Being Jewish on Campus

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What is it like on campus to be Jewish and a lover of Israel, as a student, as a faculty member? When one reads reports in many Jewish media sources it sounds grim. How bad is it? Is it really bad? I here offer reflections as a long-term faculty member at a number of institutions across the country and at a branch of the University of California since 1989.

I came to the philosophy at the University of California, Riverside, in 1989 from the University of Notre Dame. My wife and I live in Los Angeles, as do our adult son and daughter and her family. My daughter lived in Jerusalem for some years, studied at Pardes, and married her chavrutah. My wife and I are members of Bnai David Judea, a Modern Orthodox congregation. For some 20 years, I've spent most of June in Jerusalem, learning at the Chafetz Chaim Yeshiva and attending philosophy conferences at the Hartman Institute.

A few years after joining the UCR faculty, I was approached by the then faculty advisor to Hillel and asked if I would take over as advisor. Given my interests and background, I was eager to do so. Around that time, Dr. Raymond Orbach, an eminent UCLA physicist and administrator took the post of Chancellor of UCR. Orbach was Jewish and wanted to build up the Jewish population of UCR. He was successful in many things but not that one. UCR has always had a relatively small

Jewish representation among the students; a much larger representation among the faculty. At the time, UCR was a commuter school, recruiting largely from the local inland areas. More recently, the highly diverse population is from across the state. But it's certainly not Orthodox-friendly in terms of kosher food or a comfortable Shabbat atmosphere. (I once attempted to make inroads in the kosher food problem, but to no avail.)

Dr. Orbach and I did some fundraising in the Palm Springs area, trying to raise money for Hillel. And to encourage this, I taught a few adult education courses in the Palm Springs area. For two years or so, we received enough support to hire a Hillel Director, a rabbi or lay leader. I would interview the candidates and meet with Dr. Orbach who gratefully had a hands-on approach. At one point we hired an Orthodox lay leader who worked extremely well with the students and quickly became my chavrutah.

The support of the Palm Springs Federation was regular but generally (other than a two or three year period) insufficient to hire a Director. I argued for funding to do more serious Jewish education on campus, but the real stimulus to Federation funding was the occasional threat of anti-Semitism. This seemed to me upside down: Creative programming seemed like a much better way to insure solidity of the campus Jewish presence. Nor was there serious anti-Semitism to worry about. There were occasional issues, but the administration--Orbach and those who followed him--were on top of such things.

The other source of personal frustration was student attitudes to the political/security situation in Israel. Some years back, an Israeli organization--strongly leftist in orientation--sent two speakers to campus, a Palestinian Women's Studies Professor from BirZeit University and a Jewish Professor of Geography from Ben Gurion University. I was asked to be on a response panel of UCR faculty, a woman from Religious Studies, and two Palestinian-American faculty members from Engineering. I was supposed to speak in between the two Palestinian-Americans. The first one said pretty outrageously wrong things about Israeli policy and attitudes. The Protestant minister who was running the program instantly rearranged it so that I could speak last and respond to both Palestinian-Americans. The second spoke in even harsher terms. This gave me the opportunity to say what I believe, that harsh overstatement and wild condemnation accomplishes nothing, that the moral imperative is to listen to the other side, that the two main speakers, Israeli and Palestinian, represent one opinion among others, one that I disagreed with. One can disagree strongly, but we need to hear one another. Talking points are all too easy; they trade on

oversimplification; and they accomplish nothing. I sat down feeling grateful for the opportunity to (I hoped) raise the level of the debate.

Next the students--Hillel students and sympathizers with the Palestinian-Americans--got to ask questions and make comments. Without exception, all we heard were talking points. The pro-Israel students rightly saw the pro-Palestinian remarks as self-serving, and vice versa. Talking points are not going to help mutual understanding, nor are they going to move the sides toward any sort of agreement. My frustration with students on both sides of the divide was a product of my inability to share nuance with them.

Nevertheless, I have had considerable success talking about Israel to campus audiences. On one occasion, the UCR Ethnic Studies program put on its website an inappropriate pro-Palestinian announcement. Our administration was upset and asked me to help organize an evening devoted to the issues. Five faculty members spoke, representing a variety of points of view. My own talk began with my connections to and love for Israel, the time I spend there regularly, as well as my misgivings about Israeli policy. People listened; what they were hearing was a faculty member who clearly had allegiances but who spoke openly, in human terms; not talking points. In fact, the Palestinian students approached me afterward about speaking to their group. Not much came of this after I asked them if they were okay with a Zionist speaker. In any case, they were respectful, a far cry from what we have read about.

One of the campuses of the UC that has a terrible reputation in the Jewish community is UC Irvine, also an hour from Los Angeles, halfway to San Diego. UCI is the campus at which the pro-Palestinian students were arrested subsequent to their unruly and rude protest at a talk given by Israeli ambassador, Michael Oren. I was invited by the UCI Religious Studies Program to give the annual guest lecture. My topic was my work in the philosophy of religion, but as with my book on the subject, The Significance of Religious Experience, I told of my religious struggles and commitments, my love for learning Talmud, and the extensive time I spend in Israel. I spoke about the latter at some length, not sure what to expect.

My talk was well-received and a number of people stayed afterward to pursue the discussion. One of them was an Orthodox Muslim woman; like the rest of the audience she was interested in matters of substance. It was a very pleasant occasion. I have a friend and former chavrutah, closely identified with Israel, who is on the UCI faculty. He reports that the atmosphere on the UCI campus is similar to UCR, that the campus is, in his words, “largely apolitical.” However, in the LA Orthodox community as well as in Israel, I continue to hear that UCI is a hotbed of

Palestinian activism, an unfriendly place to Jewish concerns.

A word about my teaching: I teach a variety of courses from very large (300+) service courses (for example, “Evil,” “Introduction to Philosophy”) to small seminars, undergraduate and graduate. A great deal of my teaching concerns philosophy of religion. My style in teaching emphasizes discussion, and it’s quite personal, full of stories and examples from life, literature, film. Since Judaism is the religion I know best, many examples come from Jewish sources: Midrash, Tanakh, Talmud. And the experiences I relate include a great deal about Israel. Especially since my students are largely not Jewish and many not religious at all, I encourage them to bring in their own stories, texts, experiences, and perspectives and they are eager to do so. At no point, in all these years of teaching, have I experienced any ill feeling either about my religious perspective or about Israel. On the contrary, the responses are often warm and welcoming; always respectful both to me and to others in the classes.

My experience with the campuses with which I am familiar, in the UC system and across the country, yields the sense that there is a great deal of exaggeration in the frequently heard media reports these campuses are unfriendly to Jewish/Israeli concerns. That is not to deny that there are professors who confuse education with propaganda. Nor is to deny extremely uncomfortable times when SJP students confront Hillel students. I mentioned the UCR Ethnic Studies website above and I could tell other stories. But these are the exceptions, not the rule, and atmosphere on campus is not unfriendly to Jewish concerns.

The UCR Humanities Center seeks topics of academic concern and holds sessions on these issues. This past fall, a session was held on the proposed academic and cultural boycott of Israeli institutions. Three of us were on the panel: Professor Muhammad Ali, a Muslim from the Religious Studies Department; Professor Brownwyn Lebow, a Jewish (unaffiliated) Professor of Political Science, and me. A few years ago, Professor Ali and I taught a course together on Israel-Palestine; more on that below. All three of us thought that this proposal did not make sense. The audience, some 35 faculty and graduate students, agreed. There were only two advocates for the proposal, the people (I assumed) who brought the proposal to the Humanities Center.

Professor Ali and I taught a course in which we watched films, read history, and talked through issues about Israel and the Palestinians. The atmosphere was again entirely congenial. It was an Honors seminar, with only about a dozen students. One student was a radical leftist, the others just people interested in learning about the region and its history. At one point I assigned a Ha’aretz piece

that spoke of injustices to which a group of Palestinians had been subjected. The leftist student came prepared; she argued that this sort of thing is typical, the sort of injustice about which she had been speaking all term. I pointed out that our knowledge of this was a product of an Israeli newspaper, illustrating the sort of freedom of the press and self-criticism characteristic of democracies at their best. The point was not lost on the students.

Anti-semitism, especially in Europe and the Arab world, has resurfaced as a genuine threat. And even where it's not as much noted, things are not as one would like. I have friends who spent time in Berlin, very enjoyably. But further discussion revealed that one dare not wear a kippah on the streets. And the support for Israel among fundamentalist Christians in the United States always seems to me very thin; I fear that it would not take that much for it to turn. In light of our history and these and other current issues, vigilance makes sense.

At the same time, it's easy to confuse genuine criticism of Israeli policy for anti-Semitism. We are blessed that the State of Israel is a world power. Such international actors are regularly criticized. Indeed, such criticism helps to keep the world from falling into a worse place than it is. Some are focused on what they see as the unfair standards by which Israel is judged. There is surely something to this. But the same can be said of criticism the United States. While anti-Semitism may get into the mix, there is surely more here than simple prejudice.

When one turns to the situation on campus, one similarly wants to be alert to anti-Semitism without confusing it with legitimate differences of perspective. Part of what we--I--feel about Israel is something like family-feeling. And others belong to other families. As mentioned, there are from time to time campus incidents that cry out for our attention. At the same time we need to question the reports we read, especially when authored by those with strong commitments on the issue in question.