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OPINION

How I wish Harvard taught students to talk about Israel

I am heartsick over the death and destruction in Gaza. But I am also stunned by the simplistic hatred that has been hurled at Israel, not least by students at my own institution.

By **Steven Pinker** Updated October 7, 2024, 3:00 a.m.



Tents and signs filled Harvard Yard by the John Harvard statue in the pro-Palestinian encampment at Harvard on May 5. JOSEPH PREZIOSO/AFP VIA GETTY IMAGES

Jewish culture is driven by disputation and dialectical thinking, by the ability to weigh opposing ideas. Rabbis have yeshiva students switch sides in debates on Jewish law to hone their skills and clarify the issues. And according to a cherished wisecrack, “Two Jews, three opinions.”

My own biography has equipped me with this mindset. I grew up in a Zionist community, had a Jewish education which emphasized that Jews gave morality to the world, and taught Sunday school in the Reform Temple where I had been a student. Yet while I remain proudly Jewish, my adult convictions have pulled me in directions away from this background.

I’m an atheist and feel no need to praise God. I’m a humanist who argues that morality comes not from scripture but from treating people impartially and maximizing their well-being.

And I am not a Zionist in the sense of seeing a Jewish state as the natural aspiration of the Jews. I believe a state should be based on a social contract that secures its citizens the right to life, liberty, and the pursuit of happiness, not the embodiment of religious or ethnic yearnings. And I believe that if Jews are distinctive, it’s because we are a diaspora people, relying on norms and knowledge rather than ties to the soil, and drawing from the many civilizations in which we have lived.

In the past year, the universalism of my adulthood, layered atop the ethnocentrism of my upbringing, has left me in a state of agonized ambivalence. Like [most American Jews](#), I oppose many of the actions taken by the current Israeli government and am heartsick over the death and destruction in Gaza. Yet as I struggle to apply objective yardsticks to Israel and its policies, I have been stunned by the simplistic hatred that has been hurled at it, not least by students at my own institution, Harvard University.

In a statement issued three days after Hamas’s Oct. 7 massacre on Israel, [34 student groups held “the Israeli regime entirely responsible”](#) for the slaughter and rape of 1,200 of its citizens. Entirely! Our students exonerated the men who pulled the triggers,

raped women, and set houses on fire with families in them. They took no note of the murderously [antisemitic ideology of Hamas](#), nor of their strategy of killing noncombatants, a war crime. They seemed unaware that [Egypt blockades Gaza](#), too, and that [Hamas is armed and encouraged by a malevolent theocracy in Iran](#).

Then, this spring, the students camping in Harvard Yard went far beyond protesting Israel's attack of Gaza, an understandable impulse. They declared "From the river to the sea," and displayed signs that [wiped Israel off the map](#).

Calling for the annihilation of a state is extraordinary. None of the other 192 members of the United Nations has had its existence seriously questioned, and in 79 years none has gone out of existence through conquest. Many historians note that the grandfathering of states since 1945 is a major cause of [the historical decline of war](#).

This is not to deny the tragic displacement of Palestinians during Israel's founding. Yet the turbulent post-World War II period was a time of population transfers all over the world, as new countries coalesced and people fled out of fear or duress. Refugees included massive numbers of ethnic Germans in Eastern Europe and Hindus and Muslims in partitioned India, long since resettled. Crimes against humanity took place in those years, and the victims deserve sympathy and compensation. Yet it would be grotesque to try to reverse this history three generations later, or to abolish countries like Poland or Pakistan that emerged from the chaos.

Even those who are skeptical of ethnic or religious states have no grounds for opposing the very existence of Israel. Many liberal democracies have state religions (including the United Kingdom with its antidisestablishmentarianism), and many more have a responsibility to preserve the cultural heritage of their ethnic majority. Israel can be a Jewish state in the same sense that Denmark is a Danish state, each granting full rights to its minority citizens.

Just as egregious as calls for the destruction of Israel is the blood libel that it is committing "genocide," the worst of human evils. War and genocide are not the same. An

armed force waging war targets enemy fighters for a military goal, harming noncombatants only as an unwanted side effect. An armed force committing genocide *targets* noncombatants with the goal of destroying a people.

Israel may deserve criticism for launching the Gaza war or for sacrificing too many civilians in fighting it (despite its stated efforts to spare them). Yet its military objective — eliminating a militia dedicated to Israel’s destruction — is crystal clear, as is the reason so many civilians have been harmed, namely that Hamas entrenched itself in tunnels beneath homes, schools, and hospitals.

I would desperately like to see a cease-fire in Gaza and a Palestinian state. Yet I know enough Israelis and American Zionists to understand the counterarguments. No other country would tolerate a fortress on its border that regularly bombarded it with tens of thousands of rockets and sent out terrorists to kill and kidnap its citizens. A state in the West Bank, always vulnerable to Hamas takeover, would multiply the menace. I like to think that human ingenuity can find a way for Israel to attain the security of other democracies, with no force or repression. Yet its venomous critics have advanced no such plan.

When I was a Sunday school teacher, the curriculum was ethics, and I led pupils in deliberating moral dilemmas with no obvious right or wrong answer. During the past year I have found myself grappling with new ones and wishing that my august institution taught its students this skill.

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