



**TEL AVIV** אוניברסיטת  
**UNIVERSITY** תל אביב

**The Center for the Study of Contemporary European Jewry**

## **PERSPECTIVES**

No. 14, July 2022

The Center for the Study of Contemporary European Jewry publishes commentary and analysis on Jewish identity and culture. You are welcome to share your thoughts on our Perspectives with us: [cst@tauex.tau.ac.il](mailto:cst@tauex.tau.ac.il). We are glad to share with you the fourteenth issue of Perspectives.

---

## **The Harvard Lazy**

**An editorial and the closure of the American mind**

*Uriya Shavit*

Two months ago, The Harvard Crimson, the daily student newspaper of the Ivy League university, published an editorial endorsing the BDS movement.

The pompous text, busting with sophomoric self-importance and self-entitlement, did not send the shock waves its anonymous authors may have wished for.

It is still worthy of treatment. Reading it made me gravely concerned about the future of a great nation, and it is not Israel.

The pro-BDS students graciously noted outright that they opposed antisemitism because the “Jewish people — like every people, including Palestinians — deserve nothing but life, peace, and security.”

It is always wise to doubt the sincerity of anyone hastening to proclaim that he is *not* something.

But I tend to believe the young editors.

I don't think they are antisemites.

It is more likely that they suffer from another incurable defect.

They are intellectually lazy.

Every paragraph of their tired, cumbersome editorial cries that they side with BDS not out of deep and elaborate ideological conviction but because this movement allows them to join as one a simplistic choir without risking anything while pretending they are avant-garde.

The editorial made the point that the BDS movement is the best means to liberate Palestine. It remained, however, ambiguous as to what precisely that means, as if the question could be avoided.

Perhaps the editors believe, as some in the BDS movement do, that Zionism is a usurping colonialist enterprise that must be eliminated in favor of a one-state solution.

If so, they should have said so clearly.

They should have then engaged seriously with an uneasy question that the BDS movement repeatedly tends to avoid: Why should the Zionists – who migrated to an ancestral homeland where Jewish presence never ceased to exist, where they purchased lands in accordance with the laws of the land, and where they were ultimately given the right for a state by the United Nations General Assembly – be considered illegitimate colonizers, while Americans, including those in Boston, should not?

It may also be the case (and there is some indication of that in the article) that the editors seek only an imposed unilateral Israeli withdrawal from the West Bank.

If so, they should have stated that unequivocally.

They should have then discussed with some measure of depth the danger that, given the Gaza precedent and the current positions of the Palestinian leaderships, such a unilateral move would lead the region to bloodshed of unprecedented scales.

They should have also aimed to make some effort to explain how their commitment to liberty and freedom fits with despotism, state corruption, oppression of women, torturing of journalists, summary executions, and throwing of homosexuals off balconies – all likely features of everyday life in a unilaterally liberated West Bank, if Gaza is any guide.

Instead of dialectic substance that can move the debate forward, the pro-BDS students offered empty jargon. Not only was their editorial devoid of nuance, but it also took pride in its one-sidedness and superficiality.

Rather than deal with actual Palestinians and their deeply fragmented politics and priorities, the editorial was concerned mainly with the agonies of the authors and the situation on their campus. The Palestinians, just as the Israelis, remained faceless and abstract.

Unfortunately, intellectual laziness has become the prevailing spirit on present-day liberal American campuses. It is manifested in the self-indulged parroting of shallow slogans; the privileging of slogans that seem courageous and provocative but are, in

fact, the voice of a cheering habitus; and the total de-legitimization of alternative views that just might force doubt and require contemplation (hence the fondness of boycotts).

This is worrying because liberal democracies need inquisitive intellectual liberal elites who are able to think beyond peer pressure. They need aspiring students – not to mention professors – with the capacity for self-reflection, irony, and originality. They cannot survive without committed humanists.

Several years ago, I offered a manuscript about modern Muslim thought to an American university press of some repute (not Harvard's).

The young and enthused acquisitions editor asked me to name potential reviewers and made sure to emphasize that she could not have only Jews as readers of a manuscript on Islam written by a Jew.

I filed an official complaint, urging her and her managers to ask themselves what would have been the fate of an editor making the point that she cannot have only Muslims review a book written by a Muslim, or women only review a book written by a woman.

They dismissed the case.

I am confident none of them is an antisemite. They are all, however, intellectually insipid, unable to recognize the difference between moral values and virtue signaling.

They are not repulsed by racism or prejudice; they are repulsed by whatever their peers tell them is racism and prejudice at a given time. They do not cherish diversity; they cherish self-serving diversity. They believe they stand for intellectual provocations, but what they are really after is asserting their predispositions.

This is not about the liberal/conservative divide. The ever-growing closure of the American mind, the damaging spirit of intellectual indolence, is all-encompassing. It has become so dominant that those involved can no longer recognize their own absurdity.

In May, the class president of a Florida High school, Zander Moricz, was barred by his headmaster, Stephen Covert, from speaking in his graduation speech against the so-called "Don't Say Gay" law.

Instead, Moricz spoke about how he came to terms with his curly hair and how important it is for students with curly hair to do the same.

At the end of the speech, the headmaster hugged Moricz and took pride in the "incredible diversity" of his school. Moricz said the controversy was terrible but that he nevertheless held no grudges against his headmaster.

The shameful incident was celebrated in the American national media as a demonstration of sophistication and bravery.

So, this is where we have come to: You cannot make a thought-provoking liberal comment in a graduation speech in America because it will offend conservatives, and you cannot make a thought-provoking conservative comment because it will offend liberals.

The options left are binary: to say nothing meaningful or to speak only to those who think exactly like you. Dialogue is not an option because it might – God forbid – force people to think independently.

This is why young Moricz had to resort to metaphors, as was the habit of Soviet dissidents.

The case of this class president brought back memories, and at the risk of sounding self-congratulatory, I'll share them with you.

I was also a high school class president asked by the headmaster to give a graduation speech.

Three decades have passed, and I don't remember all the details. I only remember that my text was political, and that the headmaster was unhappy that it did not celebrate his achievements.

Unlike Moricz, I did not agree to change my speech. Instead, I left the event. I ended up organizing an alternative graduation ceremony, where participants said whatever they wanted to say.

Class President Moricz made a different choice in the spirit of his times and society. According to a CNN report, he will begin his undergraduate studies in government this fall. You guessed right: at Harvard.



Prof. Uriya Shavit is Head of the Center.

© 2022 The Center for the Study of Contemporary European Jewry. All rights reserved.