

# IS COLUMBIA UNBECOMING?

BY RABBI HASKEL LOOKSTEIN

*A sermon delivered by Rabbi Haskel Lookstein at Congregation Kehilath Jeshurun  
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A series of very disturbing reports have appeared in the newspapers concerning the treatment of Israel and supporters of Israel on the campus of Columbia University. The first report came in The New York Sun in October of 2004. Most recently, reports appeared on the front page of this week's Jewish Week, and on the first Opinion Page of yesterday's New York Post.

These reports are an outgrowth of a documentary film produced by Daniella Kahane (Ramaz, Class of 2000) and three other students. It emerged from the work of Lionpack, a pro-Israel political action committee on the Columbia campus. It was funded by the David Project, which is an organization created to combat anti-Israel bias on university campuses all over the country.

In preparation for this morning's treatment of the problem, I had an opportunity to view the film, "*Columbia Unbecoming*," and I held an extended discussion with Daniella and one of the other producers, Aharon Horwitz, and studied a report submitted to the Board of Trustees of Columbia University by an organization called "Scholars for Peace in the Middle East."

I would like to state at the outset that I am not here to bash Columbia University. I am a proud alumnus of Columbia College, Class of 1953. My father received his M.A. from Columbia in sociology in the 1930's. My sister received a B.A. from Barnard and an M.A. and Ph.D. in sociology from Columbia. Many Ramaz graduates, including some of our most distinguished lay leaders and Trustees, have received their education at Columbia. My purpose is to shed light on a problem that exists on the campus. It is not *the* problem at Columbia; it is, however, a very important issue which needs to be addressed.

*Columbia Unbecoming* charges members of the faculty and administration of Columbia University with:

1. systematic, anti-Israel bias and breaches of academic integrity in curricula and course offerings,
2. intimidation and humiliation of students because of their opinions regarding Israel,
3. abuse of the classroom as a platform for political propaganda and pressure.

These charges, and many specific incidents, had been reported, repeatedly, in the last three years to top university administrators, including the Vice President for Arts and Sciences, the Provost

and the President. The charges have also been described and debated in the daily newspaper of the College, *Columbia Spectator*.

I will try this morning to describe three aspects of the problem that exists at Columbia and which is highlighted by the documentary and the report which followed. These three aspects are as follows:

1. Bias in the classroom that severely tests the boundaries of free speech.
2. Intimidation and abuse of students who challenge the bias.
3. The nature and procedures of the committee created by President Lee Bollinger to investigate the complaints raised in the film and elsewhere.

Let us take them one by one.

### **1. BIAS:**

On an academic campus it is expected that professors will teach in a way that reflects their own point of view on a particular subject. That is part of academic freedom. What is not part of academic freedom is to present in class untruths, falsehoods, and outright lies. These are what the complaints are about and they center around members of the department of Middle Eastern and Asian Languages and Culture (MEALAC).

The number one target of the complaints is Assistant Professor Joseph Massad, a specialist in modern Arabic politics and intellectual history. Prof. Massad is currently under review in a procedure that precedes appointment to a tenured position.

Others, prominently mentioned are Hamid Dabashi, professor of Iranian studies and former chair of MEALAC. He is also the director of graduate studies at the Center of Comparative Literature and Society, and so his views go far beyond MEALAC. Also cited is Prof. George Saliba, professor of Arabic and Islamic science.

Let me now give some examples of the bias.

In an Op Ed in the *Columbia Spectator*, Hamid Dabashi denounced Zionism as “a ghastly racist ideology.” He condemned “the Israeli slaughter of innocent Palestinians in Jenin.” This last statement is a clear falsehood as testified to by Palestinian Authority sources. Immediately after the Israelis entered Jenin in April of 2002, following the Passover night massacre in Natanya, there were reports from the Palestinian side of a Jenin massacre. It turned out that nothing of the kind took place. Of the 50 or so Arabs who were killed in the Jenin operation the vast majority were gunmen who were

killed in house-to-house operations by the IDF. Rather than having a Jenin massacre, the IDF lost 23 young soldiers because it made a decision to fight house-to-house rather than to bomb suspected terrorist houses from the air or attack them with artillery. Continuing to speak about “the Israeli slaughter of innocent Palestinians in Jenin” is unacceptable bias on an academic campus.

Prof. Dabashi also cancelled one of his classes in favor of a field trip to a pro-Palestinian sit-in. Dabashi also called the university’s former Hillel director, Rabbi Charles Sheer, “a lunatic thug” for registering a public complaint. This is both bias and intimidation.

Prof. Joseph Massad speaks in class also about the Jenin massacres. When he was challenged by a student, he replied “I will not have anyone in this class who denies Israeli atrocities.”

When Prof. Saliba refers to Israel in class he calls it Palestine. This is a lie. Israel is a recognized State in the world of the United Nations. The Palestinians may want to question its legitimacy, but the world has declared through the U.N. that Israel exists. It is simply false to call it Palestine in a class.

## **2. INTIMIDATION:**

After an introduction to an Islamic civilization class with Prof. George Saliba, a young woman and Saliba continued discussing, on College Walk, the Jewish claim to the Land of Israel. She recounts in the film that he said to her “you have no voice in this debate.” She replied “of course I’m allowed to express my opinion.” She then tells us that he came really close to me. He moved down his glasses and looked right into my eyes and said: “See, you have green eyes.” “You’re not a Semite.” “I’m a Semite, I have brown eyes. You have no claim to the Land of Israel.” The conversation ended because the young woman was stunned. She never approached the professor after that, which was exactly what he wanted. He wanted to intimidate her and keep her quiet. He was successful.

Another student recalls how, at a lecture by Joseph Massad, he raised his hand and said “Hello, my name is Tomy. I’m Israeli; and I would like to ask you some questions.” The professor stopped him in his tracks and said “You’re Israeli, you served in the IDF?” The student answered affirmatively. The next question from the professor was: “How many Palestinians have you killed?” The student was shocked and responded: “What? What? How come it’s relevant to this discussion?” The professor replied “No, it’s relevant to this discussion and I demand an answer. How many Palestinians have you killed?” The student responded “I am not going to answer, but I am going to ask you a question. How many members of your family celebrated on September 11, as long as we are starting with stereotypes?” The professor then blew up and started yelling and the entire room began yelling and basically the discussion ended at that point. This account was corroborated by another student who was present in the class at that time.

### 3. THE COMMITTEE

On December 9, 2004, President Lee Bollinger announced the formation of a committee assigned to listen to students and to investigate complaints against faculty. The committee consists entirely of Columbia Arts and Sciences faculty. It will report to Vice President for Arts and Sciences, Nicholas Dirks. Its members are:

Lisa Anderson, Dean of the School of International and Public Affairs.

Jean Howard, Professor of English and Vice Provost for Diversity Initiatives.

Farah Jasmine Griffin, Professor of English and Comparative Literature and Director of the Institute for Research in African-American Studies.

Ira Katznelson, Professor of Political Science and History.

Mark Mazower, Professor of History and Program Director of the Center for International History.

Floyd Abrams, Advisor to the Committee, Partner, Cahill Gordon & Reindel and Professor of Journalism at Columbia Journalism School.

It would be presumed that the members of this Committee would have no reason for any bias. They would be able to listen to complaints objectively without being connected personally to any of the members of the MEALAC department and be people who have not expressed themselves clearly on one side of the issue unless they would be balanced by people who had expressed themselves clearly on the other side of the issue. In other words, this Committee should be perceived clearly as objective people on this subject.

In contrast, the following facts are pertinent.

Lisa Anderson was the dissertation advisor of Joseph Massad, the faculty member who has been most frequently accused of having intimidated students and having suppressed expression of pro-Israel views in class. She could hardly be expected not to be affected by a clear conflict of interest in having to review the actions of her own student and protégé, particularly at a time when her student is being reviewed for tenure. Anderson, according to the report of the Scholars for Peace in the Middle East, is also a past President of the Middle East Studies Association, which almost invariably espouses opinions congruent with the radical anti-Israel bias with which the professors of MEALAC are being charged.

Nicholas Dirks, Jean Howard and Farah Jasmine Griffin signed a divestment petition at Columbia. Dirks subsequently withdrew his name from the petition. Of Columbia's 3,224 full-time faculty members, only 107 (three percent) signed the divestment petition. Two signatories were subsequently appointed to major administrative positions: Dirks was made Vice President of Arts and

Sciences and Howard was made Vice Provost for Diversity Affairs. Two Committee members (Howard and Griffin) signed the divestment petition and the Committee reports to Dirks who originally signed it.

It is important to understand that divestment petitions specifically target Israel for human rights violations and avoid any mention of human rights violations in Syria, Iran, Egypt or Saudi Arabia. The petitioners do not call for divestment in those cases. The petitioners also ignore the fact that Israel is the only real democracy in the Middle East. We know what the President of Harvard said about such petitions and their anti-Semitic bias.

Mark Mazower has been quoted in a report in *The New York Sun*, December 10, 2004, as saying the following: "If Prime Minister Sharon is seriously concerned about anti-Semitism, there is no one better placed than he to do something about it by changing his government's policies toward the Palestinians." He has also compared Israel's "occupation" of the "West Bank" to the Nazis' occupation of Eastern Europe. Ira Katznelson avoided acting on the large number of currently debated problems that surfaced during the two years of his tenure as Acting Vice President of Arts and Sciences. Floyd Abrams, Advisor to the Committee, is a completely objective person. He is a highly regarded first amendment lawyer. However, the first amendment is not the primary issue involved in the complaints against professors. No one questions the right of faculty members to express their views. The complaints are about falsehoods in the curriculum, unbalanced presentations in class, intimidation and harassment of students and faculty, and the lack of safe and effective grievance procedures.

Concerning the composition of the Committee, it is noteworthy that while three members of the Committee are signatories on the divestment petition (one of them since withdrawn), there is no one on the Committee who is among the more than 360 members of the Columbia faculty who signed an anti-divestment petition.

Finally, Columbia spokespeople have said that there will be no public report issued by the Committee. The report will be for internal use only. Only a summary will be made available to the public.

The Scholars for Peace report concludes "If the purpose of the Committee is to protect MEALAC faculty, it seems likely to achieve its success (certainly the composition of the Committee suggests that). If its purpose is to conduct a serious investigation, it appears doomed to failure... The composition of the Committee appears designed to thwart both a serious investigation of the problems that led to its creation and the development of effective remedies."

Let me close with some perspective on Columbia. Columbia has been and continues to be a wonderful place for Jewish students. It has an outstanding Hillel, with a brand-new Kraft Center and a broad offering of programs for Jewish students. Columbia was actually the first secular university in the western world to open a Jewish studies department. What we are talking about here is not to be understood as a repudiation of a wonderful university in which, to be personal, I received a great education, as did many of members of my family. We are not talking about opposition to academic

freedom. The students who spoke to me are not opposed to academic freedom, nor are they anti-Columbia. They love Columbia. What they are saying is that MEALAC is actually inhibiting academic freedom. Professors should teach from their own viewpoint (as long as they avoid falsehood) but they should allow students to express their viewpoint and treat them with respect and fairness. That is not happening in the MEALAC department at Columbia. This is why students are protesting.

In closing, let me say that I admire students and faculty who are not afraid to stand up and fight bigotry and hatred hiding under the cover of academic freedom. I am proud of a Ramaz graduate who has learned to speak out when she sees injustice and who is not intimidated by an atmosphere which favors silence and acquiescence rather than opposition. As testimony to my own pride in these students, I am appending to this sermon a copy of a letter sent by Hon. Natan Sharansky to Daniella Kahane saying essentially the same thing. He knows the importance of standing up in opposition to bigotry wherever it is found.

Columbia is a great university. It offers a great education to all kinds of students including, especially, Jewish students who love their heritage and who love the Land of Israel. It has a problem in the MEALAC department. That problem should be addressed by an impartial committee to evaluate the complaints and recommend corrections where they are necessary. It us up to the university to provide such a committee and to follow courageously its recommendations.

We are all watching and hoping.

#### **POSTSCRIPT:**

Subsequent to the delivery of this sermon on February 12, 2005, Israeli Minister for Jerusalem Affairs Natan Sharansky wrote a letter to Daniella Kahane thanking her for advocating for free expression and academic integrity on Columbia's campus. Daniella is a member of the Ramaz class of 2000.



**Minister for Jerusalem  
& Diaspora Affairs**

26 January 2005

Daniella Kahane  
573 Churchill Rd.  
Teaneck NJ 07666

Dear Daniella,

The continuing support of American Jewry, so vital to us, depends on the younger generation. Although Jewish students make up 20% of the student population at major universities very few participate in pro-Israel activities. Too many campuses have become hothouses of anti-Israel opinion with a resulting growing hostility against Israel and in some instances intimidation toward Israel's supporters, most specifically, American Jews.

The Jewish community has, thankfully, recently begun to address this significant threat. Part of our challenge on campus is to encourage students to counter the lies and distortions about Israel both in the classroom and on campus. Sadly, few students are willing to speak. The ability to speak the truth to power is critical to the survival of freedom and democracy. That is why your pioneering efforts at Columbia University are a significant accomplishment for free expression and academic integrity and for the Jewish community on America's campuses.

I am proud of what you've done. The courage you displayed and the intelligent and articulate way in which you spoke about the situation at Columbia University should inspire other Jewish students around the country. You are to be commended as role models for the young generation of Americans who need to begin to speak out against the abuse of academic positions for political agendas.

As you may know, I have seen the movie, and have shared it with many other leaders concerned over the trends on university campuses around the world. Thank you for your bravery, your moral clarity, and your willingness to stand up and be counted.

Yours sincerely,

Natan Sharansky