

Defending Israel on Campus

(Editor's note: This article was written in response to the article entitled "No More Shouting on Sproul" by Laurent D. Ohana, which appeared in our last issue. Mitchell Bard is a regular contributor to Ha'Etagar.)

by Mitchell Bard

Israel is involved in a war. It is a war which threatens her survival. I am not referring to the hostilities in Lebanon, but a bloodless battle taking place in this country, the outcome of which may determine Israel's future. I am talking about the propaganda war being waged in this country between Israel's supporters and detractors.

Why is the propaganda war on campus important? Students don't make foreign policy, most don't even vote, why should we care what they think? The answer is fairly obvious. College is a time when people form many of the values and opinions they will hold for the rest of their lives. If we can convince our peers that support for Israel is just, that it is in America's interest to back Israel, we can insure that America will remain Israel's closest ally.

In the short-run, we might hope to affect elections, encouraging students to vote and work for pro-Israel candidates. In general, students have little impact on elections, but sometimes they can make a difference. In fact, student activists in Illinois are given much of the credit for the defeat of Paul Findley, a twenty-two-year House veteran who served on the Foreign Affairs Committee and was known as the PLO's spokesman in Congress. It is more

important to try to shape student opinion for the future because today's students, particularly at schools like Berkeley, will be tomorrow's leaders. Ideally, we would like to get information out to the entire student body, but it is not quantity that matters; after all, that one student who stops by the Israel Information Table may happen to be someone particularly interested in politics who will later run for political office.

This is why campus activism is so important. If Israel's detractors are allowed a free reign and lies and distortions go unanswered, students will be presented with a one-sided view of the issues—a view unfavorable to Israel. We must respond then, to our critics, but in a responsible fashion. As American Jews, we have no duty to *defend* Israel, we do not have to try to justify every Israeli action. Our obligation is to place events in the proper context. We must always ask why Israel is singled out for special treatment and we must examine her actions according to standards of behavior maintained for other nations rather than some "higher moral standard." This is not to say that Israel's supporters should react reflexively to every provocation (some criticism may best be ignored), nor does it mean we should respond in kind with vitriolic or inaccurate information. Credibility is one of our most important assets and it must not be sacrificed for the sake of attracting attention or revenge. Deciding on an appropriate response is not always easy. Some people prefer moderate approaches while others advocate more provocative



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ones. There is no hard and fast rule for determining the proper response. It is important, however, to set the record straight.

Political activism is not meant solely to be a defensive endeavor either. We have an obligation to speak out against injustice in the Arab world and wherever else it occurs. We must support our brothers and sisters persecuted behind the Iron Curtain and in repressive countries around the world. Many people are disturbed that both defense and offense take the form of "negative" approaches (i.e., what is wrong with . . .) and would prefer a more "positive" approach stressing what is good about Israel. There is much to be said that is positive about Israel.

One can talk about her astonishing economic growth, her vibrant democracy, her scientific and technological innovations—and we must present this side. It is far more difficult to present (due to unavailability of materials) and, frankly, far less interesting to the general public. No matter what good things we have to say about Israel, questions always come back to the outstanding issues of the Arab-Israeli conflict. "Sure," one student says, "Israel's a democracy, but why then does she occupy Arab lands?" Or another student may be impressed with medical advances made in Israel and still want to know about the health care available in

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Letters to the Editor

Dear Members of Ha'Etagar:

I just finished reading your Winter, 1983 edition of this publication. I was very impressed with the quality and thoughtfulness of your magazine. You thoroughly addressed a variety of issues that are of particular interest to Jewish and non-Jewish students.

Again, I enjoyed reading your very fine publication, and look forward to reading the Spring edition.

Sincerely,
Katherine A. Read
President
Associated Students
University of California
at Berkeley

Dear Editors,

I am enclosing another contribution for your excellent newspaper. I think it is the best local Jewish newspaper in the Bay Area.

I especially like the fact that you discuss the more important topics in Judaism, namely, Jewish identity, Jewish education and Jewish living.

Keep up the good work.

Sincerely,
Edward Tamler, M.D.

Dear Editor:

The Winter 1983 issue of Ha'Etagar changed my life. Your article on Ethnotherapy has left me No Room For Guilt. So I can now let The Yiddish Secret out—I'm becoming a Reconstructionist Female Cantor, and plan on Marketing Israel to the West.

Having Asked the Right Questions About Judaism and having received the right answers, I have realized that I'm Not Such a Nut After All. Having considered this revelation and All Jews Considered, I was tested for Tay-Sachs, A Jewish Disease, and will soon move into the Batim which are Sprouting Up All Over.

So Vat else is New? Well, right now, I'm off to partake of some Heavenly Challah while Dining Out at the Blue Nile, after which I plan to Shout about Politics and Jewish Survival on Sproul Plaza.

Thank you ever so much for helping me get From There To Here.

Eternally indebted,
H. A. Edgar

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Defending Israel

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the occupied territories. We can present positive aspects of Israeli society, but the problems cannot be avoided.

One last point is needed to respond to people upset by the occasional arguments which take place in Sproul Plaza. We cannot persuade people who have already made up their minds about the issues or who have Orwellian views of history; some people say we should not even try and I agree, but I do not believe this means we should not be willing to confront them. By discussing the issues with our critics we learn more about their side of the story and that forces us to become more knowledgeable and articulate. Discussions sometimes get out of hand and this should be avoided whenever possible; at the same time, we should not let ourselves be intimidated by individuals or crowds. Remember, we are not concerned with changing a vehement critic's mind, rather by refuting his or her arguments we hope to persuade those listening, who may not have made up their minds, of the validity of our arguments. Our problem is not the decibel level of arguments. It is the ignorance of many of those engaged in the discussion. Make no mistake, Israel's critics are well-informed and very good at

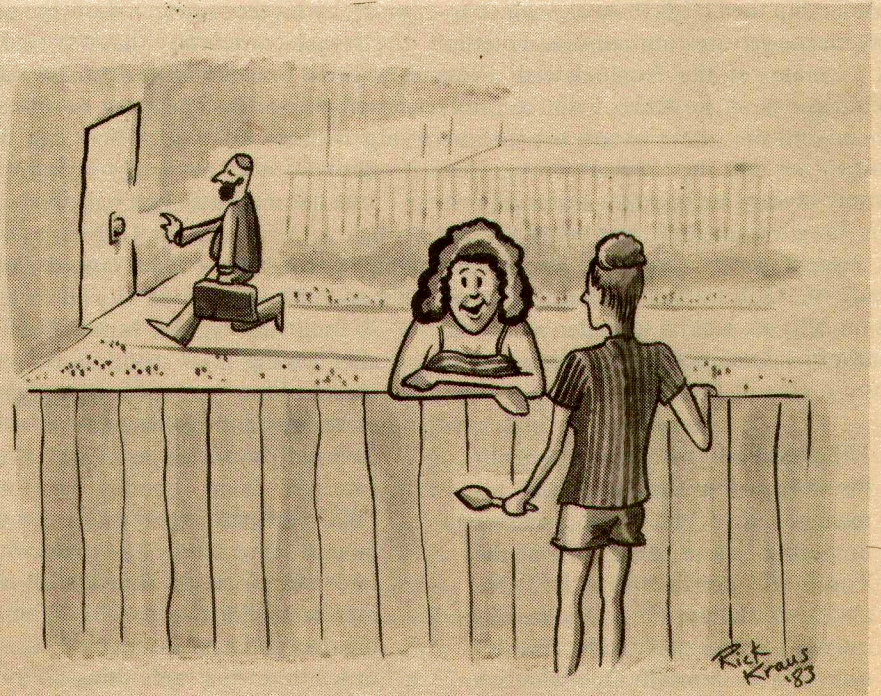
stating their case. It is sad to say the same is not true for Israel's supporters. There are very few students on this campus with the knowledge, articulateness, and inclination to debate with our antagonists. This poses a serious threat to long-run support for Israel in this country. If Jewish students are ignorant of the issues, we cannot hope to persuade the uninformed to support Israel. We must, therefore, first educate ourselves and then go out and inform others. I realize Sproul Plaza debates are not for everyone, but there are other means of disseminating information: making flyers or doing re-

search for the Israel Information Table, writing letters and articles to the newspapers, or organizing lectures.

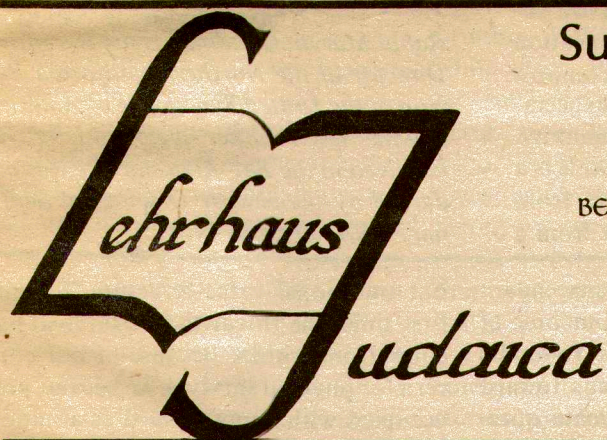
Jews have traditionally been the most politically active ethnic group in the United States and this activity has helped insure that our government stands by Israel despite all pressures to abandon her. The Arab propaganda offensive supported by what AIPAC founder, Sy Kenen called the petro-diplomatic complex is steadily increasing this pressure. There are an estimated 5000 Jewish students on this campus with no more than about one percent politically active. If

this is an indication of future Jewish political activity in this country, then the special relationship between the U.S. and Israel is in jeopardy and that puts the survival of Israel in danger. The time has come for students to shake off their apathy and take an active role in providing a visible pro-Israel presence on campus.

Mitchell Bard is a second year graduate student in public policy at U.C. Berkeley. He is a member of the Board of Directors of the Oakland Jewish Community Relations Council and co-chairman of the Israel Information Table on campus.



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