

To end its campus antisemitism, Columbia should start acting like a university



by Lev Tsitrin

Columbia University apparently concluded that the virus of antisemitism that invaded its faculty and student body (and became acutely symptomatic after October 7) has become too entrenched to be treated, and only palliative care is now possible. This is the gist of the *New York Times*' report titled "[What Is Antisemitism? A Columbia Task Force Would Rather Not Say.](#)"

Unwilling to share the professional fate of the presidents of Harvard and University of Pennsylvania who had to resign after a congressional hearing on antisemitism at their schools, Columbia's Nemat Shafik – who is set to testify before Congress on April 17 – set up a palliative care department called a "task force to combat antisemitism on campus." It is co-chaired by three Jewish professors whose job, according to "one of the co-chairs, Nicholas Lemann, a former dean of the journalism school ... is not to define antisemitism ... [but] to listen to [people], make them feel that somebody at Columbia cares about them, and to try to figure out what is causing this great discomfort and distress, and whether anything can be done to ameliorate it that's consistent with the values of the university" – the very definition of palliative care.

Equally revealing (and illustrative of the way the legalistic thinking can become entrenched – and of the Columbia professors' inability to learn from the experience of U Penn, Harvard, and MIT who flunked their congressional test), the members of the "task force" parrot their failed colleagues' thinking and language by stating that it "was ultimately a question for lawyers" whether "some common anti-Israel protest chants like "Death to the Zionist State" could amount to discriminatory harassment of Jewish or Israeli students."

As is well-known, it is insanity to do the same thing over again and expect a different result – and yet this is exactly what Columbia professors are doing. Repeat this line of "reasoning" on April 17 to Congresswoman Elise Stefanik, Columbia President Nemat Shafik – and Columbia can start

looking for a new president right away.

Given the Harvard, U Penn, and MIT congressional experience, it is inexcusably obtuse for the “task force” to declare that it needs “more guidance on the meaning of ‘discriminatory harassment,’ including antisemitic harassment” – because Rep. Stefanik, along with the ex-presidents of U Penn and Harvard – gave them all the “guidance” they need. As a cherry on the cake of idiocy and legalistic hogwash the academe wallows in, this quote from “David M. Schizer, another co-chair and former dean of Columbia’s law school” will do: “our policy definition of discriminatory harassment needs to be general, not tailored only to protect Jews and Israelis.” How so? Who else is affected by antisemitism, other than “Jews and Israelis,” ex-Dean Schizer? Can you elaborate?

But I am not here just to bash the Columbia professors, but to suggest to them the solution to the problem that should have been obvious to them from the get-go – but somehow, isn’t. How about enforcing at Columbia – which is after all an academic institution – the academic rules of discourse?

Let me remind “the task force” members that academic discourse is not done by shouting in the streets, but in academic journals and seminar rooms. Marches, picketing and sloganeering belong in a political sphere, not in academic one. Academia is all about the search for truth – and truth is not found in impassioned mass marches, but in labs, and in discussions among colleagues who calmly seek for truth, not loudly affirm their egos.

For this reason, no academic institution should allow itself to become a theater of political passions. For protests, there are city streets, pre-approved by the police department. “When at Rome, do as Romans do” – when at a university, follow academic protocols for discourse. If you think that Hamas is in the right, write an academic paper on the subject – and be prepared to have your facts and your logic (and therefore,

your conclusions) challenged in seminars, and in the papers by others. This is an academic protocol; anything else is anarchy that has nothing whatsoever to do with academic life – the life of the mind.

Of course, just as any other citizen – a banker, an electrician, a plumber – a professor or a student has every right to engage in political activism – but it has to be done outside the workplace. Political protest is a private business unrelated to one's academic duties. Political agitation is not how truth is established – therefore, it does not belong in a campus at all.

That's really the long and the short of it: Columbia – and all other universities – should not tolerate political demonstrations on their campuses. The most important lesson universities can (and should) impart on their students is that one's passion for the cause is not equivalent to the rightness of that cause. Communism, Nazism, and Islamism all resulted from sincere political passion – yet the people who so passionately advocated them were in the wrong, with a result that their ardent self-righteousness resulted in frightful crimes.

The anti-Israel self-righteousness that now consumes so many American campuses is the very opposite to the spirit of academe. In universities, only dispassionate academic argument conducted in writing is permissible. This simple fact should be the starting point, and the guiding star for Columbia's "task force to combat antisemitism on campus." The solution for the problem of antisemitism at Columbia, and at other places of teaching and research is really simple: insist on sticking to academic ways of discourse. Act as a university, not as a mob.

This solution is highly likely to do the trick of ridding Columbia of antisemitism – and even a lawyer like ex-Dean Schizer should find it sufficiently all-encompassing to not

worry that “our policy might treat protected classes differently, which itself is a problem under federal law.” When a professor is merely seeking for truth, and a student is merely seeking knowledge – doing what a university requires of them – and they keep their political passions off the campus, the antisemitism that badly infected the campuses will be removed from academic life for good.