low Library.

“Still, I paid it no mind. I never took it seriously,” Fay said. “It didn’t seem threatening to me, and so I thought, ‘How crazy could it be?’”

And for three years, things were relatively fine. Fay said she never felt “so uplifted and so empowered” as she did at Barnard.

But then on October 7, thousands of Hamas-led terrorists rampaged through dozens of communities in southern Israel, murdering 1,200 people — most of them civilians — with horrific brutality and taking roughly 240 more hostage in the Gaza Strip. The onslaught ignited a war with Israel; it also ignited antisemitic attacks in cities and on college campuses throughout the United States.

Following the massacre, the Anti-Defamation League (ADL) recorded the highest number of antisemitic incidents during any two months since it started keeping track in 1979, according to preliminary data. Between October 7 and December 7, the ADL recorded a total of 2,031 antisemitic incidents, up from 465 incidents during the same period in 2022.



Illustrative: Pro-Palestinian, anti-Israel students at Columbia University on October 12, 2023 in New York City. (Spencer Platt/Getty Images/AFP)

Over the last 61 days, Jews in America reported an average of nearly 34 antisemitic incidents per day. At least 1,411 of the total incidents reported could be linked to the Israel-Hamas war. On college and university campuses, the ADL has recorded a total of 400 antisemitic incidents, compared to only 33 incidents during the same period last year.

Fay, who is a resident assistant in her dormitory, has been the target of more personal attacks.

“I have a whiteboard on my door for students to leave messages. Some student wrote ‘Stop supporting genocide’ on it,” Fay said.

The following interview has been edited for brevity and clarity.



Barnard College senior and student activist Noa Fay stands outside the Faculty House at Columbia University in December 2023. (Cathryn J. Prince)

The Times of Israel: Jewish students held a candlelight vigil on the night of October 7. How soon after that were there counter-protests?

Noa Fay: The first one was on October 12. That rally was one of the most disturbing things I have ever witnessed. I had to cross campus that day. [Jewish students] stood in silent protest. It was so upsetting. The pro-Palestinian students were doing a call and response. There is something particularly chilling about that when you have such large numbers. They were chanting, “Jews will not defeat us,” “Globalize the Intifada,” and “From the River to the Sea.” I had a generational flashback. It was the closest thing to Nazi Germany I could imagine. They were chanting for our death. It was harrowing. My words can’t do it justice.

You’re a Black, Native American woman. How do the pro-Palestinian students on campus, who link racism in the US with what is happening in Israel, react to you?

I think I represent a level of cognizant dissonance for them. People generally don’t know that Jews of Color exist. They don’t understand that you can’t identify Jews based on our looks.

When I speak about Black and Native American issues you have people’s attention, no one questions what you’re saying. If you say it’s racist, then it’s racist. Your word is law. But now it seems my Jewishness cancels it out for them. If I say something is antisemitic they don’t listen.



Barnard College senior and student activist Noa Fay participates in a silent pro-Israel protest in early October 2023 on the campus of Columbia University. (Courtesy)

What goes through your head when you see signs around campus, posts on social media, and students and faculty describing Israel as an example of settler colonialism?

I was in line for class when I overheard two students saying something like, “If you haven’t been on your land in centuries, then it’s not your land anymore.” First of all, I had no idea there was a statute of limitations regarding that. And when you say I’m a white supremacist colonial settler? Tell me that to my Native American face.

You said you don’t feel physically unsafe, but how is your emotional well-being?

I’ve been doing terribly in every regard. I’ve never experienced such immediate depression and have been depressed ever since October 7. I couldn’t understand why all of a sudden I felt so depressed. I’ve had a loss of appetite and in the

beginning, I was sleeping more. The only thing that makes me feel better is when I'm speaking about what's going on. Talking publicly has made me feel empowered.

What about the argument that the protests, teach-ins, and so on, are expressions of free speech and academic freedom?

The whole argument that this is a First Amendment issue is ridiculous. If you take that idea then can students openly celebrate the KKK? Can they wave the Confederate flag? I go to Barnard, where if you say anything that is even slightly homophobic you will get called out.

If it's about academic freedom and you want Joseph Massad teaching, then I want to see the university hire David Duke to teach a course that looks at civil rights from a different perspective.

In your opinion what needs to change?

We need to be talking about the dismissal of presidents, and faculty and curriculum changes.

Any final thoughts?

[The pro-Palestinian movement] has made Zionism a dirty word and I want to make sure that that does not catch on. If we make it out of this, then we should all be Zionists the way people are feminists. It's about equal rights. Zionism should be inseparable from Jewish self-determination and equal rights.