

Education, Morality, and Our Children

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I must have been nine or ten the first time I learned about the Wannsee Conference. Wandering through the small Holocaust museum at our local JCC, I noticed the photo of the magnificent lakeside mansion where, in January 1942, 15 Nazi leaders sipped aged cognac and agreed on protocols for the deportation and systematic murder of 11 million European Jews. I recall reading the biographies of the men, and my mother pointing out that most held doctorate degrees. Years of academic study, the highest levels of intellectual achievement at Europe’s top universities, served to refine plans for the most barbaric plot in human history. The message was clear: Education does not ensure Morality.

I have thought about Wannsee often these last few months, as we have seen American college campuses ablaze with anti-Jew demonstrations, and administrators willfully blind to the meaning of slogans that call once again for Jewish genocide. I thought about it while I saw students lock themselves in libraries, fearful of their classmates banging and chanting while police directed the Jews to hide. Gone are last year’s trigger warnings, micro-aggressions, and anti-harassment policies. Absent are “diversity” officers paid to ensure a balmy “campus climate.” The most enviable institutions cannot or will not enforce their own rules, not when it comes to Jews.

I thought about the morality of those German PhDs as I read posts from my own college classmates calling Israeli soldiers “bloodthirsty” while dismissing Go-Pro videos of terrorist atrocities as “questionable.” And I wondered if education might actually destroy our moral sensitivity as I watched, live, the entirety of the December 5 congressional hearings, gripped with tension and wondering if the presidents of three of America’s most elite universities would come to their senses and plainly affirm their opposition to genocide. This was not supposed to be the hard question. It took

years of education to buff away the ability to recognize a simple truth—screaming for Jewish genocide harasses Jewish students.

And that simple truth leads me to ask a complicated question: Should Jewish parents send their sons and daughters to these schools? What is the impact on their own morality to be steeped in these environments for their formative years? What will this type of education do to them as human beings and as Jews?

I've had the opportunity to speak with many students over the last several years. October 7 brought into the open dynamics that existed long before but were rarely discussed. But there is no doubt the outbreak of blatant Jew hatred, and the accompanying lack of visible effort to reduce or even condemn it, has had a profound impact on Jewish student life.

Recent conversations with students break my heart. I heard from several how it's "not that bad" on campus, yet they change their behavior anyway. Some remove the Jewish stars or kippah or summer camp t-shirts they've worn for years in order to erase their visible Jewish identity, hoping this will lessen harassment from classmates, or allow them to avoid discussions with unsympathetic "neutral" students and professors. Others complained about faculty excusing the massacres as "resistance," canceling class to attend protests, allowing megaphone-bearing students to disrupt lectures, even having a Jewish student stand in the corner as a representative Jew.

One Jewish student talked about avoiding the grand front entrances of class buildings; she goes to class through the service entrances rather than cross the screaming crowds blocking the main doors. Another avoided class altogether because he couldn't bear to face the classmate with whom he had spent endless hours working on problem sets; she was part of the groups that had sent the infamous letter blaming Israel while the massacres were still underway. What could he say to her? What if others agreed? Other students shared social media posts from classmates; one had posted "Let them burn!" on October 7, as gasoline-fueled fires were quite literally consuming entire families. To attend Harvard today, you must endure blatant Jew-hatred from classmates.

Many will dissect how we got here, and how we can get out. But Jewish parents have a more immediate question to answer:

Do we want this for our children?

Jewish parents with children considering elite American colleges must ask themselves whether the pedigree is worth the price. The Jewish community has invested heavily in the Ivy League by every measure. We have built these elite institutions with our students, our faculty, our donations, and our scholarship. We have built Hillels and Chabads and dozens of other programs to support our Jewish students. And we have benefitted from the education and pedigree these universities provide, which

have allowed American Jews to rise to the top of nearly every profession where education or social network matters. The benefits of these brand names on your resume last a lifetime. It's a lot to give up.

As one whose life has been shaped by these connections, and whose children might potentially be as well, I nonetheless feel the temptation to abandon elite academia. Among the thousands of items I've seen since October 7, few stayed with me as much as the blunt honesty of Rabbi Yotav Eliach, Principal of Rambam Mesivta. As the world watched, NYU students tore down posters bearing the names and faces of the hostages, posted support for the atrocities on social media, and disrupted class with protests and chants to eliminate Israel "From the River to the Sea." When an NYU admissions office sent a form email offering advice to early admission applicants, Rabbi Eliach wrote:

You sent me an email inviting my Orthodox Zionist Jewish students to apply early decision to NYU. Really?

Let me get to the point. You have too many faculty members and students who support Islamo-Nazi Hamas and Islamic Jihad Terror organizations. The slogans: Free Palestine, and From the River to the Sea Palestine will be free all mean one thing: GENOCIDE. Real Genocide of my People. Not imagined Genocide like the one that the protesters say happened or is happening to the Arabs of Gaza or the Arabs of Judea and Samaria. Since 1967 their populations have quadrupled ... Your professors and students can chant that you want to throw us into ovens or the sea. I know: Free Speech. I guess all your "progressive" ideas of "Hate Speech" and "Microaggressions" don't apply to Jews ... You really expect us to send our sons and daughters to your school? ... So they can be threatened and told that they should be burned, gassed, shot, raped, tortured? Really? And we should pay for the privilege of exposing our children to what you believe is "Education." Think again.

Think again indeed. Even those without strong Jewish connection, or any at all, have come to doubt the value of an elite education. Harvard reported a 17 percent drop in early applications this year; a friend of mine who interviews for Harvard estimated that in the New York area, the numbers of early applications were more like 30 percent down. College advisors have reported that even those admitted to Harvard early are applying to other schools, something never seen before. Apparently, there are many who don't find the current atmosphere attractive.

In determining whether the benefits outweigh the costs, parents should consider the impact on identity, personality, and character of spending time in this environment.

First, what is the cost to everyday existence? The constant drumbeat of antisemitism prevents our kids from having a normal college experience. Indeed, the protestors acknowledge this as a

goal—several hundred protestors storming Harvard’s main library during final exams brandished signs threatening “No Normal During Genocide.” This matters to all who want the best for their sons and daughters, who have worked hard to earn a spot at institutions and deserve equal, fair treatment. They deserve to feel welcome at their universities. They deserve the typical college experiences of making friends and attending class and pursuing extracurriculars without running a gauntlet of screaming accusers.

Even more important than their day-to-day experience, their fundamental character and identity transforms under these conditions. Since they attend college in late adolescence and early adulthood, as one’s ultimate values are forged, the situation many Jewish students now face will impact their outlook on Jewish identity for years to come. When students claim things are “not that bad,” they have learned to accept the abuse. They’ve accepted that their Jewish identity is risky to display and learned to manage, to understand the new reality. They may be as engaged as ever in their hearts, and enjoy celebrating their identity in Jewish spaces, but they hide their true identity in other environments.

Thankfully, some students continue to speak out, taking personal risk to appear in the media under their own names, calling out their professors, administrators, and classmates for allowing antisemitism to thrive. Most do not. Or they speak out anonymously. Even if they manage to resist actually believing the dominant propaganda excusing or justifying the attacks, they learn to speak the language of inaccurately explaining the outrageous antisemitism—not as menacing conduct that all decent humans should condemn, but as “free speech” reflecting a core principle of free society. When administrators fail to stem the tide of hatred, Jewish students adapt by inappropriately excusing those who threaten them with violence.

After a time, the antisemitic cancer may push to stage 2, where the students question their own beliefs. Jewish students (and faculty) repeatedly hear the message that in order to be on the side of good, to support human rights and freedom and minority rights, you must take a side, and that side is anti-Zionist and pro-Palestinian. Any decent person would at least question their beliefs if everyone around them tells them repeatedly that they are not only incorrect but deeply immoral. At elite colleges, in an environment where students naturally admire professors and trust their perspective on the material, they are even more likely to doubt themselves. Similarly, students assume a level of integrity and intelligence in their peers, who also had to qualify for admission. When students hear day after day that Israel commits genocide, expulsion, and mass punishment, it becomes nearly impossible to feel confident in support for Israel and identification with fellow Jews who express such support. The insidious nature of this process by which “being a nice person” requires doubting your own fundamental beliefs and group affiliation has long term impact. Are our students learning to stand up for themselves and others? To take risks? To be willing to express unpopular beliefs? These are not just important for their Jewish identity, but for their success in life.

Some students take this a step further and fully internalize the message that to be good means to oppose Israel. This takes root so deeply that they join one of the many virulently anti-Israel groups that deliberately seek Jewish membership. Jewish Voices for Peace, IfNotNow, and other groups recruit Jewish students to divide the Jewish community and support the lie that hatred for Israel can be separated from hatred for Jews. The profound idiocy of this position should be obvious. Roughly half of world Jewry lives in Israel, a proportion that is growing all the time. Targeting Israelis means

directly targeting half of all Jews. Moreover, Jews the world over have ties of kinship and friendship with Israeli Jews. You can't support those who murder, rape, behead, and burn alive Israeli Jews and claim you don't hate Jews. Campus activists try to rebrand a sadistic massacre of Jews as "justifiable resistance" and claim they don't hate Jews. They chant slogans that are known euphemisms for killing all Jews ("globalize the intifada") and eliminating the Jewish state ("from the river to the sea") and claim they don't hate Jews. And it doesn't matter if they are Jewish. Some Jews collaborated with the Nazis, too.

Contrast this progression with the attitudes of Israeli Jews their same age, called upon to fight for their very survival while coping with unimaginable losses. I want my children to know what they stand for and to be willing to defend it. I want them to inhabit the spirit of Sergeant First-Class Joseph Gitarts ז"ל, a computer science student who served in the Tank Corps, in a note to his parents: "I lived a good and interesting life, at the same time I was never afraid of death. I could have hidden and stayed away. But it would go against everything I believe and value and who I consider myself to be."

American college students need not risk their lives in their Ivy League dorms, but parents do take risks in sending their children to institutions that allow antisemitism to shape their character. To ensure their students' moral compass remains intact, parents must continue guiding their sons and daughters throughout their college years. By encouraging them to courageously represent their Jewish identity, beware of internalizing the hatred, and deepen their connection to Jewish values seeking truth and independent thought, our actions can help our students preserve their values while acquiring an education.