INTRODUCTION BY THE EDITOR

In this article, Kenneth Stein walks the reader through the politics of yesteryear in order to explicate the complex dynamics of the University world today and how they affect Israel education. Citing eye-opening research, he illustrates the difficulties inherent in Israel education on the college campus, for faculty and students alike, while isolating the factors in Jewish education that might contribute to these problems.

"Awake ye from ye slumber, the call that is heard, oh my people"[1]

Kenneth W. Stein

Introduction

Thirty years ago, major American university campuses did not suffer from political apathy. When I was a graduate student in Middle Eastern history at the University of Michigan, the debate about the Arab-Israeli conflict was part of a rich menu of controversial topics which included organizing against the Viet-Nam War, issues of apartheid, teaching assistant's pay, the Cold War, minority rights, Nixon's impeachment, and the 1976 presidential election. Faculty, while angry at the Nixon Administration for a variety of reasons, did not automatically castigate Israel for shared foreign policy objectives with the United States. At Michigan anyway, it was unheard of for a teacher in an Arabic class to make a snide comment about a contemporary Arab-Israeli political issue. Today, students report that Middle Eastern language courses are replete with innuendo and negative political statements about Israel. Today, on some campuses, Israel is singled out as 'the root cause' of Islamic attacks on the U.S. A study sheet from an International Relations course at a large southern state university stated: "America's relationship with Israel is a major reason why al-Qaeda attacked America on September 11, 2001." I cannot recall any professor in an Arab politics course, using the classroom podium to preach a political outlook. Then, a debate criticizing Israel often included reference to Israel as a "colonialist, imperialist outpost." Today, language labeling Israel and its policies routinely includes harshly strident terms like 'racist,' 'apartheid,' and 'ethnic cleansing.' Today, as compared to three decades ago, antagonism against Israel on American campuses is sharper, more widespread, and antagonistic. What has happened on North American campuses that has unleashed such anger toward Israel and its policies? What factors have 'conspired' to put Israel in a defensive posture? The answers lie in how the conflict has changed, how it and Israel are viewed, what has and has not been taught in high schools and colleges over the last 50 years, and general access to information.

Faculty and students

First and foremost, Israel is not embraced as uniformly as it was in the early 1970s. This is true for Americans in general and for Jews in particular. The American Jewish peace camp is no longer tiny and insignificant; it is vocal and vigorously active. Few Jewish organizations are without dissenting voices about Israeli policies. Never considered three decades ago, the Palestinian quest for an independent state has gained acceptance and open support from the U.S. government, among American Jews and non-Jews alike, both on campuses and off. For the last two decades, many faculty strongly believe that Israel is tardy, recalcitrant, and haughty in the negotiating with the Palestinians. This is concurrent with the overall loss of Israel's mythical luster in the minds of American Jews in general. In 1993, when the American Jewish Committee surveyed American Jewish attitudes and asked, among other questions, "do you support or oppose the Israeli government's handling

of the peace negotiations with the Arabs?" 84% voiced support and 9% voiced opposition. When the same question was asked a decade later, *after* the failed Camp David 2000 Summit and *after* the wave of terrorist attacks against Israelis, 60% voiced support and 32% voiced opposition.[2] Today, as compared to the 1970s, college campuses and high school environments also reflect greater disagreement with Israeli policies, increased support for a Palestinian state, and a noticeably less positive identification of American Jewish college students with Israel.[3]

Israel is no longer viewed as "David" against "Goliath," but as the victimizer against the Palestinian victim. Support on campus for anti-Israeli positions sometimes comes from Israeli and Jewish academics, media writers, and sources that at best criticize Israeli policies, and at worst call for Israel's elimination. Reinforced by a plethora of substantive and propaganda-mired websites, and propounded regularly by notable Israeli professors and journalists, a negative view of every Israeli policy is instantly available. When coupled with multiple satellite reporting sources, Israel perennially appears on the defensive in sending out either a consistent or positive message.

Second, at many colleges and universities in America, at least among most faculty in social science and humanities departments, political attitudes are generally left of center. Public policy and foreign policy debates on campus generally start on the left and move to the left. This was also the case thirty years ago, however the breadth of the 'left' viewing attitudes has grown significantly. Dominant or prevailing attitudes of the 'left' exist in many professional academic associations, including Latin American studies, modern languages, African studies, Middle Eastern studies, the Organization of American Historians, and others. While noticeably successful in organizing scholarly activity internationally on matters relating to Israel, even the Association for Israel Studies cannot be categorized as center or right-of-center in political outlook.

Likewise, Jewish students on campus tend to be more liberal than conservative, embracing the underdog on many issues. Historical perspective is easily exchanged for fairness and evenhandedness. At a symposium on Israel and the peace process, sponsored by Brown University's Hillel in February 2004, several Jewish students who planned the symposium simply could not understand why Israel would not allow the Palestinians to establish their state in the West Bank, Gaza, and Jerusalem. According to these students: "Israel started the June 1967 war, it already stole Arab lands in 1948, it should by right give the Palestinians their state." Besides, they said, "United Nations Security Resolution 242 calls for "Israeli withdrawal from *all* [sic] the lands taken in the 1967 war." When the students were queried further about what happened in 1948 or the inclusion of '*all*' in UNSC 242, they could not tell me much about how either war started.

Third, Israel's campus reputation is singed with overt association to the Bush Administration. Bush's identification with Israel is a liability on American campuses, especially with the left-of-center outlook of many faculty who may instigate campus opposition to Israel. This is not a partisan statement. It is a reflection of political attitudes on university and college campuses. The reasoning goes like this: Bush is Sharon. Sharon is Bush. Both are engaged in a 'war on terrorism,' both use American weapons in targeted assassinations, both brutalize their opponents. Both use force to accomplish political ends. Thus, both are disliked immensely. During the Clinton presidency, even with the hope of an Oslo Process bringing a finality to the Palestinian-Israeli dispute, American campus disapproval of Israeli actions was present, but not acidly angry. In general, Clinton was not an object of campus derision by most faculty. However, George W. Bush is – and his closeness to Israel adds emotional fuel to a dislike of Israel and Israeli policies. Since the overthrow of Saddam Hussein in April 2003, this has been exacerbated by angry sentiment and cynical feeling that Bush and his Administration lied about why it was necessary to unseat Saddam Hussein. Sharon is also spoken of as untrustworthy in what is seen as a 'ploy' rather than sincere intent to withdraw from the Gaza Strip.

Fourth, for professors who support Israel's right to exist as a majority Jewish state but who criticize Israel's policies toward settlements or toward the Palestinians, maintaining the middle ground is much more precarious and discomforting today. There are fewer and fewer faculty who, if they know the relevant details, are willing to remain analytical and avoid polemics, let alone speak up in public settings. Say something negative about Israel on campus and one can be immediately labeled as anti-semitic, say something negative about the Palestinians or the Arab world, and one can be quickly classified as a hater of Moslems. It is rare that audiences listen to learn, they listen to have their prejudices reinforced. Opinions are so polarized about the conflict, that rarely do audiences let new facts or revisionist analyses obstruct their own ideologically resistant philosophy.

Fifth, at least until the aftermath of 9/11, high school students knew very little about foreign affairs. Students arriving on campus in the 1990s tended to be a-historical. Regardless of political orientation, historical perspective is in short supply among in-coming college students. For five years our Institute for the Study of Modern Israel has conducted pre-collegiate teacher workshops for teachers who want to infuse more Israel content in Jewish and non-Jewish academic settings. From their remarks we conclude that, with few exceptions, their students, now arriving on university campuses, do not know much about the origins of Zionism, important aspects of the modern Arab world, background to the Arab-Israeli conflict, modern Jewish history, eastern European Jewish history, or the history of modern Israel. Their knowledge is sporadic, and most often connected generally to Jewish holidays.

High school seniors today were born in the mid-1980s, with little awareness of key events in modern Israel, be it the 1948 Independence War, the 1967 War, or the 1973 War or its consequences. And, because they lack an understanding of the qualities, virtues, and characteristics that Jews employed in establishing and maintaining the state, they do not exhibit either a sense of pride or common purpose in relating to Israel today. They have little intellectual or philosophical base upon which to connect let alone support Israel or Israeli policies when Israel is discussed in either formal or informal settings on the college campus. With notable exceptions, Jewish students who go to Jewish schools have not been prepared to discuss 'the Israeli narrative,' and this is true regardless of Jewish denomination, or whether Jewish students emerged from supplemental, congregational, or day schools. Matriculating Jewish college students with little formal Jewish education, no visit to Israel, or Jewish camping experience can be expected to have even a less connection to Israel. Since 2000, crash remedial efforts such as those by the Israel on Campus Coalition and AIPAC have been highly successful in giving Jewish students the knowledge to confront and respond to anti-Israeli sentiment on university and college campuses. However successful these recent efforts are, they cannot make up for systematic neglect of Israel Studies on American campuses over the last five decades.

Lack of Israel Studies on American Campuses

Thirty years ago, when Jewish studies and Holocaust studies became serious components of college curricula, the study of modern Israel was not considered an area of academic interest. After the 1967 and 1973 Wars, petro-dollars from Iran and Middle Eastern Arab states and from wealthy individuals enriched North American university campuses. In a few places, endowed chairs, faculty positions, institutes, centers, and programs were established, mostly aimed at presenting Arab, Iranian, or Islamic views. In an almost immediate response, American Jewish donors with ties to a variety of colleges and universities established endowed chairs, positions, and programs in Holocaust and Jewish studies. Coming on the heels of emerging inter-disciplinary programs like Black studies and Women's studies, universities and colleges eagerly accepted funds to establish programs which interested alumnae donors. For colleges and universities with shrinking budgets, the opportunities to add new positions in social science and humanities disciplines, with a professor whose specialty was also in some field of Jewish studies, were attractive opportunities.

In the 1980s and 1990s, while Arab studies faculty grew slowly, the number of inter-disciplinary Jewish studies programs, centers and endowed chairs grew increased. During the same period, Israel studies programs, centers or endowed chairs were not created. To my knowledge, no Israel programs, centers, or endowed chairs were created at a North American university until the mid-1990s. In most Middle Eastern studies programs and centers, Israel was not the main academic focus. And if anything relating to Israel was taught, the focus was usually limited to the Arab-Israeli conflict, Israeli politics, Hebrew language, or Israeli literature.

By our count, there are some 3,000 major university or college campuses in the United States in 2004. There are relatively few Israel-related courses taught in comparison to the number of Jewish Studies, Holocaust and Middle Eastern Studies courses, and a relatively insignificant number taught compared to the number of American or European studies courses.[4] A rough comparison suggests that in any one campus in any single semester, 20 to 30 times as many courses are offered on American, European, and Third World history and politics than on an aspect of Israel and its modern origin. The few courses offered (aside from Hebrew language) tend to be oriented toward the conflict rather than more global topics like Israeli sociology, Israel's political institutions, or simply a course on modern Israeli history.

Among endowed chair holders, there are approximately two dozen positions in Holocaust studies in various disciplines at North American universities, and, by our count, only seven endowed chairs in Israeli studies, with mine at Emory University, the only full-time continuous position since 1997. A review of panels and papers offered at the last five annual meetings of the Association for Jewish Studies reveals very few that dealt with the history of modern Israel or origins of Zionism.

Academic Freedom or Polemics

To generalize about how Israel is taught in a variety of disciplines on American campuses today is a dangerous undertaking. It is wrong to assume that there is either a mass-organized nation-wide campaign against Israel or some university or college sanctioned objective to achieve that end. Laying the blame at the feet of Middle Eastern studies centers or programs is not accurate either. Of course there are professors who are Middle Eastern specialists who profoundly dislike Israel. Of course, they can influence hiring, monetary allocations, and on-campus programming. But one does not need to be a Middle East specialist to have anti-Israeli views. Any professors' choice of books for a syllabus can influence a course's orientation. Any professor can reduce a grade if a particular political viewpoint is not sufficiently noted on a mid-term or final examination.

The question is if and when this does occur, what should the student do? When does the student meet with the professor, or chairperson, or the dean of students to register a complaint? Or what if the student, who totally or partially disagrees with the professor's interpretation, on the examination just parrots back the professor's views to insure a good grade?

Conclusions

Like American society at large, the university environment is more polarized than it was during the Viet-Nam era. Both Jewish and non-Jewish faculty, including expatriate Israeli faculty, are more critical of Israel than ever before. There is no longer one story told about the establishment of the state of Israel Students like their teachers have access to diverse information, data, and viewpoints, which does not necessarily add up to a balanced understanding of international affairs or contemporary history. Students simply lack historical perspective in understanding or framing contemporary events. Again with notable exceptions, where pre-collegiate Jewish educational settings offer information about modern Israel or Zionism, the depth of what is taught is shallow and many teachers themselves lack the curriculum materials or time to offer knowledge about Israel, assuming of course that they or their schools possess an educational philosophy or raison d'etre for teaching Zionism or Israel.

On college campuses, the number of courses about Israel is meager as compared to Holocaust studies and Jewish studies offerings. And when courses about the Middle East are taught, professors are eager and more willing than ever to put Israel and America into the same unpopular bag. In a broader vein, many of the problems Israel faces on American campuses today are products of the 21st century. They are due to changes in world politics, intellectual outlooks, media access, and in some quarters a genuine antagonism leveled against Israel.

Still a substantial responsibility for the dilemma, which Israel faces on campus in 2004 rests on the collective shoulders of the American Jewish community itself. It failed to take advantage of extraordinary opportunities in past years to find time and space for the study of modern Zionism and Israel at the pre-collegiate and university level. Even at many Jewish camps, again with notable exceptions, a curriculum on Israel is only now being fashioned. Most Jewish students who arrive on campus know about holidays, traditions, customs, bible, and prayer, but they know little about the modern Israeli narrative. Most are liberal in their outlooks. Even recent graduates of Hebrew Union College and Jewish Theological Seminary rabbinical programs who were interviewed reported that while they may have studied in Israel, they never took academic courses on Israel or Zionism – and even they were exposed to faculty who were highly critical of Israel.

The phrase '*dor le dor*' means continuity from generation to generation. And yet, in the field of Israeli and Zionist history, both on and off campus, there are generational gaps. For more than half a century, political activism and fund-raising for Israel have been honed to finely tuned successes that connect American Jewry to Israel. However, "teaching it [Israel, Zionism, or any modern Jewish history] diligently to the children," has not achieved similar prominence. This presents a dangerous weakness, for if you do not know the story, you cannot tell it, and you certainly cannot defend it – even if you disagree with parts of it.

At Emory University in Atlanta, Georgia for 27 years, Dr. Professor Kenneth W. Stein is the William E. Schatten Professor of Contemporary Middle Eastern History, Political Science, and Israeli Studies, and Director of the Emory Institute for the Study of Modern Israel. He is the author of *Heroic Diplomacy: Sadat, Kissinger, Carter, Begin and the Quest for Arab-Israeli Peace*, (Routledge, 1999), and *The Land Question in Palestine, 1917-1939*, (University of North Carolina Press, 1984 and 2003). He is the Director of the Emory Institute for the Study of modern Israel and conducts summer teacher workshops on modern Israel for pre-collegiate teachers. For more information, please see **http://www.emory.edu/COLLEGE/JewishStudies/stein.html**

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1 *Author's note:* This assessment is a snapshot. It is impressionistic though supported by data and personal experiences from thirty years of teaching at the University of Michigan and at Emory University, and reflective of how Middle Eastern history and politics, Jewish studies, and Israel studies have evolved. Yet, depending upon their size, location, endowments, whether public or private, rural or urban, commuter schools or not, universities and colleges have different cultures. Within the same urban setting of Atlanta that is home to Georgia State, Spellman, Emory, Oglethorpe, Agnes Scott, Kennesaw, Clayton, and other colleges and universities, campus debate or focus about foreign affairs may not be miles apart physically but are vastly separated with regard to student interest in foreign affairs. Some reflect apathy on virtually all political issues, others are hotbeds for controversy; in some campus settings, foreign affairs in general, let alone the Middle East or Israel in particular, has no resonance at all.

2 See American Jewish Committee Surveys, 1993 and 2003 in http://www.jewishvirtuallibrary.org/jsource/US-Israel/ajcsurvey.html

3 Jehuda Reinharz, *Israel in the Eyes of Americans: A Call for Action*, Brandeis University, July 2003, http://www.cmjs.org/pdf/Pres.pdf

4 This research was undertaken in the Spring 2004 semester, by Ms. Anna Fuchs, a research assistant at the Emory Institute for the Modern Israel. I am indebted to her for her diligent and thorough research.

Editor's Suggested Discussion Guide:

- Kenneth Stein argues that one of the problems of Israel education is that most Jews in the United States do not have a factual or historical knowledge of Israel. Do you feel you have a strong working knowledge of Israel, her history and facts? Does your educational venue offer academic instruction about Israel? Would you know where to turn to if you wanted to increase your knowledge of Israel?
- How do you feel about the statement that even rabbinical schools do not offer any academic courses on Israel or Zionism? Would you expect to find such courses offered in your community?
- Why do you think that Israel study centers, along the lines of Women's Studies centers, were not created on campuses across the United States? Do you find compelling reason from this article to begin one in your community? Who could/should fund such a venture? Who could/should be involved in such conversations?
- How do Stein's arguments about lack of academic knowledge of Israel relate to and impact our reading of Ezrachi and Margolis' articles on the need to re-imagine the relationship of Jews in the United States with Israel and Israel education?
- How do we prepare our professional and volunteer leaders in our communities with the skills and knowledge to reach the college population?