

New Priorities for American Jews

“What if we decided that widespread antisemitism had irreparably ruined these universities and their once-lofty reputations?”

by

SARA STEINHARDT BLOOM

The laughs have been few and far between lately. Maybe that is why it felt so good when Leon Cooperman, the billionaire investor, blurted out on live television that “these kids at the colleges have shit for brains.”

Mr. Cooperman, the first in his family to graduate college, took a big step toward achieving the American dream when he was accepted to Columbia University. I know this story well because the same is true of my father, Michael Steinhardt. In May 1957, he had breakfast with his usually absent father to tell him of his plans to attend City College. In response, my grandfather, who hadn’t finished eighth grade, let alone high school, told his son that there was this fancy school that wealthy Jewish boys attended, that he had read about it in the *New York Times* wedding section. If my dad could get into Wharton, my grandfather would pay for it.

That was nearly 70 years ago—and the American Jewish community is still lusting after entry into elite universities as if these institutions are the sole path to success, the most important sign of being on track to a lifetime of wealth and happiness. But recent events have shown us that the universities don’t, in fact, lust after us.

In the past few weeks, Marc Rowan, Ronald Lauder, Jon Huntsman, Les Wexner, and other philanthropists have had a long-overdue wake-up call alerting them that many academic institutions have seriously lost their way. The influence of antisemitic ideas on campus—cloaked in the guise of anti-Zionism promoted by student groups, faculty, and administrators—has finally outweighed some people’s desire to support the schools that once helped them achieve success. (It has even outweighed the hope that their donations would secure admission for their children and grandchildren.)

On many campuses, outrageous, blatant lies about Israel’s past and present cast the Jewish state as a genocidal, bloodthirsty invader of indigenous lands. Pressure from faculty and students, the

weight of immense donations from countries including Saudi Arabia and Qatar, and plain old cowardice have led too many school administrators to issue mealy-mouthed “both sides” statements about the October 7 attacks and to look the other way as students and outsiders aggressively march through campus, interrupt memorial vigils, threaten and even assault students, cheer for the recent massacre and wish for future ones, and tear down pictures of hostages.

This is a pathetic moment for the American university. It might shock us, but it shouldn’t surprise us.

Elite universities in particular have been consumed in recent years by the notion that the world can be seen simply as a race-based identity hierarchy of “oppressors” and “oppressed.” This is the hip new take on an ideology entrenched in universities for decades—one that has metastasized beyond them and into the media, corporate America, and American political life. This ideology argues that the West and the values that have built Western civilization are indelibly stained by racism and imperialism. American Jews, who are alleged to be white, or even “hyper-white,” are, the story goes, on the oppressor side of the ledger. The Jews’ alleged whiteness combines with their alleged imperialism to justify the claim that the Jewish presence in Israel is “settler colonialism.” Jews become the worst of all villains—which should come as no surprise to anyone who knows Jewish history.

And so we arrive, step by rotten step, at the ideas and behaviors on display on campuses today, where the mass killing of Jews in Israel is celebrated as an act of “resistance” or a just “military action” against “occupiers” by the “indigenous” population. In this twisted logic, Jews can never be genuine victims, even when they’re being murdered, raped, or kidnapped. Facts don’t matter—including the fact that Israel, the restoration of the Jewish people’s ancient homeland, was created as a refuge from millennia of genocidal attacks just like those perpetrated by Hamas terrorists in October.

We all know exactly what these institutions would have done if they had seen barbarism and slaughter in any other context celebrated on campus or anywhere else. Or if the posters being

proudly torn down (in some places, by Jewish students) featured victims of police brutality or homophobia rather than kidnapped Israelis.

Faced with this grotesque spectacle that violates all norms of humanity, civilization, and intellectual rigor, university leaders are—wait for it!—doubling down.

On a recent call with an elite university president (who is Jewish), whose Jewish students are genuinely terrified to be on campus, whose students and employees have demonstrated all of the above bad behaviors *and* been caught on camera doing so, this president said that her university had been “a leader.” Its response had been “remarkable.” The university has been “on it.” When I asked about the role that the same ideology infusing DEI programs on campus had played in demonizing Jews, she had absolutely no idea what I was talking about.

The hypocrisy would be laughable if I had the heart to laugh. We all know exactly what these institutions would have done if they had seen barbarism and slaughter in any other context celebrated on campus or anywhere else. Or if the posters being proudly torn down (in some places, by Jewish students) featured victims of police brutality or homophobia rather than kidnapped Israelis. The response would have been a full-throated condemnation and a rapid, public demonstration that the university was pursuing all possible means to identify and investigate those who had broken its rules and behaved so abominably. Instead: crickets. After incessantly blathering for years about condemning hate of all kinds, university administrators are showing us that, well, actually, it’s simply not so popular to announce that you’re punishing people who hate the Jews.

The moral rot of universities can be addressed only by the universities themselves. But if you are waiting for that to happen, don’t hold your breath.

Don’t be like the trustee who implored me to be “hopeful.” Don’t stick with a school because you think you’ll have a little influence from within. (This is the “what power does Marc Rowan have now?” argument. The answer: He has a lot of power, including perhaps depriving the university of a billion dollars in donations.) Don’t imagine that Band-aids such as new debate

clubs or morning prayer sessions for the soldiers and the hostages (both real examples that donors shared with me) are going to make a dent.

If pernicious ideologies have been baked into the soul of elite universities over the past 20 years (at least), then denial, appeasement, and fear have been baked into the soul of Jews over the past 20 centuries. It's time to stop.

When the trustees at universities decide that their institutions need an overhaul, they can begin the long road back to reclaiming moral clarity. They can call the Brandeis Center to investigate legal action against persistent discrimination, or submit to an external review of the impact that DEI has had on their campuses. When the presidents of these universities want to evaluate their policies regarding free speech, and stop using these policies as cover for hate speech, they can clean up their act so that professors who applaud civilian massacres are fired, and those who intellectually challenge their students are celebrated.

Jewish donors and trustees cannot and should not lead this charge. We will, of course, sue the universities to ensure that students' civil rights are protected, and that the universities comply with federal laws. But ultimately, for universities to change, their leadership must recognize that they are morally and intellectually bankrupt.

While Israelis figure out how to destroy Hamas, we in the American Jewish community need to rethink our priorities. Netanyahu has begun to call this Israel's "second war of independence." American Jews need to adopt a similar revolutionary approach and to start rethinking how we live in this country—starting with a loud refusal to tolerate people who slander us and behaviors that threaten us. Even if the Jewish story in America winds up ending the way it has in nearly every other country around the world, we need to go down fighting.

To start, in terms of campuses: University donors shouldn't be satisfied with a "better letter" or tepid plans outlining "listening sessions" and "education about antisemitism and Islamophobia." Our students are living in fear because their classmates are threatening to kill them and celebrating the deaths of their loved ones in Israel. *What other group would stand for this?* Take your cue from the impassioned speeches of Mijal Bitton at NYU or Professor Shai Davidai at

Columbia. Yell and cry and build Jewish pride and demand that the universities treat Jews with the respect that any human should deserve.

We need to demand recognition of the rot in the university system. We need to demand a wholesale change. And if we can't find it in the places we used to love, then we need to walk away. Find new places to care about, and start building entirely new programs and institutions.

“Imagination is more important than knowledge,” Albert Einstein said. While knowledge is limited, imagination knows no bounds. The Jewish people's long history of harnessing our imagination gives me hope. Instead of the Ivy League continuing to receive eight-figure checks from our philanthropists, let's get creative and think anew about how our children, grandchildren, and great-grandchildren can thrive in this country. Let's build some backbone and some pride already. As Bitton said: “Our generation's souls are being formed, right now, in fire.” Let's harness this for the rebirth of a strong, forceful, pride-infused Jewish life in America.

Some ideas:

What if all our high-school seniors in their second semester went on a week-long program in America to prepare them for life as American Jews—a prequel, if you will, to Birthright? Here they would learn that Jews are a civilization, a people, a culture, and yes, a religion. They would learn that the idea of the Jewish people does not fit easily in Western categories of identity, and that our very existence gives the lie to the ideology itself. They would learn that many of the best ideas in Western civilization either come from the Jews or have been embraced and spread by the Jews. They would learn Jewish pride and Jewish fierceness. They would learn Jewish history and maybe even some Hebrew.

What if we invested in the reconstitution of the Zionist youth movements that have lost steam in America over the past few decades? We can amplify the enthusiasm of our teens who *do* feel a sense of Jewish reawakening in this moment and support them to project and promote Jewish

pride—through weekend retreats, peer-led activities, camp summers, and experiences with their Israeli counterparts remotely and in person?

What if tens of thousands of 18-year-olds volunteered in Israel for a gap year between high school and college, or during college, or after it? They could learn Hebrew, apprentice under Israeli artists or entrepreneurs or teachers, pick carrots and potatoes, serve in the IDF, help rebuild the country after this trauma.

What if a significant portion of our college students went to elite universities in Israel, such as the Technion or Hebrew University or Ben-Gurion University or the Reichman Institute, where international students would be taught in English?

What if we built vibrant, exciting *ulpan*s (Hebrew-language schools) in major cities in America, so young adults who return from gap years or Birthright trips could learn to speak Hebrew and enjoy Israeli music, food, and film?

And what if we decided that widespread antisemitism had irreparably ruined these universities and their once-lofty reputations? What if we actively sought out and invested in the schools that are getting the current moment right? Let's identify universities that are actually devoted to justice, truth, scholarship, and high-minded ideals; where the difference between good and evil is obvious; and where the ideal of educating and building moral citizens for a diverse world becomes a reality. Let's take the steps to make Yeshiva University or Brandeis or other colleges into highly competitive institutions, beacons of educational freedom and light. Let's woo top college professors away from the Ivy towers—professors who are surely tired of walking on eggshells around their students, who want their instruction to center on critical thinking and controversy.

Einstein also said, "We cannot solve our problems with the same thinking we used when we created them." Our problems, the oldest problems in the world, have not changed. Let us now find the determination, the chutzpah, the humility, the courage, the pride, the audacity, and the dollars to fight our own war here in America. It is not as bloody as the war being fought in Israel. But it's our own front, with its own dangers, and it's on us to engage in the fight.

This article was published on November 6, 2023.