

Higher Education and Jewish Education: Knowledge is Power

[View PDF](#)



Dr. Peter Schotten was emeritus Professor of Government and International Affairs at Augustana University (Sioux Falls, South Dakota) where he had taught for many years. A number of his articles were published in our journal, *Conversations*, and this article was submitted shortly before Dr. Schotten fell ill and ultimately passed away.

About a decade ago, I noticed a blog post detailing harassment of Jewish students at an elite Ivy League women's college. Duty bound, I forwarded the story to dear friend, a long time alumnus of that school. At first, she was disbelieving. In time, she became irritated, then angry. Could this be the college she had attended? Yet what then seemed shocking, now seems almost routine. It has become common for Jewish students attending American institutions of high education to feel bullied, threatened, intimidated or silenced. What should be done? What can be done?

The current manifestation of anti-Jewish bias on American campuses is not the traditional disdain for Jews that had existed in higher education in an earlier time. Jewish quotas at elite educational institutions before World War II were rooted in a kind of country club anti-Jewish animus. Jews were pictured as pushy, foreign, untrustworthy or strangely alien. Their achievements and tenacity threatened the good-old-boy Protestant, white upper class ruling establishment. Hence, restrictions on the numbers of Jews admitted to ivy league colleges were often maintained and sometimes even openly pronounced. This prejudiced attitude toward Jews proved increasingly difficult to retain given the political progress toward increasing equality and justice evidenced in the United States in the

second half of the twentieth century. Fortunately, this form of anti-Jewish prejudice has become a relic of the past.

Today's higher education anti-Jewish animus is of a different stripe. It is fueled by the claim of injustice and oppression. That claim--sometimes subtle and sometimes overt--resounds all over campus. Classrooms have been increasingly dominated by professors who dogmatically condemn Israel (and usually only Israel, or only Israel and the United States). Although reasonable people can dispute the extent of overlap between anti-Israel and anti-Jewish bias, these attitudes are most certainly far more than distant cousins. Meanwhile, Pro-Palestinian and anti-Israeli student groups such as BDS set the tone and fuel the political energy for campus politics. They are supported by top and often middle-level administrators, whose careers to some extent depend upon their evident and continuous commitment to social justice.

For Jewish students, it sometimes appears that there is no place to hide. Hillel and Chabad can provide sanctuaries, but these shelters are often insufficient to withstand the political storm outside. Jewish community is an affirmative response to opposition and harassment, but the Jewish establishment often do not always speak forcefully or directly enough to the accusation that Jews embody or support unjust causes. The question is: what else can be done to support the Jewish student who feels marginalized or attacked?

It is time, I suggest, for Jewish educators to help formulate a response to the charges of injustice and oppression frequently hurled against Jewish college students. These students need to possess a knowledge of the facts that accurately defines contemporary Jewish reality. The truth about how and where Jews live today--in Israel, in the United States and in the various nations of the world--constitutes essential present and past knowledge necessary to counter the narrative that Jews are responsible for the uniquely predatory and repressive actions of the world's single Jewish state.

Hebrew school education about Jews in the contemporary world most often focuses on two broad themes. The tragedy of the Holocaust is almost always taught and is often a centerpiece. Jewish catastrophe, unfortunately, has been a recurrent Jewish concern throughout history. The Holocaust raised the possibility of the

eradication of Jewish life worldwide. The questions associated with it are endless. What malevolency can explain such a possibility? Why did it happen? Why was more not done to resist it? And how can an educator communicate to students of any age the incommunicable?

A second theme of Jewish education about today's world has to do with the founding and flourishing of Israel. The event's importance to Jewish life is self-evident. A possible end to the Diaspora is no small accomplishment. Furthermore, there are other reasons to celebrate this achievement. Israel's founding was a significant contributor to many Jews' sense of identity and pride worldwide. If the Holocaust made Jews victims by turning them into corpses, Israel's founding, survival and continuous independence constitutes an enduring source of comfort and satisfaction for many Jews today.

Unfortunately, these defining events in Jewish history prove largely irrelevant to the political battles waged upon today's campuses. Said more precisely, the Holocaust and Israel's founding do not provide the Jewish student sufficient self-knowledge and factual awareness to equip them to withstand the withering opposition they often encounter. Jewish students today gain little sympathy because of the Holocaust and past victimhood their people once experienced. For this generation of students (both Jewish and non-Jewish) who live their lives so much in the present, even the appropriate sense of that horror has been largely lost. For that reason, a person's understanding and relationship to the Holocaust today no longer constitutes a basic element of most Jewish students' sense of self-identity,

Regarding the founding and prospering of Israel, the situation is even worse. Israel may have been greatly admired in its founding but now that admiration is far from universal. As Joshua Muravchik put it in a well-known book title, with the passage of time David somehow became Goliath. With growing power has come increased censure. Condemnation of Israel has become the focal point of much modern day anti-Judaism, particularly on college campuses. Increasingly, Jews are not identified with the positive achievements of a small, determined democratic nation but rather with an imperialist, racist state that deserves condemnation. In short, Jews are accused of supporting and governing a fundamentally immoral country.

That Jews have been the unique object of total extermination, or that Israel was founded on noble ideals, does not do much to address or settle the current rounds of anti-Israeli criticism. The essence of that criticism is reflected in the application of a phrase repeated endlessly today. The phrase is diversity, inclusion and equity. The mantra is repeated endlessly by politicians, by human resource department heads of major corporations and by big media. Its effect is almost hypnotic. It is a shorthand formulation of how one achieves egalitarian justice. The inclusive and diverse workplace is the ideal workplace. The nation that has achieved true diversity and inclusion is both tolerant and fair. This term even has replaced the traditional American standard for good government. As stated in the Declaration of Independence, legitimate government had traditionally been defined as an entity that secures citizens' rights and governs according to their consent. Essentially, it proclaims that citizens are free to make their way in the world and pursue their own course and their own happiness. The new standard is more radical, often prescribing outcomes rather than liberties. Also, it is important to recognize that diversity, inclusion and equity are both goals and standards. Their achievement is important, perhaps necessary. Governments and organizations must be held accountable.

Admittedly, such standards are controversial and open to all sorts of objections. But that is a different set of arguments deserving extended consideration elsewhere. For now, the important point to realize is that this mindset has been taught to this generation of college students. Increasingly, it has become the lens through which they evaluate social reality. When looking at an Israel governed and supported by Jews, many will inevitably ask: Is it diverse? Is it inclusive? Does the society produce equitable results for all its citizens? In other words, should I support or oppose it? A good number of these students will not be hard core opponents of the Jewish state. Rather, they are likely to be open-minded and genuinely undecided, asking questions and seeking answers. Jews-- and Jewish students-- must be better prepared to engage them. The stakes are high.

Examining Israel and contemporary Jewish life worldwide from this perspective will, I think, persuasively and objectively refute many of the harshest charges levied against Israel while correcting

misperceptions about Jews and about Israel's moral status in the world. It is important to understand to the extent such a teaching will supplement--rather than replace--different peoples' rationales for Israel's legitimacy and for protecting the fundamental human rights of Jews everywhere. Nothing in this educational approach necessarily contradicts or negates deeply held positive beliefs about Israel or Jews. One can still believe that Jews' claim to Israel is divinely ordained or historically determined. Or, alternatively, a person can still defend Israel's founding and policies according to the precepts of international law. Nor is the conviction that Jews everywhere are entitled to fundamental rights and decent treatment undermined by applying broad applied diversity and inclusion standards. As long as equity is understood as fundamental fairness, and not strict numerical representation, any diversity and inclusion discussion should prove non-threatening.

The obvious advantage of this sort of education is that it arms Jewish students in their confrontation with campus critics. But there is another, more subtle benefit to be gained from such an educational approach. The study of diversity and inclusion--in Israel and around the world--is rooted in practice. It focuses upon what nations actually do and how people live and have lived and how they have been treated. What can we expect and observe about how diversity and inclusion actually functions in the world? This real world emphasis avoids a common failure of much academic theory, which tends to adopt utopian standards and programs and then selectively apply them to disfavored policies or nations.

Finally, a word about definitions. The, discussion of diversity and inclusiveness are here couched in their most popular and appealing sense (as they seem to an idealistic student). Diversity simply means being understanding of cultural, racial and other differences. It suggests, in other words, that a person is open, non-prejudiced and tolerant. Inclusion implies that no one is to be denied respect or opportunity. Equity, as we already noted, means fairness and due process. Therefore, American law and politics equity often is taken to mean the strict representation of groups regarding the distribution of rewards (and penalties). That is not the way the term is used here.

We are also concerned that these terms, once so defined, be applied consistently, holding all nations and peoples to similar standards. Such a requirement is important because of the emotional and seemingly semi-hypnotic response yielded by these ideas. Fashioned into a negative critique applied against the Jewish state, these terms can take the form of a radical indictment. When this occurs, Israel stands accused of imperialism, apartheid, racial and religious bigotry and sometimes even genocide. These are among the most grievous violations of the diversity, inclusion and equity standard imaginable. BDS and related organizations repeat such charges endlessly and these accusations are today commonly echoed on college campuses.

Jewish education needs to address this critique head on, before Jewish students pursue higher education. So far, this has not been done effectively. What is required is a curriculum, or perhaps at least a class, that addresses these concerns by describing the ways Jews actually live in the world today. Their actions and practices need to be seen in an international and historical context. And, of course, as was previously noted, consistent moral standards need to be applied.

What would such a course of study look like? No doubt, its creation represents a challenge to leading Jewish educators. What follows is one possible formulation. It represents a very brief and sketchy outline of what such an education might look like:

Course of Study: Diversity, Inclusion and Judaism: Then and Now

Part I: Overview. Three points need to be made here. First, terms like diversity and inclusion are contemporary reformulations of traditionally important concepts in western thought and within Judaism, namely the equal dignity of all human beings. Second, while often proclaimed, the actual achievement of these goals throughout history has proven elusive. Failure has been the rule, success the exception. Third, Jews have suffered particularly because of this failure. Anti-Judaism (i. e.. anti-Semitism) remains an enduring legacy. As Robert Goldwin has written, "Jews had suffered persecution almost everywhere in the world for Millennia." Continuing, he observes, "they have been beaten, tortured, murdered, and hounded from country to country and even from continent to continent."

Part II: Jews in the United States. First, demographically and statistically, what do we know about Jews and contemporary Jewish life in America? What (geographic, cultural, political, etc.) differences and similarities characterize the lives of Jewish citizens (e. g. Reform, Orthodox and secular Jews)? What about the relationship between Jews and non-Jews? (The issue of assimilation could be considered here). Finally, what social, economic or political trends are today noteworthy? (The current spate of attacks on Jews might be mentioned).

Second, what is the legal and political structure of the United States *in respect to* Jews? At the time of the Constitution's adoption, Jewish life in the states was surprisingly tolerant by contemporary-worldwide standards. Yet Jews (and interestingly Catholics in Protestant states and Protestants in Catholic states) were not treated equally at the time of the Constitution's writing. In many, there existed state churches, religious tests and other discriminatory practices. By contrast, the United States Constitution prohibited such religious oaths in the newly created government, a remarkable but much overlooked guarantee protecting freedom of conscience. In time, the two religion clauses of the First Amendment also became important protections of the right of Jews in the United States to practice their religion.

Part III: Jews in Israel. The creation of the modern state of Israel needs to be described. Also the ethnic, racial and ethnic (and even religious) differences among Israeli Jews need to be explained. Particular emphasis should be placed between the different Mizrahi/Sephardic and West European origins of the Israeli people. Jewish emigration--especially from Russia and Ethiopia--might be highlighted. Various religious movements among practicing Jews and secular Jews will also need to be recounted. This diversity within Judaism and among Jews points to a different kind of diversity: that between Jews and non-Jews who are Israeli citizens. Most predominantly, these include Christians, Druze and Arab Muslims. This two part analysis should refute the too popular stereotype that Israel is a monolithic nation. Rather, pointing to the multiple diversities that characterize Israel today raises the following question: given this great amount of diversity, how does a successful nation-state like Israel try to provide for inclusion? Contemporary issues and

challenges could be discussed and analyzed here.

Next, there exists the need to the explain Israel's political and legal system and structure as a continuing effort to reconcile diversity and inclusion --in other words, to attempt the creation of a single community out of its many disparate parts. Also this would be an appropriate place to describe and analyze the recent debate within Israel regarding the appropriateness of declaring itself to be a Jewish state.

Part IV: Jews in Arab Lands. The number of Jews living in Middle Eastern Arab land has declined precipitously mid-twentieth century. In some nations, almost all traces of Jews and Judaism have been eradicated, a phenomenon explained in detail by authors such as Bernard Lewis and Lyn Julius. The contrast between the Israeli attempt to accommodate and integrate its Arab population and these Arab states' persecution of their Jewish residents is striking. The difference is highly significant and has been underappreciated, particularly by Jewish students. An interesting example is what is now essentially a Jewish-free Egypt and the collapse of political influence and sheer numbers during the 20th century.

A short examination of why this happened--particularly an analysis of social, political and religious influences within Arab Middle East nations--could help explain how and why Jewish life and influence vanished from many of these countries.

Part V: Jews in European Nations. The pre and post Holocaust history of the treatment of Jewish populations in various European nations help provide a more rounded and complete picture of Jews' battle for respect and inclusion--first in a Christian society and then in the modern secular state. Special emphasis upon England, Germany and France should be given. Social and economic influences prove particularly important. The resurgence of left and right wing anti-Judaism today should be pointed out. Governmental and legal responses (such as the passage of hate crime legislation) could be explained and examined.

Part VI: Jews Elsewhere: Here there is room for a variety of Jewish experiences throughout the world. For example, the Jewish immigration to Shanghai might be contrasted with the history of Jews

in Ethiopia to give some idea of the rich and diverse history of Jews throughout the world and through time. Although such a topic may seem remote to American students, there exists a wealth of information and research that can serve as a basis for an intelligent and illuminating discussion of the many variants of Jewish life.

Part VII: What is a Jew? Even the question of who is Jewish is a profound and perplexing. *What is a Jew* asked Rabbi Morris Kertzer some seventy years ago, hardly raising a new question. Is Judaism primarily a matter of birth? If so, what or who counts? Is having a Jewish mother or at least one Jewish parent essential? If one chooses to consider oneself Jewish, is it merely a matter of self-definition or must the affiliation be formalized. If so, how? Who exactly are the Jews? Certainly not a race. But perhaps, to some extent, one or several ethnic identities. Or maybe what is special about Jews is that they so strongly identify with the land (Israel)? Could it be that they are a people? If so, what constitutes their peoplehood? Is it shared historical experiences or shared books? Or is it a belief in a single God or perhaps in revelation itself? If so, what do we make of those who declare themselves Jewish atheists? Was Spinoza really a Jewish thinker? What about Karl Marx? Is Woody Allen a Jewish comedian? What is significant about this question of Jewish identity is its complexity. Its many nuances speak to an important kind of diversity within Jewish thought itself. And it stands in sharp contrast to the recurrent anti-Jewish caricature of "The Jew".

This vile image of the Jew--or something akin to it--has not gone away in our time. Its strangest--and perhaps one of its most frightening aspects--is its emergence full blown on American college campuses. The evil Jew-- manifested most fully by allegedly imperialist, racist, colonial Israel, has today become little more than a vile campus cliché. Many older American Jews find the situation shocking. Most Jewish students--to the extent they embrace their identity--are woefully unprepared to confront this challenge. That needs to change. It is both a challenge and a task for Jewish education and Jewish educators. Presented for your consideration above is a bare outline of what such an effort might look like. It is a small first step. But, I hope, it is a step forward.

