

How US universities went from ivory towers to bastions of antisemitism - opinion

The combination of the infusion of money from Middle Eastern countries and a social movement to promulgate the Palestinian cause found its habitat at higher schools of learning.

By AMY NEUSTEIN

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A POSTER of people taken hostage during the October 7 Hamas attack on Israel is torn, outside the gates of Harvard University. (photo credit: BRIAN SNYDER/REUTERS)

In the early part of the 20th century, Jews were subject to restrictive quota systems that prevented them from attending [elite universities](#). This was most pronounced at the graduate level, forcing many aspiring Jewish doctors to study abroad. If a Jew wanted to earn a PhD, the doors were mostly closed. Schools such as Columbia University or the University of Chicago were notorious for barring Jewish doctoral candidates.

This changed by the late 1950s, when the doors at reputable universities began to swing open to cultivate young Jewish minds. Many of the [Jewish students](#) were top of their class, and they repaid their universities handsomely with alumni dues, contributions, and endowments.

What is not spoken about, and perhaps not publicized very much, is how universities in the 1970s, in a mad rush to balance their debt, began to take in very large endowments and contributions from the oil-rich Arab countries. I know this firsthand. I was a doctoral candidate at Boston University in the '70s, earning my PhD in sociology in May 1981. I sat in class with Arab students, who were mostly from Iran and Saudi Arabia.

How universities took money from Arab nations

Sitting in class with Arab students, I stood out as a Jew. This was obvious from my dress code and my rushing out of the classroom early Friday afternoons to catch a trolley back to my apartment so that I could light candles in time for the Shabbat. Yet, in spite of my overt Jewish appearance, I did not encounter antisemitism from my Arab classmates, nor did I encounter any prejudice from my instructors, most of whom were not Jewish.

In fact, I recall quite vividly how one of my instructors would talk openly in class about his experiences as a Jew growing up in Chicago in the '40s. His name was Dr. Tom Cottle. He would later become famous for his interviews with theatrical personalities in his television series, *Tom Cottle: Up Close*. When Dr. Cottle would speak about his Jewish upbringing and culture, the class was entranced. There was no sign of disrespect or enmity from either the Arab students or the American non-Jews in the class.



PROTESTERS RALLY against Israel at Harvard University, October 2023 (credit: BRIAN SNYDER/REUTERS)

SOMETHING CHANGED. Around the early '90s, a match was lit. The combination of the infusion of money from Middle Eastern countries and a social movement to promulgate the [Palestinian cause](#) found its habitat at higher schools of learning. The university setting presented an ideal place to situate and nurture a cause that centered on a presumed "underdog." This galvanized students – sadly among those students were many Jewish students from tepid to nonexistent Jewish backgrounds – to champion the rights of the Palestinians while condemning Israel as "colonizers."

Certainly, the masterminds behind this movement understood that students are easily beckoned by social causes that make them feel empowered. By defending the rights of those they feel are less fortunate, they assuage their guilty conscience for enjoying their middle-class comforts that others do not. This behavior is commonly seen in students born into privilege. By identifying with those of a lesser class, they can, in those vicarious moments when they envision themselves downtrodden and disenfranchised, feel vindicated.

It was not until around 2010 that the small fires that started in the '90s would become wildfires raging out of control. The factor contributing to this conflagration was the popularly promoted DEI platform at universities nationwide. "Diversity, Equity, and Inclusion," while in principle well-meaning, in practice became a dangerous albatross for the Jewish population in particular. This happened once the Palestinian cause was packaged together with, or entangled in, the campaign for equity and inclusion of those American demographic groups that had been excluded from ascending the ladder of American privilege.

One must ask, how can we denude American universities of venom and strife? Certainly, as we saw in the Congressional hearings last week, by holding the presidents of universities accountable for the menacing and threatening hate speech on campus, we have taken the first big step. However, the seeds of venom sown so many decades ago require a rethinking of patronage of secular institutions of higher learning.

We've seen how they present a precarious setting for Jewish students, exposing them to violent diatribes and physical threats. In an era where we've witnessed more mass shootings on college campuses (and other places too) than at any other time in history, it becomes a fortiori even more dangerous for Jewish students, in particular, for they now have the added burden of facing a campus rife with antisemitism.

Alas, there are no easy answers. But we must not close the book on asking questions either. For the reason that, by asking questions we can readily anticipate the answers will come, perhaps if not today, then tomorrow.

The writer, a PhD, is the author/editor of 16 academic books. She writes on institutional structures and corroded values. Her latest book, Moral Schisms, will be published by Oxford University Press. She resides in Fort Lee, New Jersey.