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Indulging the Antisemitism of Woke

Doron S. Ben-Atar

I neither favor nor oppose the Anti-Semitism Awareness Act of 2019. I have no illusions that its passage will alter the campus scene. The act is indeed, as Professor Pamela Nadell writes, the product of the “politics of gesture.” But the opposition to the act is even more so, as evidenced by Nadell’s performance according to her own account.

Over the last two decades, anti-Israel activities on American campuses have targeted Jewish and Zionist students and faculty and sought to silence voices that don’t toe the line of anti-Zionist orthodoxy. All too often, as Andrew Pessin and I documented in *Anti-Zionism on Campus: The University, Free Speech, and BDS*, these attacks escalated into bullying and real persecution.¹ Inside and outside the classroom, the orthodoxy of what Cary Nelson has aptly called “Israel Denial,” has fostered an intimidating antisemitic culture.² The failure of university administrations and faculty to safeguard the basic rights of pro-Israel voices has led some Jewish individuals and organizations, as diaspora communities have done for centuries, to appeal to the authorities for protection. The bullies and silencers, in turn, have rebranded themselves as champions of free speech. Because they would have been laughed at if they appeared as such in Congress, they took a page from the old antisemitic playbook, and turned to Jewish allies to carry their water. This is how Professor Nadell found herself an expert witness in front of Congress. Kenneth Stern of Bard College, who recently invoked the Jewish alibi “some of the protesters are themselves Jewish,” to cover a controversial antisemitic incident at Bard’s Hannah Arendt Center, chose

1. Andrew Pessin and Doron S. Ben-Atar, *Anti-Zionism on Campus: The University, Free Speech and BDS* (Bloomington: Indiana University Press, 2018).

2. Cary Nelson, *Israel Denial: Anti-Zionism, Anti-Semitism and the Faculty Campaign against the Jewish State* (Bloomington: Indiana University Press, 2019); Tammi Rossman-Benjamin, “Identity Politics, the Pursuit of Social Justice, and the Rise of Campus Antisemitism: A Case Study,” in *Resurgent Antisemitism: Global Perspectives*, ed. Alvin H. Rosenfeld (Bloomington: Indiana University Press, 2013), 482–520. See also the following articles about woke antisemitic polemics in the special issue “Word Crimes: Reclaiming the Language of the Israeli-Palestinian Conflict,” *Israel Studies* 24, no. 2 (2019): Donald G. Ellis, “Apartheid,” 63–72; Lesley Klaff, “Holocaust Inversion,” 73–90; Miriam F. Elman, “Islamophobia,” 144–56; Gabriel Noah Brahm, “Intersectionality,” 157–70; and Corinne E. Blackmer, “Pinkwashing,” 171–81.

her as his mouthpiece, walked her “through the bill’s legislative tangle,” and she went on to do his bidding.³

Professor Nadell told Congress that when “revolting racist incidents occur, the response from university leaders is immediate and multi-layered. We hold town halls proclaiming, ‘enough is enough’; we issue statements of condemnation; we offer distraught students opportunities for healing and counseling.” But who decides what is a “revolting” incident? What if the “revolting” incident is standing up for Israel and the healing and counseling reinforce anti-Jewish prejudice? Consider, for example, the case of philosophy professor Andrew Pessin and Connecticut College. In 2014, during *Tzuk Eitan*, the 2014 war between Israel and Hamas, Pessin described Hamas on his Facebook page as “a rabid pit bull chained in a cage.” Some seven months later the student newspaper, *College Voice*, ran three editorials comprising the entirety of the first three pages of the issue, accusing Pessin of racism and hate speech. Lamiya Khandaker, an activist in Students for Justice in Palestine who led the anti-Pessin campaign, suddenly discovered that Pessin’s Facebook post of the previous July made her “feel unsafe.” Two others charged that Pessin advocated genocide of the Palestinians. The paper’s editor-in-chief sponsored a petition targeting Pessin individually, and the readers’ comments section filled with nakedly antisemitic statements about Jewish money lending, control of media and banks, etc. The university administrators that Nadell places so much trust in joined in on the action. Connecticut College President Katherine Bergeron suspended classes and held campus wide mandatory workshops on racism and hatred, where anyone who dared to suggest Israel was not the ultimate representative of global evil earned the label of a “racist.” The faculty, spurred on by the “Office of the Dean of Institutional Equity and Inclusion,” eagerly joined the piling on. A colleague told Pessin to “stop making life difficult for other Jews still on campus by fighting back.” While Pessin went on medical leave, nearly every department in the college issued a public statement condemning hate speech and referring specifically to “the Facebook post of a certain faculty member.” Only

3. Batya Unger-Sargon, “I was Protested at Bard for Being a Jew,” *Forward*, October 12, 2019, accessed on October 17, 2019, <https://forward.com/opinion/433082/i-was-protested-at-bard-college-for-being-a-jew/>; Kenneth Stern, “I Was at the Bard Anti-Semitism Panel, and Saw Deep Disagreement, not Singling Out of Jews,” *Forward*, October 13, 2019, accessed on October 17, 2019, <https://forward.com/opinion/letters/433098/letter-to-the-editor-i-was-at-the-bard-anti-semitism-panel-and-saw-deep/>. Some challenged Unger-Sargon account of what transpired at Bard while others confirmed it. Regardless, Stern invoked the Jewishness of the protestors to counter the charge of antisemitism, as if Jews cannot be antisemitic.

one of the 200 members of Connecticut College faculty emailed Pessin to ask for his side of the story. And to make sure that no one doubted where the college stood, later that year Connecticut College conferred on Lamiya Khandaker, who invented and orchestrated the attacks, the “scholar activist” award of the college. This is the process Nadell took so much pride in. This is the process she suggests we trust.⁴

Hiding behind the First Amendment is disingenuous. The woke coalitions of micro-aggressions, #metoo, apartheid week, and virtue-signaling stand for the exact opposite—for intellectual repression and intimidation of alternative voices, for denying the right of anyone they deem offensive to set foot on campus. Ten years ago, when the woke coalition on my campus invited yet another anti-Zionist rabble rouser, a Jewish student asked me in front of her classmates why it is that no one would dare to allow an anti-Black, anti-gay, or anti-Latino speaker, but it’s absolutely okay to invite an anti-Jewish one. I replied that this is the way it has always been for Jews; I told her that my mother used to say, *shver tsu zayn a yid*, it’s hard to be a Jew. The student was not terribly impressed by my lackluster response. And I agree with her. But I don’t have any other answer. As for the ACLU, its sudden rediscovery of its commitment to the First Amendment rings hollow in the ears of those who know its history of support for campus bullies.

Nadell used her fifteen minutes of fame to put forward a partial and inaccurate picture of the problems that Jewish students, staff, and faculty face on US college campuses. Claiming to know “something about anti-semitism,” she reduced the contemporary challenges to threats coming from the radical right, which is a very minor phenomenon on campuses, and all but ignored the festering left. She condemned Donald Trump’s statement about Jewish disloyalty, but said nothing of Ilhan Omar’s crude antisemitism, and instead echoed the embarrassing failure of the Democrats to distance the party from Omar’s antisemitism by rehashing the sophomoric oppositions to all forms of hate. She denounced the alt-right rally in Charlottesville, but said nothing of the fairly regular physical assaults, mostly by African American and Latino youth, on ultra-

4. This incident was covered widely by the *Washington Post*, the *Jerusalem Post*, as well as in other Jewish publications. See, Richard Landes, “Salem on the Thames,” *The American Interest*, July 30, 2015, <https://www.the-american-interest.com/2015/07/30/salem-on-the-thames/>; David Bernstein, “All is not well at Connecticut College: An Andrew Pessin Update,” *The Washington Post*, August 25, 2015, <https://www.washingtonpost.com/news/voikob-conspiracy/wp/2015/08/25/all-is-not-well-at-connecticut-college-an-andrew-pessin-update/>; Noah Beck, “Pessin Affair Exposes Connecticut College Anti-Semitism,” *The Jerusalem Post*, February 3, 2016, <https://www.jpost.com/Opinion/Pessin-affair-exposes-Connecticut-College-anti-Semitism-443747>. All accessed October 23, 2019.

Orthodox Jews in Brooklyn. A scholar of women's history, one could hope that Nadell would at least mention the numerous incidents in the feminist camp, from the antisemitism of the organizers of the Women's March movement to the refusal to allow Jewish women to take part in gay pride marches. Not a word. Nadell acknowledged that the rising number of incidents is "indisputable," but asks that we see the entire picture. Jewish students who pass don't feel threatened. Self-identified Jews who support Israel report an alarming number of incidents, but according to Nadell even they wouldn't define their campuses as antisemitic. Citing a discredited Stanford University study by woke faculty that gave American campuses a clean bill of health, Nadell assured Congressmen that they should ignore the flood of news about attacks on Jews. What really matters is the first amendment rights of antisemitic bullies.

The former president of the Association for Jewish Studies chose to cover for the thuggish behavior of the woke rather than using the opportunity to educate Congress and the public about what it's like to be a Jew on American campuses. Ignoring the rich scholarly and popular literature on the subject, Nadell declared that "deplorable individual incidents do not prove that the campus environment is rife with antisemitism." So how are American campuses doing more recently? Just consider, for example, events in Manhattan's two leading campuses on September 25, 2019. At Morningside Heights, Columbia hosted Malaysia's prime minister and proud antisemite Mahathir Mohamad, who in the name of exercising his right to free speech engaged in Holocaust Denial. And in the Village, New York University's American Studies department hosted an all-star panel of academic antisemites, chaired by blood libel champion Jasbir Puar, that went on to deny the most basic elements of Jewish history.

Nadell, Stern, and their allies refuse to face the reality that the progressive political coalition has embraced what philosopher Elhanan Yakira called, "virtuous antisemitism."⁵ They placate and protect their allies in the woke coalition. They set themselves apart as the good rational Jews, unlike the *gevald* hysterical ones.⁶ They fantasize about a big intersectional anti-racist coalition standing up to the racism and antisemitism of the alt-right. That was Nadell's final point to Congress. She recalled a racist incident at American University and was inspired by Professor Ibram X. Kendi's grouping of "students of color and Jewish students";

5. Elhanan Yakira, "Virtuous Antisemitism," in *Deciphering the New Antisemitism*, ed. Alvin H. Rosenfeld (Bloomington: Indiana University Press, 2015), 77–102.

6. I have written more in depth about the phenomenon of Jewish koshering of contemporary antisemitism in Doron S. Ben-Atar, "Historicizing the Transhistorical: Apostasy and the Dialectic of Jew Hatred," in *Deciphering the New Antisemitism*, 105–50.

this is the same Kendi who had no problem with the antisemitic diatribes of Angela Davis. Nadell was moved by the embrace. I worry that this kumbaya moment obscures the troubling rates of antisemitism in the Black academic community.

Disagreements over the best response to campus antisemitism is part of a broader soul searching in the American diaspora. The majority of non-observant descendants of American Jews do not share the ethnic and religious bonds of previous generations. Conservative and Reform congregations are bleeding members at alarming rates. Many young progressive Jews are embracing universalist woke concerns and sensibilities, and distance themselves from particularist expressions of Jewish solidarity, be it Zionism, synagogue membership, or connection to any Jewish organization.⁷ And as the woke ascendancy strengthens its hold on academic culture and discourse, antisemitic spectacles are becoming the norm on many campuses. As my mother put it, *shver tsu zayn a yid*.

7. Daniel Gordis, *We Stand Divided: The Rift Between American Jews and Israel* (New York: Ecco Press, 2019).