

Students who did Justice for Palestine

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“Brick by brick, wall by wall, Israeli Apartheid has to fall!”

The chants of *Students for Justice in Palestine* have shadowed me on countless campuses. No matter the college or university, their slogans germinate and sprout by a predictable process of evolution, a precise set of rules. They're nourished by the condemnations against Israel freshly chalked onto the sidewalk. Their cries climb like ivies in the courtyard up the Ivory Towers of higher education. Soon enough, they spread through the corridors and classrooms inside where minds are meant to stay open.

“From the river to the sea! Palestine will be free!”

These strings of words, inevitably reach the room where I'm preparing to give my remarks. I can be certain they'll try to stifle the tenets of free thought and speech.

“Viva, Viva Palistina!”

I rarely have cause to fear for my physical safety on campus. But each time I hear such chants targeting my lectern, I'm dragged back to the Gaza border. The PA on base is blaring, “RED ALERT!” and my pulse grows wild. Why should the complaints of my detractors bring me back to a state of war? Because I know that after both forms of warning, an explosion follows.

“Collaboration is crime; stop blockading Palestine!”

But these are only words, right?

I won't pretend the hostility doesn't slice into me like a pizza-wheel through thin crust. Whoever came up with that pat phrase about sticks, stones, and bones is chock-full of tomato sauce. Words do hurt.

Witnessing an army of young protestors file aggressively into your lecture brings pain beyond the mere physical sphere. Their slurs are meant to inflame, their slogans on posters and banners intend to sting. The righteous fury they aim at anyone they oppose can send even the bravest ninja – turtle or otherwise – deep into his shell.

Today at the University of Louisville is different.

Sort of.

The process starts out the same. The chants build and bounce. The posters slam and sicken. The room fills with protesters, and their rage immediately starts to seesaw. It travels through my divided audience like lightening between cumulus clouds. Protesters from *Students for Justice in Palestine* stand rigidly at attention, banners and flags held with pride. They refuse to take seats. Despite my invitation, they opt to

stand opposite the chairs of the women and men who have come to support Israel.

"I find it disheartening," I admit. "To see these backward proportions. I wish I saw a lot more of this," I say, pointing at those seated. "And a lot less of this." I draw their attention to the banners that create a temporary wall across the length of the room. The whole space is shrinking, caving in on us, as protesters continue to pile in.

What I am seeing unfold hurts me. I release that pain through the softest of words. "I wish more students understood why it's worth standing in a room where people hate you for who you are – where people come to protest, just because the word Israel is on the flyer."

One of the members of SJP, a young girl draped in a Palestinian flag, shakes her head stubbornly, as if to say, "The word Israel is indeed enough reason to protest."

This is where things get weird in Louisville.

The protesters hold their ground, but they choose not to push deeper into the battlefield. These students allow me to speak for 25 minutes without disruption—that's a rarity. They don't cause further mayhem in the name of Palestine as so many other SJP chapters would. Instead, they stand proudly with their banners in hand – cardboard and ink that equates Zionism to terrorism. But that's okay; they choose not to stifle my freedom of speech. They hold up their opposition to my existence with outstretched arms the entire time I speak. They are close enough that I can see their hands shaking from the effort.

"We don't dialogue with terrorists!"

This is what I'm used to hearing from members of SJP before they disrupt, shout, and storm out. But the Louisville chapter stands quietly until it's time for questions and answers. They keep their fury in check, but, like the students in most other chapters, they care passionately about their cause. Their questions make that clear.

In bitter voices, they lob accusations of war crimes in my direction. "How do you reconcile being part of such a murderous force? And then try to justify your own personal journey?"

Those who are seated start an outcry in my defense, but I am able to restore calm. I crane my neck back and forth between the two storm clouds, allowing each side to ask a question in turn.

"I'm an American Jew," says one of the protesters. "Don't you think it's strange that as American Jews we can go on Birthright or make *Aliyah* to go live in Palestine, while Palestinians who have come to the US don't have the right to get a free trip to their homeland? Don't you find that, just, infuriating?" Her tone is openly patronizing. "I just don't understand..."

"Not at all," I respond, without edge. "Much of the money in Birthright's budget comes from philanthropists. If Mahmoud Abbas wants to contribute a portion of the stolen \$300 million in his personal account to invite young Palestinian Americans to visit Israel, he's welcome to do so. No one would stop him."

I then point out another truth. "A lot of the issues that arise for the Palestinians come from their own leadership. What's happening to these people is disgusting. But it's also unfortunate that you're placing all the blame on Israel. That can't lead to a solution. Israel is doing what it must do to survive. And no more."

I pause to gather my thoughts and I allow my gaze to travel across the human wall. I want each person to accept the sincerity in my eyes. "If you guys focused more on calling out their leadership – men who are

siphoning away aid that flows from the rest of the world – and if you condemned Hamas for killing its political opposition, for murdering gay people, and all the other atrocities they carry out – you’d get better results than standing here defiantly.” I add, “ ... in this wonderful way. I love that you’re standing up for something ... I just wish you were directing your efforts at someone who deserves it.”

The foundation of this living, breathing wall softens ever so slightly. What a sight. What a feeling. I can see the cogs turning, right below that layer of bridled rage. These students care. They want to find a solution for an injustice, for the people of Palestine whom they’ve chosen to champion, a people who differ from my own, who often murder my own—and yet I find myself inspired by the students’ courage. Not for showing up, nor for holding aloft their thoughts so tirelessly. Instead, I’m inspired by their willingness to have a dialogue, to hear a narrative that differs so greatly from their own, to keep an open mind.

“Would anyone like to ask a final question?” I inquire at the conclusion of the event.

The young student draped in a Palestinian flag raises her hand. Earlier, she shook her head with righteous indignation. Now, she speaks softly. “A famous Russian philosopher once said that the line between good and evil runs not between nations, cultures, cults, or creeds, but through every human heart.” She then asks, “Do you ever see there being peace between the Palestinians and the Israelis?”

I’m disappointed to admit that I gave a long-winded response about my struggles with pessimism, and how I can’t see peace during our lifetime. “There is too much hate,” I explain.

I see now what I should have said. “Yes. Peace will be possible when more people start asking your question.”

She wants to clarify something else. “Can we agree that war is not the answer?” Her words come across like a prayer, a wish.

“One hundred percent,” I respond with a smile. “You can quote me on that.”