

OPINION

Anti-Jewish bias has deeply permeated university culture

ODED HAKLAI

CONTRIBUTED TO THE GLOBE AND MAIL

PUBLISHED YESTERDAY

[Click here for source](#)

Oded Haklai is a political studies professor and director of the Centre for the Study of Democracy & Diversity at Queen's University.

Many have raised concerns after multiple student groups on university campuses issued alarming statements that characterized the massacres perpetrated by Hamas against Israeli civilians on October 7 as “legitimate resistance” and part of the “decolonization struggle,” insinuating that the victims were to blame for the atrocities committed against them.

In response to these statements, some university administrators censured transgressing university clubs. Reports that Queens students were dressed up like Hamas at a Halloween party have also led university administrators to investigate, which could result in a range of sanctions.

As necessary as it is to take students to task when they cross the threshold from legitimate political opinion to bigotry, these condemnations should not obscure the responsibility that universities themselves have in cultivating the environment in which students exhibit moral confusion.

Herein lies the real challenge of universities. For all the handwringing about students, their activism largely expresses what they internalize from their environment, their professors and the curriculum. It is here that some of the seriously hard work of universities needs to be done.

There are many examples that demonstrate how anti-Jewish bias has deeply permeated university culture. One example is the monumental shift toward

studying and analyzing Israel almost exclusively in terms of settler-colonialism, totally neglecting the deep historical ties Jews have to the territory of present-day Israel as well as Jewish continuous presence on the territory.

The reductionist “Israel equals settler-colonialism” paradigm had been relatively marginal until not so long ago. It has become so hegemonic in the current campus environment that academic units now routinely issue “solidarity” statements and sponsor events that totally ignore Jewish indigenous claims, narratives, and experiences in Israel. Such statements effectively draw the social boundaries of the academic community in a way that excludes Jews.

A further consequence is that generations of students now remain ignorant of Jewish history, identity, and experience. And even worse, the logical prognosis for settler-colonialism is decolonization. Israel is the only country for which it has now become normal not to use the country’s name. Israel/Palestine is now standard.

Coupled with a conspicuous reluctance to acknowledge Hamas’ antisemitic ideology, it should not be surprising, therefore, that many students, educated in this environment, interpret Hamas violence in terms of social justice struggles, even when involving massacres and rape.

The exclusion of Jews from Equity, Diversity, and Inclusivity programs (EDI) adds to the inhospitable climate. Even though Nazi antisemitism was the quintessential epitome of racialization, EDI administrators do not categorize Jews as a racialized minority, possibly because the stereotype about Jewish power and privilege has been unconsciously internalized.

Treating Jews as undeserving of EDI protection has practical consequences. It is hard to envision university leaders, or faculty members tolerating offensive arguments that the killing of George Floyd is an unfortunate result of rampant violent unlawfulness in Black communities rather than an expression of systemic racism. When it comes to Jews, however, victim-blaming arguments that justify (or “contextualize”) the October 7 massacre are deemed part-and-parcel of the free flow of ideas protected by academic freedom. The norms that apply to groups protected by EDI do not apply to Jews.

Complaints about antisemitism are frequently countered by accusations of bad faith intended to stifle criticism of Israel. While it may be true that there are occurrences of dishonest accusations of antisemitism, the same can be said about accusations of other forms of racism, Islamophobia and misogyny. Yet, it would be egregious to deny that these other forms of bigotry exist. Nor is there any evidence or reason to believe that Jews are more likely to make dishonest accusations of bigotry than any other groups. Yet in many academic circles as well as faculty unions, it has now become a matter of routine to respond to concrete examples of antisemitism as bad-faith attempts to silence critics.

On these premises, debates around integrating the International Holocaust Remembrance Alliance's working definition of antisemitism into university anti-racism policies have been particularly fraught. Faculty unions have rallied and passed motions against its incorporation.

The issue here is not the merit of the definition itself – something that Jews have debated amongst themselves – but rather that, in an era of EDI, Jews are not afforded the same privileges as other vulnerable minorities to define their experience with oppression. Jewish EDI exceptionalism is premised on the unconscious bias that Jews are more susceptible to make complaints in bad faith.

What all this amounts to is a deeply engrained culture of campus antisemitism extending well beyond students. There are no easy solutions, but a good starting point would be for university leaders to start taking the problem seriously. In-depth investigations of causes and manifestation will need to be carried out. Curriculum change, similar to those carried out to confront anti-Black and anti-Indigenous racism, will be necessary. Empty statements or Band-aid solutions will no longer do.