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How to Fight ANTI-SEMITISM • Ze'ev Maghen • Columbia University, 1990

Dear Jewish Student:

To say this essay caused a stir at Columbia University would be quite an understatement. Never in our years at college have we seen so many people in so many different places and contexts discussing and debating the issues raised by a single piece of literature. It has dramatically changed the way many students think, inspired large numbers of unaffiliated Jews to get in touch with their Jewishness, and, most importantly, it has galvanized us, turning passivists into activists and activists in new directions.

The starting point for the essay is an event which occurred on our campus—a lecture delivered by a City University professor of African studies to whom a number of anti-Semitic slurs have been attributed— but we think its message is for all of us, so we've decided to share it with all of you. Many of you may be deeply involved in Jewish practice and activism, others more peripherally so or not at all—in each case we feel this article speaks to you. The positions expressed in its pages are "controversial," that is, they are not the current conventional ones. They will make some of you mad, some of you delighted, and, we expect, leave none of you indifferent. Here's hoping it sets you on fire as it did us!

Sasha Levin

Richard Price

Dasee Berkowitz

Miriam Cahn

Sarah Garfinkel

Arnon Goldstein

Stacy Fruen

Last Monday night Leonard Jeffries came to Columbia, and I went to hear him speak. Seldom have I experienced such a welling-up of nausea, such an onslaught of disgust, such a feeling of helplessness in the face of unbounded ignorance, such a feeling of hopelessness for the predicament of my people, as I did that night. Yet strange to say, all those gut-wrenching, heart-searing emotions converged upon me before the esteemed professor began his demagogic discourse, indeed, before I even entered Ferris Booth Hall. For it was there, standing in line on that building's patio, that I had the misfortune to witness one of the most saddening and despair-inducing spectacles I have seen in a good while.

There on the grass opposite were my fellow Jews, pleading with the crowd to understand that hating Jews is bad, and that (even worse) it has "no place in multiculturalism." They were there "to express our anger, and our fear" (our fear!). As I listened to these members of my supposedly proud family begging the gentiles (who for the most part ignored them, busy chatting away amiably enough): "We appeal to you, look into our faces, see our pain," my revulsion soared to unprecedented heights; as I watched these representatives of my supposedly creative community standing silently (!) behind a fence (!!)) holding up signs rehearsing the same old useless platitudes, I felt ashamed; and when I heard the pathetically comical "dialogue" between one group of retreating Jews half-heartedly crying, "We want Jeffries fired!" (quite the maximalists, aren't we?) and another group frenziedly hushing them (no doubt the chant was deemed inconducive to the all important "image" the second group was so "responsibly" and "moderately" seeking to evoke—after all, the "Spectator" might get the wrong idea!)-when my ears caught this finale of idiocy, which produced its share of chuckles and smirks from those standing in line, I confess that I bowed my head and thanked the Lord that next year I will live in Jerusalem forever, and

never again have to subject myself to the flagrant manifestations of the ever-new lows to which some diaspora Jews will descend.

Have you ever written an assiduously researched, minutely and delicately crafted twenty-five page paper and then lost it in the computer? If so, you might grasp a tenuous inkling of a smidgen of a notion of how frustrating and maddening it is to have to review all over again, from absolute scratch, a proposition which it once took so much effort, so much thought, so much argument, so much ink and so much blood to finally and (it was thought) incontrovertibly prove: YOU DON'T PROTEST ANTI-SEMITISM. How incredible that it still needs to be said!

A man calls you a pig. Do you walk around with a sign explaining that, in fact, you are not a pig? Do you hand out leaflets expostulating in detail upon the manifold differences between you and a pig ("A pig has a snout, I have a nose; a pig wallows in mud, I only occasionally step in a puddle, and then, of course, inadvertently...")? Do you stand on a soap box and discourse eruditely on why, in general, it is extremely not nice to call people pigs, and appeal to the populace to please have no truck with an individual rude and nasty enough to say such things about an upstanding citizen like yourself?

Fellow Jews, where in hell is your dignity? Where is your abhorrence of useless, thoughtless, counterproductive endeavor? Of course we want people to befriend us, to treat us with proper regard, that's only natural. Of course we desire and advocate amicable relations between ourselves and other ethnic and religious groups (after all, who came up with "Nation shall not lift up sword against nation, neither shall they learn war anymore"-a Martian?). But let's make a moment's inquiry, shall we, into the analogous microcosm of a healthy, strapping, youthful, well-adjusted organism-say, the reader- and examine how s/he interacts socially toward the same ends in his/her individual life.

You want people to like you, right? Well, and how do you go about achieving this? Do you launch a campus-wide "Don't Dislike Dan!" campaign, replete with billboard, petition, full-page ads, a couple of lobbying organizations and occasional sky-writing? If some miscreant simply won't be your pal, in fact actually takes an overt aversion to you despite all your exertions to woo his affection and heal the breaches, would you....picket in front of his dorm? Or do you run your life a bit differently, concentrating your time and effort on being the best "yourself" that you can, growing and learning and living and enjoying, treating others fairly and kindly, setting up criteria for right and wrong and trying like the dickens to adhere to them and if despite all this a few folks nevertheless persist in being incurable slimeballs and absolutely refuse to interact genially and courteously.....@!%#?& them, as my grandmother says-you move on.

Clearly any sane human would opt for the latter course, seeing as the alternative is not only laughably ludicrous, but profusely demeaning and unforgivably ineffective. And yet as a group, as a people, we Jews have inexplicably chosen to live this very same absurd alternative. The current trend among the vast majority of American Jewish youth is lamentably not toward being the best "ourselves," the best Jews, we can be; for most Jewish young people in this country the condition is rather one of fundamental ignorance of the enormous treasure and incomparable high that is full, glorious, meaningful Jewish life. At the same time, the preponderance of highly-funded Jewish organizations in America today (and the ones gobbling up the largest chunks of young, activist Jewish talent), rather than confronting this lethal problem, are focused almost entirely on one thing: perimeter "defense." So terribly many of us have never experienced the warmth and splendor of a genuine Shabbat, have never learned a word of our language or set a foot down in our homeland, so terribly many of us are assimilating and intermarrying at a rate auguring nothing short of national oblivion-yet dare anybody

disturb us during this gradual (not so gradual!) disappearing act by calling us names or painting swastikas on our walls, and we and our organizations will raise a hue-and-cry so loud, so fierce and so heavily financed that it will be sure to accomplishÖ..nothing. Instead of brilliant rays of edifying, stimulating light pointed inward at our own people, we have dull, feckless, tinker-toy weapons (like those demonstrations) trained outward at "them." Is it possible that, like some tacky third-world dictatorship, we intermittently parade this military plastic-wear to distract attention from our own internal shortcomings? Otherwise how explain our unflagging willingness to fritter away entire afternoons and evenings at other peoples ' events, monotonously yammering potent pearls of efficacious eloquence like "Hey, Hey, Ho, Ho, racism has got to go!"-when we have so much work to do? Or is it just that it's so much easier to react than to act?

Perhaps more unbearable still is our other habitual response tactic: the interminable and unsurpassably self-degrading campaigns to ingratiate and "explain" ourselves to our neighbors (think they find this attractive?), to "educate them about us" (when are we going to educate us about us?). We've spent sixteen years now-ever since the "Infamous UN Resolution"-and who knows how many millions of dollars and people-hours, trying to teach non-Jews what Zionism isn't. My God: when are we going to start teaching Jews what Zionism is?

Instead of growing, learning, living, enjoying and furthering Jewish individual and national life, our *raison d'etre* and collective consciousness these days might be formulated: "Keep them at bay!" When it comes to concerted action, we are less Jews than we are anti-anti-Semites. This is why an egregious buffoon like Leonard Jeffries, with all his spurious bombast and hate-mongering pseudo-scholarship, actually has a leg up on us: because while he focuses his time and energy on the blacks, we focus our time and energy -- on the blacks.

But look: if you insist on paying such neurotic attention to what the Black Students Organization and other non-Jews on campus might possibly be led to think about you, at least be aware that these feeble, defensive, reactive pleas for justice and for people to be nice to you achieve the opposite-they only make you further despised. As so many of our great leaders and thinkers have taught us, as so many events in even our most recent past have shown us, it is only when we stop begging for approval from the world, only when we have enough self-esteem to look inward for our strength, to aim at living up to our own rigorous moral and ethical standards and not those that others none too ingenuously set up for us, only when we have the pride (and the ability) to be flagrantly, emphatically and unapologetically who we are-only then, our luminaries, our experience and our common sense tell us, will others begin and continue to respect us.

Or did you really think you could protest anti-Semitism away? Did you honestly believe that rally number seven-hundred-fifty-six-thousand-four hundred-and-twenty-three was going to produce results all its predecessors, in America, Europe and elsewhere, consistently have not? And just how long are you prepared to stand there and "reason" with a man as he slams his fist into your gut over and over and over again? How long will you kneel and appeal to him while he keeps ramming his boot into your supplicant face? A day? A week? A year? Three thousand years? Enslavement, expulsions, crusades, pogroms, inquisitions, blood libels, massacre upon massacre, every type of specious accusation has been hurled at us, every form of persecution known to man has been heaped upon us. Less than fifty years ago the entire world watched as six million of our people were ground into dust in the single greatest butchery in the history of humankind. See: less than one year later there was a spontaneous, murderous pogrom in Poland. Does this sound like a phenomenon you can reason with? Even the blood of almost one half of our nation did not satiate the anti-Semites (sometimes I wonder if it educated us).

Ask yourself: why are we still here? What is the key to our unique, defiant, unparalleled survival against all odds and forecasts? St. Paul predicted we'd "wither away," Hegel said our jig was up, Spengler consigned us to "winter season," Toynbee called us a fossil. Wrong, gentlemen. So what is it, this ingredient that makes us the "Indestructible Jews?" What, as Mark Twain asks, is the secret of our immortality? Surely none of you will tell me that down four millennia, and through the wrenching vicissitudes and savage depredations of exile, it was our appeals, protests and screams for equitable treatment that sustained us, kept us in life, and brought us to this season. No, my friends, our history teaches us a different lesson: that those who, rather than appealing and screaming, choose to build, to educate toward cultural and national revival, to defy anti-Semitism not with Jewish pleas and Jewish hand-wringing but with Jewish learning, Jewish observance, Jewish strength and Jewish achievement—such are those who bring our people survival, salvation, a future. The immensity of the gap separating these two approaches is impossible to underestimate.

How often, my fellow Jews, we gather to "oppose"; how rarely we gather to create. When, may I ask, was the last time any of us got together to form a movement for real change? When was the last time we stayed up all night debating and planning how to build and improve Israel, how to arrest and reverse assimilation in America (these are real Jewish issues, the true imperatives of our time—is it our pitiful inability to think "big" that precludes us from seeing these tasks as our own and tackling them on the necessary scale?). Once upon a time such pragmatic, productive idealism was the pre-eminent pre-occupation of Jewish college students, this was how they spent their evenings, dreaming, planning, implementing. What has happened to us? How have we become bureaucratized, mediocratized, too cynical to dream, too complacent to struggle? The most we can muster in the face of our enemies, in the face of our own future, is routine (even our projects and solutions are routine), inertia, and sameness. For God's sake, if nothing else, aren't you bored?

Some Jews just can't tear themselves away from their "image" obsession. I remember, about three years ago at the beginning of the intifadah, Brigadier General Amnon Straschnow of the Israel Defense Forces was invited to address the students over at the Law School. I brought a class of 10th graders I was teaching at the time. A relatively small group of Arab students stood at the back of the auditorium, and each time the general rose to speak, they opened up with "P.L.O.!, P.L.O.!", and "Nazi! Fascist!" After the honored guest had been thrice thus humiliated at his opening word, the Jewish Student Union finally decided to act. One oh-so-professional, oh-so-tolerant, oh-so-moderate member of this august association after another mounted the rostrum, and in soothing tones pleaded with the Arab students, spoke about freedom of speech, about an "agreement" they had reached previously with the Arab Club that the speaker would not be molested. The general got up again, approached the microphone, opened his mouth to speak, and "P.L.O.! P.L.O.! Nazi! Fascist!" This went on for an hour. At one point the Jewish establishment descended from the "bimah" to talk "heart-to-heart" with the offending students. I actually overheard one Jew say petulantly, "but you promised..."

Many students, myself included, when the shame and embarrassment of allowing an Israeli general to be thus treated at a Jewish event had risen into our throats, advised having the police, who were present, eject the Arab students, which was in fact entirely legal, or, short of that, doing it ourselves. Other, wiser students in the upper echelons of the JSU counseled against this, however. Over the microphone they assured us that in days and weeks to come the Arab students would be the ones to look bad, to be condemned, pilloried by the "press," banished from the olympian corridors of student political power. We should not spoil that image by doing anything whatsoever untoward. Brigadier General Amnon Straschnow was led, barely concealing his shame and rage, down the aisle and out of

the room, as a few of us, awkwardly and with stupid looks on our faces, tried to sing Hatikvah. Epilogue: my friend in the JSU lamented to me the following week that the university senate had inexplicably refused to condemn the Arab students; nobody was pilloried in any press campaign and the "Spectator" barely reported the event once if I recall; General Straschnow went home to Israel and wrote a contemptuous article in Ma'ariv about how timid American Jewish youth are.

Well, by now you're indignant. I've not only insulted your venerated establishment (wait, there's more!), but I've offered only criticism while advancing no proposals for a more fruitful approach. To remedy that, I'll tell you what I told a high-ranking member of the JSU whilst standing on Columbia's steps two weeks prior to the Professor Griff incident (for those not hip to the scene, this sophisticated gentleman was a rapper who had a few choice observations to make about members of our tribe).

I told him that the only answer to anti-Semitism is Jewish growth, is Jewish knowledge, is Jewish joy, is a deepened Jewish commitment, a more powerful internal Jewish cohesion, a more vigorous dedication to Jewish and Zionist outreach. I told him that you combat anti-Semitism by promoting that which the anti-Semite wants to crush: Jewish vitality. I told him that affirmation, not negativity, is the way to fight, the way to win. I told him that instances of anti-Semitism are often, sadly, the most powerful catalysts of Jewish identity resurgence. Don't just sit there with ashes on your head bemoaning and "condemning" them (as if an anti-Semite or potential anti Semite gives a damn about your condemnation!)-exploit them against their own ends, toward your ends (ah, but do you have ends? Look in the mirror and ask yourself: "do I have ends?"). Tachlis: I told him that at the "crisis" meeting the week prior I had seen more unaffiliated Jews come out of the woodwork than ever before-they were angry, confused, looking for some way to respond, for something to do. The anger was really pride, the confusion really searching. For God's sake, it's the only time you may have such an opportunity, such a wide, hungry Jewish audience-don't use them as bodies to stand and chant inanities aimed at uninterested non-Jews and then send them home with nothing! Involve them in Jewish rejoicing, show them Jewish fire, have a massive Kumzitz smack in the middle of campus with five guitars and fifty Israeli flags and sing till your soul comes out of your body and give divrei Torah and tell stories of Israel and hand out positive, thought-provoking literature and daven a melodious Ma'ariv (evening prayer) under the stars and dance like wild animals and rend the air and your hearts with Hatikvah and distribute invitations to Shabbat dinner and make new Jewish friends! If you feel the need, in the middle of it all put up a sign: "Professor Griff, go suck an egg. Am Yisrael Chai!" (the People of Israel lives). Let Stokely Carmichael rant, let Professor Griff rap, let Leonard Jeffries rave-in the meantime you build (Zionism taught us this-in many ways, this is the essence of Zionism). Oh and by the way: the presence of a bonafide anti-Semite on campus is not a pre-requisite for engaging in such activity!

The Jewish Student Union's response to the above recommendation/ exhortation was, after "taking it under consideration" in consultation with "the appropriate constituent committees," not only to reject it in favor of their impotent, one-size-fits-all, anti-Semitism-isn't-a-Jewish-problem-its everybody's-problem (funny how we're the only ones who seem to suffer from the problem), generic "anti-hatred" rally (even a Palestinian Arab speaker was brought in to give it that really "multicultural" feel)-they further alternately insisted and hysterically implored that we not bring even one Israeli flag (to a rally against a man who had suggested that all Israelis should be killed) as it would detract from "the atmosphere of unity we are trying to foster" (in other words, as long as I'm not me, as long as I'm not a demonstratively proud Jew and Zionist, I can join that great unified broth of cultural and ethnic homogeneity-where have I heard that argument before?)

[STOP THE PRESSES! As we scribble, fate has conspired to provide us with a regrettable but particularly

apt illustration of our point, in the form of a fiendish filcher who evidently made off with some fifty mezuzahs from the doorposts of a corresponding number of slumbering Barnard women. The obligatory crisis convocation was convened, dean and appropriate Jewish notables in attendance, the despicable purloiner was duly and harshly condemned (in absentia), and of course "anger, fear and pain" were expressed (these three show up at so many Jewish functions lately that I'm beginning to think of them as some kind of ethnic Jewish cuisine-"for tonight's entree we have anger smothered in fear; for dessert, pain"). Meanwhile, the "healing process" was also inaugurated (oh please-nobody was murdered or pillaged, some mezuzas were stolen!). That exhausted the official Jewish community's response. Well isn't it clear, we're missing a terrific opportunity here to capitalize on the nefarious deed and utilize it for the good! Of course news of the crime spread like wildfire, and now everybody who's anybody is talking mezuzas, even Jews who had barely heard of them before. Now's the time to embark on a mighty mezuzah campaign! Teach about them, write poems in their honor, have the Pizmon choir arrange a song to the verse, "On the doorposts of thy house, and upon thy gates" and serenade every dormitory with it, get mezuzas donated and give them out to every Jewish student on campus complete with jazzy instruction booklet and inspirational tract to boot (again: thief unnecessary!)]

One may fairly ask the question why, considering the approach employed by the Jewish Student Union to campus anti-Semitism has induced little if any change, why do they persist in utilizing the same methods, year after year, without regard to efficacy? The answer is simple, and extremely important (so listen up!): the Jewish establishment, unfortunately and perhaps by definition, is not about change. It's not about challenge, it's not about new ideas, it's not about dynamism, it's not even about "leadership"-it is about maintenance. Lest you be deceived, and perceive this as a purely modern-day affliction, remember that when Dr. Theodor Herzl was courageously and prophetically laying the foundations of the State of Israel, he was vociferously opposed every step of the way by that very same imaginationless, status quo obsessed, "official" Jewish "leadership," whose principal daily pursuit was shuddering at what the gentiles might think. Somewhat earlier a man called Moses, on a comparable mission, encountered many similar obstacles from much the same group (its lengthy tradition in no way makes this crusty conservatism any less regrettable or dangerous-indeed, this makes it the more heinous: don't we ever learn?). Now this perennial fogysm has resurfaced as a relatively recent, rueful phenomenon on the university campus, what you might call the establishmentarianization of the college student body. When an astute upperclassman lately accused the JSU of not standing for anything, the latter wrote in their defense that they simply cannot be expected to stand for anything, since they function as "an umbrella that shelters, preserves, and protects" (is it just me, or does this sound like some bizarre cross between Mutual of Omaha, the Los Angeles Police Department and formaldehyde?). Tell you what, if that's all you aspire to, then get out of the way and at least let the rain fall, let it drench us silly, we want stimulation and growth, we came to college to have our intellects assaulted, we came to college to be turned on, exposed, edified, provoked, confronted, challenged, changed-not sheltered, protected and preserved like some old jar of marmalade.

Here it is essential to perceive the chasmic difference between a "movement" (of which we Jews have none on this, or most any other campus) and an "organization" (of which we have, Baruch Hashem, more than our share). A movement has a clear enough purpose: to take an environment of individuals and move them, intellectually, emotionally, even physically from point A to point B (take, ooh I don't know, Zionism for an instance). In the case of a university campus, such folk would have in mind the object that one or more aspects of that environment and a given population in it, indeed even of a much larger environment outside the university arena, would look vastly different, reshaped, redirected by the time they left the institution. They would accordingly judge and plan all active and reactive tactics by this criterion. In many situations which an organization would view as a threat or aberration from the

smoothly flowing norm, and which they would therefore inevitably attempt to "cautiously" and "quietly" (and generally ineffectively) "defuse," a movement would see an opportunity, would take advantage of a seemingly negative phenomenon and turn it into something positive, would utilize it for internal and external growth-because you see: they're going somewhere.

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By now you've probably figured out that the title of this little treatise constitutes a bit of false advertising: the essay is not about anti-Semitism. Indeed, it's about not being about anti-Semitism. Nor is it about lambasting the establishment (necessary and even cathartic as this can sometimes be), especially since among its members are many devoted and talented people, quite a few of whom complain about the same serious deficiencies I have discussed here. Taken no further, blaming the establishment for ills for whose alleviation we are all responsible is as worthless as shrieking at anti-Semites.

What the essay is about is solely this: are we going to open our minds to significantly different strategies and objectives, are we going to re-examine our attitudes and stop worrying so damn much that we might "offend" or "appall" each-other by expressing ideas at variance with those currently in vogue, are we going to finally bypass this near-pathological timidity and officially sanctioned apathy-and act? Are we going to start thinking bigger than our own campus, are we going to realize the responsibility is ours and no-one else's, are we going to comprehend and reclaim the awesome, historically-attested ability of students to reshape society-and use it? Are we going to forge the core of a courageous, meaningful, innovative, nationwide movement of Jewish youth (no, I haven't been drinking), a movement to electrify the atmosphere, to spread the ideas, the knowledge and the feelings, to set out on fresh paths? Are you, dear reader, going to personally initiate this process by getting together with some friends to talk about these issues, as they relate to your own lives and that of your community, maybe even to imagine, dream, brainstorm, plan....fulfill?

Am I getting through? Are you too far gone already with your student "boards of directors," your "chairpersons" (ever think about this title?) and "proper channels" to remember that you are young people and changing the world is your job? Perhaps. History, not I, will someday ask what earth shattering or even not-so-earth-shattering metamorphoses for the better you pulled together and achieved in your four years at the single most influential institution on earth, the university, at a crucial time in the history of our people and our nascent country.

I leave you with the Chanukah candles we will all light. We light them to commemorate a time when a heroic movement of Jews took an altogether different line than their established "leaders," who had counseled "moderation" and self-effacing "multiculturalism" in the face of anti-Semitism. Many of us light them because this holiday was deliberately raised out of comparative obscurity by another movement, conceived and initiated by college students two thousand years later, that struck out in a new direction over against the "cautious," "moderate" and assimilationist approach of the "established" leadership in their time, and effected the greatest miracle in modern history-a miracle that daily awaits our arrival and full participation.

The candles are fire, and any good physics student will tell you that fire produces heat, and heat makes things move. Stop trying to "cool things down" my friends, heat 'em up! Ideological controversy, intellectual challenge, outreach, guts, passion, direction, movement. That's what the energy of being young is all about. That's what the beauty of being Jewish is all about. That's what our Torah, the most dynamic, revolutionary book in the universe, is all about: movement. Movement from ignorance to

knowledge, from study to practice, from slavery to freedom, from exile to redemption.

Wake up, my strangely content Jewish brothers and sisters! Wake up and see what's going on around you, wake up and see what's not going on around you and make it go on. You are the most powerful people in the world, if you only knew...

Ze'ev Maghen, GSAS Class of '92

Go back to YBJewish.