

Fighting and Winning the Battle on Campus By Mitchell Bard

When Israel illegally occupied the West Bank and the Gaza Strip in the Six Day War of 1967, the home to millions of indigenous Palestinians, they were ordered to leave by the international community (UN Res 242). The fighting that is currently ensuing between Israel and the Palestinians is a direct result of Israel's refusal to withdraw from that land. Since 1967, Israel has refused to give Palestinians independence and continues to demand that they live as a colonized people under a system that resembles the old apartheid state of South Africa. The Palestinians have suffered for 35 years because they have resisted the daily humiliation and oppression of a state that justifies and practices colonialism.

This was the first paragraph in a long op-ed written by a student in the DePaul student newspaper. In just this one paragraph, many of the most common criticisms of Israel are raised. Could you write a response? Would the Jewish high school and college students you know or educate be capable of responding?

The issue of education about Israel has suddenly become a matter of great concern, primarily because of a handful of heavily publicized incidents in which Jewish students have been molested, harassed, and subjected to other forms of abuse from anti-Israel forces on the college campuses. This has led to a general misinterpretation of the crisis that we're facing. Most people think the problem is anti-Israel sentiment on the campus. The truth is that what happens at places such as Berkeley and San Francisco State are the exceptions, not the rule.

The real crisis is that our young people don't know the history of Israel. They don't identify with Israel. So, when they get into situations like those at Berkeley and San Francisco State, they're not equipped to handle them.

Being idealistic, and usually from liberal backgrounds, young Jews are easily swayed by the simplistic arguments made regarding the occupation and repression of the Palestinians. Educators have not done a good job of responding to the "progressive" critique of Israel that portrays Palestinians as poor, downtrodden, underdogs. It is therefore not surprising that some of the most outspoken critics often tend to be Jews given our historical identification with the oppressed.

One of the most interesting phenomena is that students have totally different expectations of pro-Israel speakers and anti-Israel ones. No one expects the Hanan Ashrawis to give anything but a pro-Palestinian propaganda lesson; however, I found that students expected me to give an evenhanded academic discourse — on one hand, the Palestinians have done some terrible things, but on the other hand so have the Israelis. They were genuinely taken aback when I offered them a full-frontal assault on the Arab myths and an unapologetic pro-Israel message.

This is not to say that Israel is faultless, or that shortcomings should not be acknowledged. However, there is a very big difference between a speech, for example, that debunks the myth of Israel as an apartheid state while admitting that perfect inequality does not exist between Israeli Jews and Arabs, and a talk that highlights those inequalities.

My approach offends the sensibilities of those who believe in the notion that there are two sides to every story. What I usually suggest to students is that they read John Stuart Mill's treatise *On Liberty*. In it, Mill argues that to be an informed person you need to know everything there is to know about your side of an issue (the thesis) and to try to learn the other side (the antithesis) equally well. Then, it is possible to come to an educated conclusion of your own (the synthesis). What I point out is that Mill does not say that the two sides are factually or morally equal. What students don't understand is that because another side exists does not mean that it is valid. Thus, when (to take some extreme examples) Arabs say the Mossad blew up the World Trade Center, or that Israelis are infecting Palestinians with the AIDS virus, or the blood of Muslims is used to make matzah, these may be other sides of the Arab-Israeli conflict, but students must be able to discern when those arguments are without any merit. Educators are failing to teach these distinctions.

Students desperately crave information and want to respond to Israel's detractors, but only a handful on most campuses is active and knowledgeable. They usually get little or no help from the faculty or community. Generally, audiences are comprised of students; Jewish professors and adults from the community rarely show up to demonstrate support for the students. By contrast, Arab (or pro-Arab) professors often attend pro-Israel lectures and do their best to discredit the speaker.

This also points to the broader problem of anti-Israel bias within American academia. While the anti-Israel speakers and protests may provoke the greatest emotional response, a more insidious danger has been allowed to go unchecked, and that is the teaching of revisionist history by faculty members. In his book, *Ivory Towers on Sand: The Failure of Middle Eastern Studies in America*, Martin Kramer documented one aspect of the problem: the creation of a whole field of study, and special academic centers, that are largely devoted to teachings that are hostile toward Israel. This has a far greater impact on future attitudes than a speech or protest.

Because of the high profile incidents at several universities, the Jewish community is devoting unprecedented resources to helping college students. The Israel on Campus Coalition, formed with the help of the Charles & Lynn Schusterman Family Foundation, and comprised of about 25 organizations, including Hillel, AIPAC, AICE, the religious movements, and Jewish agencies from across the political spectrum, is working to coordinate a campus strategy for the first time. This is a very positive development; however, it is clear that this is not going to solve the fundamental problem of Jewish political ignorance. This must be addressed at an earlier stage, starting no later than high school. Greater emphasis must be placed on providing younger Jews with a solid grounding in Israeli political history and teaching them strategies to respond to critics.

I am not talking about turning our schools into propaganda centers. On the contrary, I believe that a rigorous course of study on Middle East affairs, which includes reading critical texts from the other side, will strengthen the identity of young Jews. While Israel is far from perfect, I believe that it is impossible not to be pro-Israel if one has examined the issues and history.

Certainly the place to start is in the Hebrew schools and day schools, which most parents incorrectly assume are teaching these courses. Ideally, some of the education about Israel can also be brought into the public schools. It's tougher to do this because of their sensitivity to political controversy, but the effort should be made.

A number of specific steps can be taken to address the crisis in Jewish political knowledge. I know from past experience in publishing a similar list that the establishment response will be that we're already doing it all and, if you give us more money, we'll do it even better. It is true that in the last six months great strides have been made, but the crisis would not exist if everything that could be done were being done.

1. **Endow chairs.** In addition to professorships, ideally, centers for the study of Israel and U.S.-Israel relations would be established to counter the Arab-funded professors and centers around the country. Faculties are not going to consciously hire professors who are pro-Israel (more likely the opposite). The only way to put Israel on the academic agenda is to fund professorships (visiting Israelis make little impact). In the last decade, this was done for the Holocaust and now Holocaust studies are a robust field on campuses throughout the country. The community could establish chairs at key universities around the country and pro-Israel scholars could make a lasting impression on thousands of students and future leaders. The cost of endowed chairs ranges roughly from \$500,000 to \$2 million. Since first suggesting this, at least two new chairs of Jewish studies have been endowed (at San Francisco State and Johns Hopkins), but this is not the same as a chair specifically devoted to Israel.
2. **Recruit faculty as mentors.** For too long, Jewish students have gotten little or no support from faculty who, often, do not want to be identified by their Jewishness. The Arab faculty has no such hesitation. Now, thanks to the efforts of Prof. Mervin Verbit at CUNY, and others, a network of faculty is being developed to provide guidance and support to students.
3. **Provide students with books addressing the political history and issues.** For example, the book *Myths and Facts* has for several decades been the most valuable tool for educating students about the Arab-Israeli conflict. AICE has recently updated the book and it could be a text in every curriculum. It should also be distributed to Jewish students on every campus. AICE will also soon be publishing *On One Foot*, a condensed series of responses to the most common issues related to the Arab-Israeli Conflict.

The Avi Chai Foundation is offering two free books (from a selection of about 170) to participants on birthright Israel trips; a similar program could be established by another foundation or institution for students who meet some minimum requirement of involvement in an Israel-related organization.

4. **Expand web resources.** Students get most of their information from the Internet, so it is important to make sure that material is on the web. The Jewish Virtual Library, for example, has more than 7,000 entries on everything from anti-Semitism to Zionism and an online version of *Myths and Facts*. Every organization could use this as their library to educate students. Online courses for high school students could also be designed around the Library's materials.
5. **Provide funding for quality speakers to travel to the campuses.** Every campus where Hanan Ashrawi speaks should have a pro-Israel speaker follow in her wake. Students aren't hearing Israel's side of the story and a good speaker can show that critics can be answered, and in a civil way. Speakers need to be sent out in a more organized way (e.g., on regional circuits), and those going to speak in the community for UJC, AIPAC, and other organizations should be brought to campuses as well. No one should go to a community without speaking also to a day school, high school, or university.
6. **Catalogue the critics.** It is not difficult to get copies of speeches by anti-Israel speakers; the content

and responses can be disseminated in advance of their visits so students can be prepared. Disseminating information about Israel's critics inevitably leads to cries of discrimination and blacklisting, but there is nothing wrong with educating students about the background and views of speakers so their credibility can be assessed.

7. **Train students in Israel advocacy.** Many students want to be active, but they don't know what to do. They can be taught how to use Myths and Facts, how to write op-eds, ways to respond to critics, and methods of building coalitions.
8. **Incorporate the campus into the community.** Students should sit on federation and CRC boards. The community must keep abreast of what is happening on the campus and respond to student needs. The community should participate in events, offer advice and guidance, and ensure the students don't feel isolated. One of the most important roles is to work with the faculty and administration, which pays little or no attention to students, but is keenly attuned to the views of donors and alumni. The defeat of the divestment campaign will not be accomplished by students; it will be thwarted by their parents.
9. **Fund Jewish newspapers on campuses.** Jewish newspapers have disappeared from most campuses. A newspaper is a source of information, and it is also a way for students to be active and identify as Jews. The publication can be via e-mail or on the web. Jewish community newspapers should provide guidance and establish mentoring programs.
10. **Continue the birthright program.** There's still no better way to build a connection to Israel than to take students there. To make it better, programmers should include Israel advocacy training as part of the experience before, during, and after the trips. The program also should be open to high school students.
11. **Share information.** Turf battles preclude any one organization from being allowed to become the campus resource, but it would save resources and help students if duplication of effort was minimized and multiple organizations cooperated in the implementation of the overall campus strategy. The Israel on Campus Coalition is working in this direction.
12. **Don't reinvent the wheel.** We don't need six organizations to produce their own Myths and Facts (at least two others did it already, anyway). Certain organizations should be relied upon for their expertise, such as AIPAC on political issues and ADL on those related to anti-Semitism.
13. **Create a drumbeat of Israel.** Events have to be ongoing. One or two speakers a year isn't sufficient. There has to be a constant level of pro-Israel activity (lectures, dances, rallies, art exhibits). This will create a greater level of comfort with Israel, especially for students who normally aren't active. It will provide a sense of continuity and allow the Jewish students to set the agenda rather than simply respond to crises and criticism.
14. **Get them while they're young.** It is important to integrate advocacy training into Jewish camps so summers can be used for training, especially for teens. For example, a "scholar-in-residence" can spend one or more days teaching about the history of Israel and advocacy techniques. Similar programs should be created for youth groups.
15. **Monitor textbooks.** It is difficult for anyone wishing to teach about Israel to gain access to public schools. What is taught is usually in general history textbooks. Several years ago, I reviewed the most popular high school history texts and found the coverage of Israel and Jewish history to be appalling in terms of quantity and quality. It is vital that one or more organizations evaluate textbooks and take steps to see that publishers and school districts are aware of problems of accuracy and bias.
16. **Create more job opportunities.** One way to create an incentive to study about Israel is to create positions that allow people to use their knowledge beyond the immediate battleground on the campus.

positions that allow people to use their knowledge beyond the immediate battleground on the campus. Most organizations have internships, but we need more longer-term fellowships and Israel-related staff and teaching positions as career options.

Sample course outline

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