

In a Feb. 25 Facebook post, McGill student Molly Harris recounted her experience in a “Rez (residence) Project” workshop, a (mandatory) three-hour discussion on “oppression, privilege, consent and race” designed to create a “safe space” for fellow dorm students. Molly described an incident when, singled out negatively for being Jewish, she felt unsafe. According to Molly, the facilitator responded that Molly could feel victimized for being female, but “being Jewish didn’t constitute grounds for systematic oppression.”

Molly writes, “Though a little perturbed, I let this go, I didn’t argue with the facilitator, and stayed quiet for the remainder of the workshop.” I sympathize with Molly’s intuition that pressing the issue would not have gone well for her. On campuses with an active anti-Zionist presence, like McGill, hatred of Israel has a trickledown effect into the general “social justice” agenda — feminism, Black Lives Matter, LGBT and others — which has hardened many progressives’ heads against all Jewish pain, and shamed Jewish students into suppressing or denying it.

And so it has become commonplace even for Jewish students well-versed in their people’s history to accept the mantle of “privilege” rather than insist that 60 years of success in North America isn’t a patch on three thousands years of exclusion, religious persecution, second-class status and wholesale massacre, not to mention ethnic cleansing from 94 countries (with the alleged sins of the only one from which they cannot be expelled the hysterical, single-focus obsession of “human rights” activism).

Molly’s uncomfortable experience ranks as relatively benign in the scheme of anti-Israel expression on North American campuses, where the always-thin line between anti-Zionism and anti-Semitism has been slowly but surely dissolving. In the U.S. evidence of the merger can be ugly: swastikas on Jews’ dorm doors, rancid graffiti like “Zionists should be sent to the gas chamber” and scurrilous Facebook postings like “F***ing Jews. GTFOH with all your Zionist bullsh*t ... Give Palestinians back their land, go back to Poland or whatever freezer-state you’re from...”

A survey of U.S. Jewish college students by Trinity College and the Louis D. Brandeis Center for Human Rights Under Law reveals that 54 per cent of surveyed students reported experiencing or witnessing instances of anti-Semitism on campus in the first six months of the 2013-14 academic year. Another Brandeis survey found that 75 per cent of North American Jewish college student respondents “had been exposed to anti-Semitic rhetoric,” and one third “harassed because they were Jewish.” Both surveys found active BDS campaigns to be a consistent correlated factor in the anti-Jewish hostility.

A new report by the AMCHA Initiative (Hebrew for “your people”) confirms that BDS promotion creates “a hostile environment for Jewish students.” AMCHA examined 113 U.S. public and private colleges and universities with the largest populations of Jewish students in North America (but not the Canadian campuses that have high Jewish enrollment). Data were gathered from incident reports, media accounts, social media postings and online recordings. Also examined were the presence or absence of active anti-Zionist student groups and the number of faculty who had signed one or more petitions or statements endorsing an academic boycott of Israeli universities and scholars.

Categories for “targeting” of Jewish students included: physical assault, genocidal expression, destruction of Jewish property, discrimination, and intimidation. Language was considered anti-Semitic if it included historical tropes like blood libels or conspiracy theories (Jewish control of media, banks, governments, etc.), conflation of Jews with Nazis, Holocaust denial, and demonization or delegitimization of Israel (derived from the U.S. State Department definition of anti-Semitism). They found, for example, that on more than 60 campuses, Israel was vilified for genocide, crimes against humanity, “pinkwashing” (LGBT tolerance as a distraction from Israeli evil) and “faithwashing” (Israel’s religious tolerance for the same reason). A speaker at one school called Israel “the embodiment of evil.”

The report concludes that anti-Zionism is the most prominent face of contemporary anti-Semitism on campuses today, and that the best statistical predictors of overall anti-Semitic activity on a campus are the presence of groups like

Students for Justice in Palestine and the number of faculty who have endorsed the academic boycott of Israel. Significantly, they found that the level of BDS activity on campus is the best predictor of anti-Jewish hostility.

By their nature boycotts are normally limited, as they either work or they don't. Only one boycott has failed to succeed, but has continued in various incarnations for 100 years, namely the boycott against the Jews. Like the Arab League Boycott, ongoing since 1948, which is its spiritual father, today's BDS campaigns are inherently Judeophobic, and denial of "safe spaces" to Jews when they are exposed to identity-based hostility is an inherently anti-Semitic impulse. Let's finally acknowledge that and deal with it as we would any other offensive manifestation of intolerance.

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