

# JEWISH FEDERATION NEWS

**SAVE THE DATE: Dr. Daniel Gordis in person November 16 & 17. Read his most recent article below:**

## Neve Gordon Is Not the Problem

By Daniel Gordis, *The Jerusalem Post*, September 2, 2009

Intentionally or not, Neve Gordon, senior lecturer and head of the Political Science Department at Ben-Gurion University, has unleashed a firestorm in Israeli academe. His recent op-ed in *The Los Angeles Times* declared that Israel is an apartheid state, and that it ought to be boycotted to "save Israel from itself."

Sensing a public relations debacle among their American supporters, the president and leadership of BGU distanced themselves from his comments and hinted that he ought to resign. Predictably, other Israeli academics leaped to Gordon's defense. Most interesting, however, was the outrage Gordon's column has evoked among many American Jews. Some are so beside themselves that they are now threatening to withhold their financial support from the university.

To be sure, Gordon's argument is deeply flawed. He writes as if Israel sought or enjoys controlling the Palestinians, making no mention of the fact that it captured the West Bank in a defensive war that it did not seek, or that more than once (most recently with Ehud Olmert's election in 2006) Israelis have chosen leaders whose campaigns called for relinquishing those territories. Add to that his failure

to admit that the Palestinians still refuse to recognize Israel's right to exist and continue to call for its destruction, and one can appreciate the fury of Ben-Gurion University's American supporters.

The fury these American Jews are suddenly expressing illustrates how little these very supporters know about the system of higher education in Israel to which they are so deeply committed. Is this really their first glimpse into the widespread and long-standing hostility of Israeli academe to Jewish statehood? Gordon has been espousing this viewpoint for years. He regularly writes for anti-Israel publications, holed up with Yasser Arafat during the siege of Ramallah, and has on more than one occasion likened Israel to Nazi Germany. But he's always enjoyed the steadfast support of the university, to its very highest echelons. His views are widely held among his colleagues.

Nor is BGU unique here. Coming to Gordon's defense, Tel Aviv University professor Shlomo Sand stated outright that Israeli universities are not Zionist institutions and should not be. They are about scholarship, he insisted, not about the Jews or their state.

There are non-Jews and non-Zionists at these universities, he

claimed, and the universities must serve them no less than anyone else. And at Hebrew University, the crown jewel of Israeli academe, the long-term influence of the binationalists involved in the university's founding has also been well documented.



Daniel Gordis

Indeed, the only thing that is surprising about this latest turn of events is that American donors are surprised. For, to those who know even a bit about Israeli academe, the anti-Israel posture of many departments is really yesterday's news.

The important question in all this is what American philanthropists who are committed to Zionism and to Israel's higher education ought to do. Surely they can't really believe that universities will suddenly silence their professors or terminate tenure. What, then, are the options?

These philanthropists ought to look close to home for their answers. For many of America's great universities developed from an entirely different tradition. Woodrow Wilson, as president of Princeton, spoke unabashedly of "Princeton in the nation's service." Columbia College instituted its now-classic core curriculum as an explicit defense of Western civilization. Neither Princeton nor Columbia, like many other great American liberal arts colleges, saw any conflict between superb scholarship and inclusiveness on the one hand, and devotion to country and one's own civilization on the other.

Is it at all surprising that these colleges have produced an abundance of America's great leaders?

Israeli education needs more

support from American Jews, not less. Rather than withholding their funds, a much more useful response would be to channel their support and their knowledge to create an Israeli version of the "college in the service of the nation."

How?

Those American philanthropists currently wringing their hands probably have no idea that Israel has not a single liberal arts college to its name. Typical Israeli undergraduates get none of the curricular breadth that an American education usually requires, and as a result, they know almost nothing about Western civilization, the majesty of Jewish intellectual history or even the competing philosophic currents inside Zionism.

In today's Israel, the People of the Book do not even read their own books. When they read or hear someone like Neve Gordon, nothing in their education has given them the tools to evaluate what he says, or to take him on. They are helpless.

Today's narrow model of education, in which students essen-

tially study only one discipline, produces excellence, but excellence as technocrats. It does not produce the broadly read, intellectually nuanced people that the Jewish state so desperately needs.

Without dramatic change, Israeli universities will produce only more Neve Gordons – scholars of varying quality, who feel no love for the very country that has saved their people. If it learned from American education, Israel might actually begin to cultivate a new wave of leadership, and with it, a generation of Israelis who actually love their nation.

Dr. Gordon is correct – Israel needs to be saved from itself. What Israel needs now is a reconceived notion of the educated Israeli.

It needs a liberal arts college, and the young people prepared to speak constructively about Jewish sovereignty, its challenges, its failures and its future that only that kind of college can produce.

A century ago, who could have imagined that the Jewish state would one day have a world-class army but a failing, collapsing educational system? Whether or not American Jews have the foresight to use their philanthropy to promote genuine change in Israeli academe still remains to be seen. But if they do, Neve Gordon's op-ed may ironically have goaded both Israel and the American Jewish community into taking the first steps needed to begin to save the Jewish state. ☆

*Daniel Gordis (www.danielgordis.org) is Senior Vice President of the Shalem Center in Jerusalem. He is the author, most recently, of "Saving Israel: How the Jewish People Can Win a War That May Never End" (John Wiley & Sons, 2009)*

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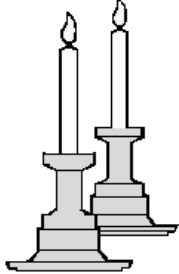
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