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Free Speech, Israel, and Jewish Illiberalism

By ALAN WOLFE

You have been invited to give a lecture on a topic of great interest to you. The time and place have been arranged, and your fee negotiated. Suddenly you receive a call canceling the event. While the usual excuses are offered, you quickly learn that your putative host has been pressured to withdraw the invitation by one of his supporters, who has taken a dislike to things you've written.

Would you be angry? Would you see evidence of censorship? If your name is Christopher Hitchens, you would not. Hitchens, one of America's most prolific public cultural critics, had precisely that experience last January, when his invitation to address the Republican Jewish Committee at a public meeting on the "oil for food" program of the United Nations was nixed because of objections from Morton A. Klein, president of the Zionist Organization of America. Klein objected not so much to his views of the U.N. program, Hitchens wrote recently in *Slate*, but to "some of the things I had said about Israel and Israeli policy over the years." Still, the sponsors had every right in the world *not* to hear him, he said, just as he has every right to speak out on topics of concern to him.

If your name is Tony Judt, by contrast, you would not only object to the cancellation of your talk, but your protest would inspire prominent writers and academics to side with you. An accomplished European historian at New York University and director of its Remarque Institute — his recently published *Postwar: A History of Europe Since 1945* (Penguin Press, 2005) has already achieved the status of a classic — Judt, who once lived in Israel and served in its military, has emerged as a strong critic of a Jewish state. Basing statehood on ethnicity or religion, he wrote in a 2003 article, is an "anachronism." The only possible future for Israel, he said in "Israel: The Alternative," published in *The New York Review of Books*, is as a binational state. For many Jews, such positions come close to denying Israel's right to exist. Why have Israel at all if it is not to be Jewish, they ask? And, given low Jewish birthrates and high Arab ones, wouldn't a binational state eventually lead to the persecution of a Jewish minority? As the journalist Leon Wieseltier put it in the generally pro-Israel *The New Republic* last month: "I have never met anybody of any persuasion who believes that Judt's call for a one-state solution to the Israeli-Palestinian conflict in 'Israel: The Alternative' was not a call for the abolition of the Jewish state."

Judt had been invited to speak in October on "The Israel Lobby and U.S. Foreign Policy" by a group called Network 20/20, which regularly rents the Polish Consulate in New York as the site for its events. Although the Anti-Defamation League, whose leading officials view Judt as an Israel hater, denies pressuring the consulate to cancel the talk, it acknowledges having made a call inquiring about the event. That conversation, in turn, led the Poles, who tend to be very sensitive on any issues remotely touching on anti-Semitism, to cancel Judt's talk — one hour before it was supposed to take place.

In response to the cancellation, two protest letters were sent off to the ADL's national director, Abraham H. Foxman. One, organized by Norman Birnbaum, an emeritus professor at Georgetown University Law Center, called Foxman's actions "political vigilantism" and labeled Foxman himself "an adversary of our traditions." I did not sign it. As unhappy as ADL's phone call made me, Foxman is neither a person who takes the law into his own hands, as the term vigilante implies, nor, given the ADL's commendable record of combating extremism, un-American.

Moreover, the Birnbaum letter contained what I view as a serious contradiction. Ostensibly defending Judt's right to speak, its signatories also proclaimed themselves "in solidarity" with Judt, as well as with Harvard University's Stephen Walt and the University of Chicago's John Mearsheimer, the international

relations scholars who wrote a controversial working paper on the influence of the "Israel Lobby" in American politics. When people proclaim they are "in solidarity" with something and someone, I hear echoes of the 1960s demonstrations in which otherwise intelligent people refused to criticize unsavory regimes on the grounds that the enemy of their enemy must be their friend. I do not consider myself "in solidarity" with the ADL or with its opponents, but as an individual free to criticize both. Foxman acted "in solidarity" with Jews, as he understood their interest. To act "in solidarity" with critics of Israel is just as objectionable. Intellectuals should act in solidarity with the truth.

I did sign another protest letter to Foxman, written by Mark Lilla, a political philosopher at the University of Chicago, and Richard Sennett, a sociologist with NYU and the London School of Economics and Political Science. That one pointed out that in a democracy, the proper response to speech with which one does not agree is more speech. Lilla and Sennett took no position on the substantive issues raised by Judt, about Israel or American foreign policy; indeed, they went out of their way to bring together people who "have many disagreements about political matters, foreign and domestic." Expressed that way, their letter was signed by a number of intellectuals known for their support of Israel, including Wieseltier; two of the *The New Republic's* former editors, Andrew Sullivan and Peter Beinart; and its current one, Franklin Foer. (I am a contributing editor of the magazine.)

Not content with angering *New Republic* liberals, just weeks before his talk was canceled, Judt had also written an essay in the *London Review of Books*. "Bush's Useful Idiots" criticized "the liberal intelligentsia" for keeping "its head safely below the parapet" by not opposing more vigorously both the foreign policy of George W. Bush and Israel's invasion of Lebanon.

In this time of petitions, Bruce Ackerman, a professor of law at Yale University, and Todd Gitlin, a professor of journalism and sociology at Columbia University, neither of whom writes for *The New Republic*, published yet a third broadsheet in *The American Prospect*. With the title "We Answer to the Name of Liberals," it was mostly a defense of liberals against conservative charges that their protests of Bush's policies have made them shills for Osama bin Laden and other enemies of America. But with a subtitle of "A response to Tony Judt," this petition began by refuting the charges of liberal complicity with Bush foreign policy that Judt had made in his September *London Review* article. You can be against Bush's war in Iraq, Ackerman and Gitlin argued, without also having to be either for or against his support of Israel and its actions in Lebanon. Forty-four people signed. Again, I was one of them. "True patriotism does not consist of bravado or calumny," Ackerman and Gitlin wrote. "It resides in faithfulness to our great constitutional ideals." They are right. As they pointed out, liberals are second to none in their desire to protect the United States against terrorism, but they are equally as vigilant in protecting the United States against the temptation to undermine its great commitment to freedom.

Give Tony Judt credit: He certainly knows how to start an argument. Actually, he has started two. One, concerning the future of a Jewish state in the Middle East, is, like the Middle East itself, combustible, and it is by no means clear that intellectuals in this country will have much influence on how it is ultimately resolved. That is a shame, for we need in the United States a debate about the future of Israel as robust as the one that routinely takes place within Israel itself. In "Israel: The Alternative," Judt paid particular attention to right-wing Israelis whose views, in his opinion, come quite close to fascism. But even though there is no denying that Israel, like the United States, has turned sharply to the right, must we conclude, as Judt seemed to suggest, that any state based on religion or ethnicity will ultimately be illiberal? And does it follow that if Israel is illiberal, its aggressive foreign policy will create a "disaster," as Judt put it, for a United States that allies itself with the country?

Those are questions that Americans need to ask themselves — however they answer them. But it is hard to raise them, at least in any probing way, when prominent Hollywood celebrities like Mel Gibson flirt with anti-Semitism, and when newspapers like *The New York Sun*, a staunch defender of Israel, routinely accuse those who criticize Zionism of being little different from Gibson. It is difficult to know why honest discussions about Israel have become so difficult to conduct. Is it, perhaps, because the rise of the Christian right, no matter how ostensibly supportive of Israel it claims to be, reminds Jews that they live in a Christian country and thereby makes them more likely to circle the wagons? Or does the reason perhaps lie in the fact that Jews have become part of America's multicultural mosaic, one more group

proclaiming its identity and difference? Or perhaps it has to do with the charge made by many pro-Israel Jews that Israel is held to a different standard when it comes to judging the morality of a country's foreign policy than other states, including Israel's enemies in the Middle East? Whatever the reason, discussions of Israel in the United States resemble a shouting match filled with insult and invective more than a reasoned debate over the proper relationship between that country and this one.

For precisely that reason, the other argument Judt has started, which is whether people should be open to those whose views they find at best distasteful and at worst hateful is not, or at least ought not to be, controversial at all. Surely intellectuals, who commit themselves to arguments based on reason, should be enthusiastic in their support of open debate.

All of which makes Christopher Hitchens's equanimity in the face of the cancellation of his talk a mystery to me. I suppose he is correct that any private organization has the "right" to invite or disinvite any speaker it chooses. But this issue is not a matter of law. Zionists who only want to hear from Zionists — like Israel's critics who never get to hear the views of its supporters — fail the test of open inquiry. Hitchens, an intellectual if there ever was one, was censored, and he ought to be outraged.

Aside from those who believe that there is no such thing as free speech, most intellectuals can be counted on to oppose efforts at censorship. In my own case, it was the Jewish environment in which I was raised that led me to value free speech and expression. Although I grew up a secular Jew — my bar mitzvah was as pro forma as they come, and after that, I have returned to synagogue only a handful of times — I was spoon-fed a version of Jewish liberalism in which we Jews were always expected to come to the defense of unpopular ideas. When American Nazis announced in 1977 their intention to march in Skokie, Ill. — a town in which one-sixth of the population was related to a Holocaust survivor — the American Civil Liberties Union defended their right to do so, and many of the leaders of and contributors to the ACLU were Jewish. I recall taking considerable pride in the ACLU's actions, not out of Jewish self-hatred, but out of pride in Jewish liberalism.

We have come a long way from a time when American Jews would support the right of Nazis to march; now, if the Judt cancellation is any indication, some prominent Jews are not even willing to let Jewish critics of Israel speak. And the ADL intervention is not the only case in which Jews have found themselves on the wrong side of a free-speech issue. Last spring Brandeis University, named after one of the most prominent defenders of free speech ever to serve on the U.S. Supreme Court, canceled an exhibition of art organized by one of its own students on the grounds that the paintings, most of them made by Palestinian teenagers, were one-sided. Around the same time, prominent Jews like Michael Rubin, of the American Enterprise Institute, successfully lobbied Yale University not to offer a professorship to Juan Cole, a well-known scholar of the Middle East. Human Rights Watch, a careful and balanced organization that monitors abuses of human rights, came under furious attack from American Jewish organizations for accusing Israel of violating international law by killing innocent civilians during its actions in Lebanon. And, in response to major donors, Harvard's John F. Kennedy School of Government withdrew its logo from the working paper critical of American support for Israel written by Walt and Mearsheimer.

None of those cases resulted in the suppression of ideas: The Brandeis exhibit was moved to MIT; Cole retains his professorship at the University of Michigan at Ann Arbor, and his blog, *Informed Comment*, is as popular as ever; Human Rights Watch will have many opportunities in the future, alas, to document abuses by all sides in the Middle East conflict; and Walt and Mearsheimer, despite the factual errors and sometimes hysterical tone of their working paper, received a very lucrative offer from Farrar Strauss to publish a book based upon it. Suppression, however, is not the issue; in our open society, it is close to impossible to suppress any idea. The important question deals with intentions, not consequences. In all of the cases I've mentioned, a troubling number of Jews had no intention at all of rushing to defend the rights of people with whom they disagreed, and that alone is cause for concern.

The concern is practical as much as anything else. Jews are a religious minority in American society and, as such, ought to be especially sensitive to censorship, for censorship nearly always takes place when majorities have no interest in hearing what minorities have to say. When Brandeis took down the

Palestinian art exhibit, one professor there, Sylvia Barack Fishman, told *The Boston Globe*: "Why must it be that Christians must always be in the majority? Is it against the laws of nature for Jews to be majority?" Such a viewpoint fails to appreciate that Christians, who control many more institutions of higher education than Jews do, could use her words to make Jews feel uncomfortable in their universities in return for allowing Christians to feel out of place in one or two Jewish ones. (Fortunately, many Christian institutions do not insist on their majority Christian privileges, although some, including evangelical colleges that require faith statements, do).

A second reason for concern is that we live in an era of religious extremism. Many Westerners, including many Jews, came to the defense of *Jyllands-Posten*, the Danish newspaper that published cartoons considered blasphemous by many Muslims. But when Jews work to suppress critics of Israel, they are in no position to criticize anyone who suppresses anything else. It makes far more sense for Jews to support open expression of ideas, including ideas offensive to them, when both American and Israeli security would benefit from forms of Islam willing to entertain criticism from within and without.

It is, I believe, time for everyone involved in these debates to calm down a bit. Organizations such as the ADL, if they are to rise above naked identity politics, ought to be less concerned with policing ideas and more preoccupied with promoting them. And critics of organizations such as the ADL should not engage in hyperbole and should be selective in their indignation. (Having recently signed two petitions, I would very much like not to sign any for the foreseeable future.) The Middle East is a caldron of turmoil, and out of the mess that is Iraq, as well as the failure to find a solution to the problem of Palestine, may come real threats to the United States and its allies, including Israel. We ought to be more focused on enemies without than preoccupied with finding them within.

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