

Expanding the Israel Base

Raphael Cohn

Over the past few months, there has been intense debate over the question of how much, if any, criticism of Israel is acceptable within the American Jewish community. Much of the debate was stirred by a recent publication by the American Jewish Committee (AJC) entitled “Progressive Jewish Thought and the New Anti-Semitism.” In this report, Alvin H. Rosenfeld, an English professor and the director of the Institute for Jewish Culture and the Arts at Indiana University in Bloomington, describes what he sees as the problematic participation of Liberal Jewish intellectuals in anti-Zionist discussion which borders on anti-Semitism. Elements of the essay were discussed everywhere from *The New York Times* to *CNN*, and it forced all supporters of Israel to question where the line is between legitimate criticism of Israeli policies and outright anti-Semitism, and to question how open our communities are to such criticism of Israel. Many of those criticized for their left-of-center stance on Israel have complained about this unwarranted censure, claiming that by branding anyone critical of Israeli policies an ‘anti-Semite,’ the mainstream American Jewish community is squelching legitimate criticism, while they should instead focus on actual anti-Semitism.

In some ways, the Penn community has been a microcosm of this national debate. The stigma associated with being a Jewish critic of Israeli policies has been keenly felt by many Jewish students who have not found a

platform for their voices within the mainstream Jewish groups at Penn, such as Hillel and Chabad. In February, there were a slew of events as part of Palestine Awareness Week at Penn, put on by a number of groups on campus including the Penn Arab Students Society (PASS), the Muslim Students Association (MSA), Students for Justice in Palestine (SJP), and others. The event that drew the most attention was a lecture by Norman Finkelstein, a controversial figure for what he sees as the manipulation of the memory of the Holocaust in order to immunize the Israeli state from criticism.ⁱ The controversy surrounding Finkelstein's visit and the ensuing discussions about free speech, while upsetting for many, seems to have awakened a spirit of activity and a desire to engage in debate among many people on campus. The intensity and tension in the room was palpable during the Undergraduate Assembly (UA) meeting where the event was discussed. Hopefully, the spirit of activism and energy which was generated by that controversy will lead us to continue to discuss and engage in important issues.

But perhaps most important is the light that this controversy shed on the inability of people with a broader range of views on the Israeli-Palestinian Conflict to find a voice in the mainstream Jewish community.

With regard to the Finkelstein debate, it became remarkably clear that the only official voice from Hillel on the Palestinian-Israeli conflict is generally that of the Penn Israel Coalition (PIC).ⁱⁱ PIC is, in essence, an Israel advocacy group, whose job is to promote Israel's image on campus and to lobby the United States government to support Israel. Most of us can agree on the importance of American support of Israel, and the important job of lobbying our politicians

i. In the context of this discussion, it is interesting to note that many within the Jewish community immediately associate Finkelstein's name with Holocaust denial, while he very clearly does not deny the Holocaust. His theories are based on approximations which say that between five and six million Jews were killed during the Holocaust. This is seen by some as exemplifying the ability of certain groups to de-legitimize critics of Israel by branding them as anti-Semites.

ii. Penn Israel Coalition is Penn's non-partisan pro-Israel student organization that works toward increasing Israel advocacy and awareness on campus and strengthening the US-Israel relationship.

to support a country with which many of us feel a strong connection and which certainly needs the support of a foreign power to intervene on its behalf on the international stage. In no way do I wish to criticize PIC for its position. I am happy that PIC exists to support the state of Israel and acknowledge that they do a wonderful job of spreading pro-Israel attitudes. But I think that at the same time, we can agree that if the *only* Jewish group on campus that discusses Israel is one of Israel *advocacy*, then there will be very little substantial discussion of sensitive political issues. This became evident to many people who were involved in the panel sponsored by the Penn Arab Student Society (PASS) on the topic of international law in the Palestinian-Israeli conflict earlier this semester. During the initial planning stages, PIC was approached to participate in the PASS panel. PIC of course refused to participate, and rightly so. If the goal of a group is to promote Israel's image, then they certainly should not engage in a discussion where many flaws of Israeli policies will be discussed. Fortunately, Kedma was then approached by PASS, and given the chance to show that there are other groups within the Jewish community who are in a position to engage in meaningful discussion about the issues, and had the privilege of sending two speakers to participate in the event.

Still, I find it disturbing that those who support Israel, but think that the best way to support Israel is not necessarily to always be in full support of whatever Israel does, cannot feel comfortable expressing these views in mainstream Jewish communities. Some have argued that we should not air dirty laundry, and that such discussion should be limited to within our own circles—but even this has not happened. The apparent lack of meaningful discussion within the Jewish community is perhaps the most disturbing aspect of this issue. Furthermore, by claiming that it's harmful to allow these viewpoints to be aired outside of our community, we provide outsiders with the impression that we are a closed off population, not interested in engaging truthfully and openly with the world around us.

Even more troubling is the apparent unwillingness of our community

to criticize those who exploit the perception of anti-Israel media-bias, apprehension about anti-Semitism, and fear of the threat of imminent attacks by fundamentalist Muslim countries. This exploitation of fear is used by some in order to radicalize the fearful into becoming participants in an anti-Arab, anti-Muslim frenzy. The week before many of Penn's Jewish student groups petitioned the UA to attempt to curb the Political Science Department's co-Sponsorship of the Finkelstein lecture (an issue on which Kedma has no official position) many of those same groups sponsored a pro-Israel lecture featuring two well known defenders of Israel. While, overall, there were many educated and legitimate arguments given in support of Israel at the event, it was disquieting to hear one of these speakers proclaim that students from Arab countries should be allowed to study the humanities in American universities, but should be barred from studying the hard sciences out of the fear that they might use that expertise to attack America and/or Israel. What was even more alarming, however, was the thunderous applause that followed. I would hope that most people in that audience of college students and Jewish community members do not actually agree with such a racist viewpoint, but were only rallied to applause by the fear instilled in them by the previous portions of the presentation. Even so, by allowing such people to promote fear and racism, without any criticism from the mainstream Jewish community that supports them, we will be rightfully accused of condoning such actions.

Fortunately, there have been some positive developments regarding this issue within the Jewish community at Penn. There have been a number of events co-sponsored by Penn Hillel and Arab and Muslim groups on campus. It seems as though this trend is strengthening and becoming a central component of Penn Hillel's participation in campus activities, and I believe this can bring about an increase in understanding and cooperation between these communities. Even more encouraging is the interest in dialogue about this issue within the Jewish community. In addition to the spirit of activism sparked by the Finkelstein controversy, Hillel recently hosted an organization called The Jewish Dialogue

Group to mediate a discussion among students with diverse opinions on Israel. The dialogue was lively and enlightening, and hopefully signaled a willingness on the parts of people on all sides of the discussion to engage in honest and open conversation about some very sensitive issues.

In Kedma's short history, the question about publishing criticism of Israel has come up a surprising number of times. Our policy regarding criticism of Israel has been to publish articles and participate in dialogue as long as the claims being made are well-substantiated and researched and do not deny the right of existence of the State of Israel. We have been questioned and even slandered regarding, for instance, our publication in Issue One of an article about Palestinian women in the Second Intifada, and our participation in the PASS panel discussion mentioned above. And yet, our belief has remained that a dedication to meaningful discussion and dialogue is essential to any sort of brighter future for Israel and the Palestinians. I hope that this belief is shared by enough people in our American Jewish community to ensure that the type of productive dialogue that encourages openness to the viewpoints of others, thus giving us the ability to learn and grow, will become commonplace and even expected.

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