

Disinvited

The leadership of New York's West End Synagogue is too committed to the ever-changing progressive party line to suffer a radical feminist like me



Wes

t End Synagogue (WES), New York City

by Phyllis Chesler

As we know, a virulent, often vicious and increasingly intolerant “cancel culture” has permeated our campuses and much of the media—but it has also infested some of our synagogues. I now have firsthand experience of what this means.

Being disinvited is not a new experience for me. I’ve been disinvited from engagements before because my radically feminist views were not politically correct; because I dared to expose feminist hypocrisy among the sisterhood; and because

I defended the truth, and thus defended Jews, Judaism, Israel, and post-Enlightenment values. I've also been disinvited because my academic studies about and activism against honor killing, face-veiling, female genital mutilation, Islamist terrorism, and an Islamist version of cancel culture (think Salman Rushdie) was seen as "Islamophobic."

Here's the story. In early May, a retired City University of New York (CUNY) professor, Susan Prager (a woman whom I do not know and have never met) invited me to deliver a lecture about antisemitism and feminism to the West End Synagogue (WES), a Reconstructionist congregation near Lincoln Square, possibly via Zoom, perhaps in person.

And now I've been disinvited. Why? Apparently, my alleged views on transgender and LGBTQIA people are key—even though this wasn't the topic of my lecture—but such views rendered me unacceptable as a speaker on any other subject. I was also accused of possibly being a racist as well.

Are we living in the 1950s, and is this yet another version of McCarthyism? Have we plunged into Huxley's *Brave New World*?

What would someone's views about the transgender issue have to do with antisemitism and the survival of a demonized Israel? Moreover, are differences in opinion more important than freedom of thought and speech? Intellectual and political diversity? I guess they are in some circles.

Of course, the Talmud preserves both majority and minority opinions. For centuries, in fact, totally opposite views have lived side by side, a glorious example of tolerance and civility among those who take ideas seriously.

The good news: A number of WES congregants have written letters to the synagogue's president, Harvey Weiner, and to the board of directors demanding that I be allowed to speak. I've been told that a handful of couples have already exited the synagogue; others have promised not to donate money to the

annual appeal on Yom Kippur.

This is certainly not what I had in mind.

At first, I hesitated to write this piece. Did I want to expose the shortcomings of a *Jewish* house of worship? Especially when Jews are under such profound cognitive siege and Israel is, as ever, under attack.

However, I must ask: What religion are they observing at the West End Synagogue? Is it Judaism? Wouldn't a Jewish approach involve the rabbi or the president picking up the phone and having a conversation with me? Or writing to me about their concerns?

Never happened.

But I learned more when professor Prager forwarded a copy of the letter that the synagogue's board of directors sent—not to me, mind you—to its “concerned” community members on Friday, Aug. 12, explaining why they had rescinded their invitation to host my talk.

“The decision, first, of the Executive Committee (after lengthy discussions at multiple meetings), and then of the full Board (after another lengthy discussion) was a reaction to Ms. Chesler's recent writings that offend core values of our Community. These concerns have nothing to do with the merits of Ms. Chesler's earlier work, or what she might have to say regarding anti-Semitism or issues involving Israel,” the board wrote—making clear that the substance of my lecture was not the issue at hand.

“Ms. Chesler's recent writings suggest that she is currently focusing primarily on trans or gender identity topics, as her cause celebre, rather than on either Israel or anti-Semitism. ... [T]he likelihood of audience questions on those recent writings raises a real risk that the talk by Ms. Chesler at WES would devolve into discussions about those her [sic]

recent writings.”

Rather plainly, then, the board declared a “real risk” to the temple community if the curiosity of its audience carried the event into the dangerous and forbidden waters of a genuine discussion about gender and transgender identities and the consequences for sex-based identities or realities. A risk grave enough to cancel the event all together.

However, their statements are false and easy to disprove. I have not focused mainly or exclusively on the trans issue. The WES board letter links to five of my articles to bolster their claim, covering a time period in which I published 200+ articles on feminism, antisemitism, Israel, Judaism, Holocaust heroes, honor killings, commercial surrogacy, double standards in the American criminal justice system, rescuing Afghan women, Islamist terrorism, *devrai* Torah, and, ironically, about the dangers of cancel culture. In recent years, I also published articles about iconic lesbian feminists, such as Valerie Solanas, Aileen Carol Wuornos, Andrea Dworkin, Kate Millett, and Jill Johnston.

The WES Board also wrote that I may be a racist as well as a transphobe. I suggest that they tell that to the nearly 500 Afghan Muslim women whom I [helped rescue](#) and to the Muslim and ex-Muslim [reformers with whom I work](#). If they check the names of the anti-Islamist Clarity Coalition founders, they will see mine among them. As to my alleged opposition to LGBT people, let it be known that I am legally married to a woman with whom I’ve lived for more than 30 years and that my signature was solicited for the LGBTQNY/Stonewall [endorsement](#) of New York Congresswoman Carolyn Maloney. There it is, right along Liz Abzug, Charles Bayor, Erik Botcherr, Diana Montford, Christine Quinn, Alfonso Quiroz, and Judith Kaysen-Windsor.

A radical feminist position on gender identity rights that trumps sex-based identity rights does not mean that one is necessarily opposed to individual transgender-identified

people, nor does such a view challenge in any way their civil liberties or First Amendment rights.

Such a discussion rarely takes place because the transgender cult (as distinct from transgender individuals) fueled by Big Pharma, Big Philanthropy, and Big Mental Health, and as represented by a very vocal, angry men's rights movement (and alas, by some synagogues), shuts down all discussion by defaming and deplatforming radical feminists, or by shouting them down, harassing them, and sometimes physically attacking them.

To understand how we arrived at this moment, Prager—the chair of WES's task force on antisemitism—explained to me that, at first, the other members of the task force were enthusiastic when she had suggested I come to speak about feminism and antisemitism.

But then, a few months later, Prager said she “received a phone call in which she was informed that one person in particular was angry that she had been invited. He suggested that [Chesler] not appear or we delay the meeting until this person felt more comfortable.”

After Prager reiterated my decades of work on feminism and antisemitism as well as her own “commitment to free speech,” she suggested that whoever the unhappy person was could “raise issues in a Q&A” at the lecture. Prager said that she was then “told the person might not feel comfortable doing this, and that [Chesler's] appearance was a violation of West End Synagogue's commitment to inclusivity, which seemed to involve not having anyone speak who was thought to make people uncomfortable.”

Prager added that “someone was always bound to be [made] uncomfortable by something, and that I thought inclusivity meant including all ideas and people. Apparently, you are falsely believed to be opposed to trans people and is anti-

gay. It is on these false assumptions that she is deemed to be unacceptable as a speaker at WES.”

Prager was then asked to meet with members of the temple’s executive committee, where, she told me, she was instructed to cancel my lecture. “I pointed out that if they cancelled, many women would be angry and that women were, once again, being ignored. I also raised the issue of free speech but was again ignored,” Prager said. “I was told to inform you but refused, stating that it was their job to do their own dirty work.”

It’s worth pointing out that this is a congregation with a woman rabbi and a woman cantor. Their Hebrew school teachers are all women. As one of the leaders of the Jewish women’s struggle to pray with a Torah at the Kotel, I welcome women not only being included but functioning in positions of religious authority. God knows, I did not have such women in mind.

I must also note that in the name of “inclusivity,” WES has disinvited a speaker merely because they believe she has another view of an issue they hold near and dear: A “different” intellectual and political view.

I would love to say that I don’t know what has gone wrong. But I do know—we all do. The increasing secularization of American Judaism; the desperate desire on the part of many American Jews to appear as politically correct as possible and to avoid bearing the burden of defending Israel; the misunderstanding about what *tikkun olam* is truly about.

In rabbinic Judaism, *tikkun olam* had to do with legal actions or enactments in order to preserve the social order. In prayers, such as *Aleinu*, it is about eradicating idolatry. In mystical Judaism, it is about the in-gathering of lights and souls.

It is not necessarily or solely about atonement for American racism; expanding our understanding of sex, gender, and gender

identity; or reviling Israel, monotheism, and Western civilization.

As of this writing, four months after I was initially invited by professor Prager, and a month after being informally disinvited, I finally received a rather opaque letter from Weiner, the WES president. He wrote that “there was some confusion in our process, for which we apologize. We are unable to go forward with the proposed lecture.”

Please allow me to thank the WES board of directors for at least “gifting” me with the material for this piece. I hope that they find a way to tolerate differences, even embrace them in a calm, respectful, and civilized manner, and to keep open minds and open hearts, especially toward other Jews.

For my part, I’ve had my lawyer send them a letter asking for an apology and a public admission of error to all those to whom they distributed their letter about me and to all those who shared it beyond the congregation. Somehow, I doubt they will do this. They seem to be functioning like the Red Guards or the Komsomol, turning on their parents, grandparents, teachers, and all tradition. No beatings or executions yet, but shaming, defaming, censoring, and silencing.

I’m not entirely sure that my radical feminist analysis of the transgender cult is the only reason for my disinvitation. Perhaps my Zionism was considered just as unacceptable.

Why do I think so? Prager told me that the WES will not allow prayers to be said for the State of Israel, nor will they “suffer” an Israeli flag on their grounds.

Even now, I continue to receive letters from WES members who support my being able to speak and who see the disinvitation as having violated their synagogue’s principles about free speech and inclusivity. They are, admirably, fighting for the soul of their congregation. For example, on Aug. 31, an “ad hoc committee” wrote to the WES board:

We support Phyllis Chesler's lawyer's August 24 response ... demanding that you issue a public apology to those members of the congregation who expressed concern about your decision. This letter should address the lawyer's numbered points. We would appreciate your statement of apology by September 9 so that we can bring this matter to a satisfying conclusion without involving other members of the congregation. At issue are core values of WES. We believe that this is an important step towards Teshuva, especially as we approach the Days of Awe.

The signatories include Susan Prager, chair, Carole Kessner, Barbara Gish-Scult, Ann Shapiro, and Jane Schwartz.

As of this writing, the president, Harvey Weiner, has just resigned his position at WES. My best guess, which is shared by Prager, is that he'd rather quit than apologize—or perhaps he's just out of his depth.

Long live the voice of reason.

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