

# **Censoring the Prophetic**

## **How Constantinian and Progressive Jews Censor Debate about the Future of the Jewish and Palestinian People**

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In the mid 1980s I first encountered attempts to censor my thoughts on the question of Israel and Palestine. I was teaching at Maryknoll, the Catholic mission-sending society and the English language publisher of liberation theology. Though liberation theology mostly emanates from the third world and is primarily Christian, at the time I was also writing a Jewish theology of liberation.<sup>[1]</sup>

I came to Maryknoll in 1980 where I was asked to found and direct a master's program in Justice and Peace Studies. Each year we had an extensive and exciting month-long summer program that attracted activists, intellectuals, and missionaries from around the world. The program included courses and workshops that focused on foundational issues of justice and peace. Over the years we discussed the global economic system, apartheid South Africa, feminist struggles in a global perspective, and the tension between nonviolence and armed revolution. Our 1988 summer session was dedicated to the Peruvian father of liberation theology, Gustavo Gutierrez. Along with Gutierrez, we featured some of the best known—and controversial—liberation theologians from around the world.<sup>[2]</sup>

In the summer of 1986, I decided to feature a workshop on the Israeli-Palestinian crisis. In the six years of the program we had not addressed the Middle East, and other religions, such as Islam, were yet to appear on my radar screen. While researching my book on a Jewish

theology of liberation, I came across a Palestinian educator, Muhammad Hallaj, and asked him to come to Maryknoll and speak to our students. I also asked Yehezkel Landau, an American-born Israeli whom I had just met, to participate as well. The workshop would feature two perspectives—Palestinian and Israeli.

Soon after the advertisements for the summer appeared, the controversy began. What followed was a flurry of calls from officials at the Anti-Defamation League (ADL). They requested a meeting with the head of Maryknoll in their offices in New York City.

Several Maryknollers met with the ADL officials, and, though I never asked what was discussed in the meeting, a few days later I received a phone call from the ADL's Director of Interfaith Affairs, Rabbi Leon Klenicki. The place and timing of the phone call was strange: at home during the Thanksgiving holiday. The implication of the phone call was that I was about to cross a red line. At the beginning of the conversation, I wondered what that red line was. It obviously had something to do with allowing a Palestinian to speak his own story. Here was the red line I heard as Klenicki spoke: "As a Jew, you ought to know better about the lies Palestinians tell and how fragile support for Israel really is. Though a good Jew stands up for justice, it is the Israeli and Jewish side that needs justice after the Holocaust. Especially in public, Jews need to be united. Besides, there are many opportunities for a young and intelligent Jew like you. There are many doors that we can open for you."<sup>[3]</sup>

When I think back on that call many years (and many warnings) later, I am struck by the tone of the conversation—soft, like a grandfather offering sage advice. Still the undercurrent spoke volumes.

As the conversation proceeded, I asked Klenicki to describe what was behind the doors he could open for me. He simply reiterated his statement. But I kept wondering what was behind the doors. Was it an enhanced standing in the Jewish community? An academic appointment at a prestigious university? In the background, I also heard a threat—exile. Exile was the brass knuckles that might come into play later. What would this exile mean? In the coming years I found out. What I learned is that Jewish power is around every corner of my personal and professional life. This isn't the conspiratorial power of the anti-Semitic imagination. It is an agenda-driven, realpolitik power, understandable after the powerlessness of the Holocaust years.<sup>[4]</sup>

My exile began shortly after my book, *Toward a Jewish Theology of Liberation*, was published in 1987. It continued after Israel's brutal suppression of the first Palestinian uprising in 1987; after the assassination of Yitzhak Rabin in 1995; after Israel's brutal suppression of the second Palestinian uprising in 2000; after the building of Israel's apartheid wall in Jerusalem and the West Bank; after the second Israeli invasion of Lebanon in 2006; after Israel's invasion of Gaza in 2008. With each after, the exile deepened. Forms of harassment multiplied. They included: demanding my dismissal from employment; diminishing my opportunities for advancement, publishing and public platforms; hiring private investigators to survey my private life.

David Horowitz's 2006 broadside, *The Professors: 101 Most Dangerous Academics in America*, came late in the game. But how such harassment ultimately functions in the world cannot be foretold in advance. In my own experience it has worked in a variety of ways. On the one hand, I have been exiled from any involvement with the normative Jewish community and to a university where there are almost no Jews. Honors have been denied me and national public platforms for my work have been severely curtailed. On the other, such assaults galvanized other sources of support for my work and the stance I hold. I teach at a major university where I am University Professor of Jewish Studies, Professor of History, and founding Director of the thriving Center for Jewish Studies.<sup>[5]</sup>

As with any attempt to censor and punish, unintended consequences abound. History unfolds. The understanding of that history evolves. Despite the concerted efforts of the Jewish establishment, the narrative history of the state of Israel and its policies toward the Palestinians written by dissident Jews has become the accepted narrative around the world. The narrative is as follows: At the center of the founding of the state of Israel is a profound wrong done to the Palestinian people; Palestinians were ethnically cleansed from the parts of Palestine that became the state of Israel; Israel has continued to expand its territories at the expense of the Palestinians; Israel has built an apartheid wall around the Palestinians; Israel and Jews in the United States have sponsored and/or enabled this process of conquering the Palestinian people.<sup>[6]</sup>

Horowitz recycles arguments made against me and other Jewish dissidents in a particularly egregious way—with innuendos, partial truths and outright lies. But what makes professors like me dangerous is less Horowitz's views than the truth of the matter verified in the state

of Israel's history and the suffering of the Palestinian people. Though Horowitz expresses the views of the normative Jewish community and encourages local Jewish communities to take up his bidding, his enabling amounts to a gamble. Horowitz and the Jewish establishment operate with a series of assumptions, first and foremost that those who administer and teach at universities are ignorant of the history and events in the Middle East. At least the establishment seems to want to discipline those members of the faculty who deal with difficult issues. It assumes that administrators and faculty have never taken on difficult issues in their own lives.

The establishment's assumptions are often wrong. I teach at a Baptist university in the south that has its own civil war over what a Christian university should be. Many professors at the university have themselves been victims of censorship in the Baptist world. Indeed, many were displaced from the denominational seminaries and universities they taught at. They were sent into exile with the same innuendos, partial truths, and outright lies that Horowitz and the Jewish establishment uses on the Jewish scene. So though our backgrounds are very different, Baptist exiles can identify with Jewish exiles. It turns out that these Southern Baptists in exile want to protect me in the way they wanted to be protected. Further, a successful assault on me opens the field for renewed attacks on them. Their ethical compass (after all, they stood up for principle and were punished for it) and their self-interest (wanting to build a wall between them and the local Baptist community) works in my favor.

On the Jewish/Israeli/Palestinian front, my own experience at the university includes top level administrators of a conservative evangelical bent who have a special place for Israel in their theology but who think I am "prophetic" on the question of Palestinians. And there are also administrators of a more moderate bent who have made complaints to US senators and congressmen about Israel's behavior in Lebanon and Gaza. One top administrator, who the local Jewish community counts as their true friend, confessed privately that he is an anti-Zionist. After viewing a C-Span interview featuring Horowitz, another administrator remarked that Horowitz was an "idiot," "crazy," "insufferable." When Horowitz's book appeared and the buzz over its contents began to be discussed, many faculty members congratulated me on being listed as one of the most dangerous professors in America. Though many of my students voted for George Bush as President, they were quite impressed with my designation. They even inquired as to how high I was ranked in the pantheon of dangerous professors. They were disappointed that their dangerous professor

was listed alphabetically.

The assumption that all local Jews, even those who express resentment toward Jewish dissenters in public, actually believe in public harassment is false. Over the years, I have received private messages of support and disdain for the behavior of fellow Jews. At times, local rabbis have been supportive of me and even confide in the difficulty of managing the “ignorance” of local Jews on the issue of Israel-Palestine. A rabbi of a local congregation once spoke of how “embarrassing” the criticism of me was for him. As other rabbis before him, he pleaded an inability to speak out because his employment is controlled by the congregation. On the local level, Jewish “unity” is a mirage. But who has the courage to speak out?

It might seem strange that a conservative Christian university protects a Jewish dissident. Repeated attempts by the local Jewish community to have me reassigned from the directorship of the Center for Jewish Studies, a program I created, or even have me fired have been repeatedly rebuffed. Like Horowitz, they often overreach. This happened some years ago when I was forced to meet with various community members who called for my resignation. At the end of the meeting, the group presented the provost with a list of pro-Israel speakers he should invite to speak at the university. Among others, they suggested the televangelist Pat Robertson, who, interestingly, is too conservative and controversial for the university to invite to speak on any topic, let alone Israel-Palestine. When the provost saw the list, he rolled his eyes. The community members had no idea of where the university’s interests really lie.

Our focus needs to move beyond Horowitz and the Jewish establishment. Though both can be particularly vile, upfront and personal, in my experience it is progressive Jewish administrators, faculty and students who are the main block to free speech on campuses. Those who identify with the progressive Jewish journal *Tikkun* are the most vociferous and organized censors, especially when they are clustered in Jewish Studies and Holocaust Studies programs. Though Horowitz is critical of their essential liberal and left-leaning ways, they are the bulwarks against substantive critique of Israel’s policies against the Palestinians. Where Horowitz might appear on campus once every several years, these Jewish academics are a permanent presence. They—with Hillel centers—are the Jewish establishment on campus.<sup>[7]</sup>

Progressive Jews do allow criticism at the margins of the Israeli-Palestinian debate. But they do this as a tactic to silence Jewish and non-Jewish dissidents. By being open to criticism at the margins, progressive Jews keep the debate about Israel and Palestine limited and theoretical. Their strategy includes criticizing Horowitz as a lunatic. This allows them to appear even-handed when they apply the same label to those who call for boycotts against Israeli products and divestment from companies that invest in Israel.

Of course, the charge made is more than lunacy. Progressive Jews on campus often brandish the argument that Jews to the left of them are self-hating Jews and that non-Jews who argue too strongly on behalf of Palestinians are anti-Semites. For progressive Jews, only a lunatic, a self-hater or an anti-Semite (or a combination thereof) argues that the state of Israel was born out of the original sin of ethnic cleansing of Palestinians or that a “security wall” to “protect” Israel from the anti-Semitism of the Palestinians is an “apartheid wall” to expand Israeli territory while ghettoizing Palestinians in population centers. Could innocent and justice-loving Jews do the things that they are being accused of? Especially after the Holocaust, could Jews embark on a campaign of ethnic cleansing and then lie about it?

Like their counterparts in the Jewish establishment, progressive Jews see Jews as innocent in suffering and empowerment. In fact, progressive Jews carry the same colonial and imperialist aspects of contemporary Jewishness as their counterparts in the Jewish establishment. This is why it is best to see establishment Jews as Constantinian in their outlook, more or less like Christianity that began in the fourth century. Under Constantine in the fourth century, Christianity went from being a small and subversive sect to the religion of the empire. To be the religion’s empire, Christianity militarized itself and blessed the policies of the empire. In return Christianity received special privileges and power. The Jewish establishment has made its own deal with empire and with the responsibilities, privileges, and power involved. But since progressive Jews have also made their deal, albeit with several twists, it is useful to see them as the leftwing of Constantinian Judaism.<sup>[8]</sup>

The deal Constantinian and progressive Jews have made with empire in America and Israel is also part of what I call the interfaith ecumenical deal. Here the Jewish-Christian post-Holocaust dialogue, which features truth-telling about Christian history and the centrality of anti-Semitism to that history, morphs into a “deal” where Christians continually confess their sins of historic anti-Semitism and pretend that Jews are still emerging from the death camps of Europe. Jews in the dialogue/deal demand total support for the State of Israel as

the post-Holocaust project of the Jewish people and as the practical aspect of Christian repentance for the Holocaust. Any criticism of Israeli policies toward the Palestinians is seen by the Jewish dialoguers as backtracking on Christian repentance, thus a return to anti-Semitism. Christians are also enjoined to ostracize those Jewish dissidents—Jews of conscience—who dare to criticize the State of Israel. Christians must see Jews of Conscience, defined as self-haters by Jews, in the same way. If Christians listen to Jews of conscience, they are seen as backsliding into anti-Semitism.

So beware! The threat to free speech on campuses and in the broader public arena has less to do with conservative Jews like Horowitz or even the Constantinian Jewish establishment, though they certainly play their part. More difficult to analyze and more insidious is the role of progressive Jews who condemn Horowitz and Constantinian Judaism while limiting the debate on Israel and the Palestinians. Historically, the narrative supporting Israel in America and Europe has been almost exclusively a liberal one.<sup>[9]</sup>

Conservative ideologues have been late to the Israel table, at least nationally. Now conservatives and liberals work in tandem. The 2008 presidential campaign illustrates this joint work as the Democratic and Republican front-runners in the primary campaign tripped over each other to demonstrate that they were the true pro-Israel candidate. Listen again to Hillary Clinton's and Barack Obama's speeches to the American Israeli Political Action Committee (AIPAC) and ask yourself if a Constantinian Jew could write a more pro-Israel speech? Then ask yourself if the speeches would have been profoundly different if they had been written by a progressive Jew. No doubt both trends in Jewish life had their hand in their respective speeches. To say that either Clinton or Obama are surrounded only by Constantinian Jews is to miss the confluence of both camps when it comes to public policy on the issue of Israel.<sup>[10]</sup>

Still it seems almost absurd to spend too much time on those who censor speech that speaks the truth. If history is the ultimate judge, the truth will come out and the historical narrative will change accordingly. Yes, we live in the golden age of Constantinian Judaism but one day Constantinian Judaism will crumble in the rubble of its flawed historical narrative. Historians always arrive who deflate the conquerors' sense of their presumed and argued innocence. Then the roles of the innocent and the demonized are reversed; the conquered assume their rightful place as the underdog and the conqueror is seen as the one who attempts to justify its plundering of the land and a people. Jews who struggle against their

conscience today will one day see Jewish history in a different light. Or their children or grandchildren will.

Having discovered the other side of Jewish history, the question is whether future generations of Jews will be able to navigate this truth and maintain their identification as Jews or whether they will drift so far from Jewish life in its varied institutional and cultural forms that there will be no way back. Here is the difficulty. From the inception of Jewish history, Jews have identified Jewishness as exceptional and different. When Jews of the twenty-first century wake up and see that normative Jewishness has joined the nations, that there is no substantive difference between Jews and others when Jews assume power, then the question of what it means to be Jewish will deepen ... or disappear. Jews will have to decide if it is worth being Jewish if there is no difference between “them” and “us.” If there is a difference, Jews will have to seek out what that difference is, where Jews find it, and how Jews embody it.

Jews of conscience are already encountering the Jewish future. They are ahead of the curve. Constantinian and progressive Judaism are already passé, even as those who carry its mantle retain their momentary hold on power. What is ahead for those who argue against what the entire world already knows? If the world knows, don't Jews know too? The end of Constantinian and progressive Jewish understandings are already at hand, embedded in the history Jews are creating. This is the secret known all over the global and the Jewish block.

Jews of conscience name the conundrum of the Jewish future. Live Jewishness or it will leave the world, except in name only. We might say that Jewishness survives today in name only. Can the warning cries of Jews of conscience serve as a rallying call for a future worth bequeathing to our children?

Normative Jewishness is riddled with colonialism and imperialism. Thus the heart of the Jewish covenant is infected with atrocity. Horowitz embraces and celebrates this violence as the future of Jewish life. The Jewish task is to struggle within this violence toward a future of justice, peace and reconciliation.

If conscience is the guide, then Jews cannot stray far. It is here that Jews encounter the prophetic, the indigenous of the people Israel. The encounter with the prophetic is the Jewish future if Jews have the courage to embrace it now.



1. 1. The publishing arm of Maryknoll is Orbis Books. It was through the translation of Latin American Liberation Theology into English that Liberation Theology could circulate in North America and the world. For example, theologians and other church workers in Africa and Asia were more likely able to read English than Spanish.
2. 2. For the foundational work of Gustavo Gutierrez see his *A Theology of Liberation: History, Politics and Salvation* (Ossining, NY: Orbis Press, 1973). For the collection of essays that emerged from that conference, see *The Future of Liberation Theology: Essays in Honor of Gustavo Gutierrez*, edited by Marc H. Ellis and Otto Maduro (Ossining, NY: Orbis Press, 1989).
3. 3. When Rabbi Leon Klenicki died in 2009, the ADL released a press release summarizing Klenicki's contribution to Interfaith dialogue. They wrote of the respect Christians had for him: "The United States Conference of Catholic Bishops recommended to all U.S. bishops and cardinals that they observe Holocaust Memorial Day by using as a liturgy the service prepared by Rabbi Klenicki and Dr. Eugene J. Fisher, "From Desolation to Hope: An Interreligious Holocaust Memorial Service." In May 2001, Rabbi Klenicki was honored by the Holy See's Commission for Interreligious Relations with Judaism for his contributions to the interfaith dialogue." See ADL's press release, January 27, 2009, at [www.adl.org](http://www.adl.org).
4. 4. For an interesting take on the issue of Jewish power, see *Jews in American Politics*, ed., L. Sandy Maisell (New York: Rowan and Littlefield, 2001). Tellingly, the introduction is written by Senator Joseph Lieberman.
5. 5. David Horowitz, *The Professors: 101 Most Dangerous Academics in America* (New York: Regnery, 2007).
6. 6. For an Israeli take on ethnic cleansing see Ilan Pappé, *The Ethnic Cleansing of Palestine* (London: Oneworld, 2007). For the continuation of the policies of settlement into the present see *A Civilian Occupation: The Politics of Israeli Architecture*, edited by Rafi Segal and Eyal Weizman London (New York: Verso, 2003).
7. 7. I have written of the collusion of Tikkun and Progressive Jews in general in my *Judaism Does Not Equal Israel* (New York: New Press, 2009).
8. 8. I first used Constantinian Judaism to refer to the Jewish establishment in my *Reading the Torah Out Loud: A Journey of Lament and Hope* (Minneapolis: Fortress

Press, 2007).

9. 9. Take for example Elie Wiesel, the preeminent public figure relating to the Holocaust and the primary mover in establishing the United States Holocaust Memorial Museum. Looking at his record for supporting liberal causes, it is impossible to argue that he, or others like him, are conservative. However, when it comes to Palestinians, Wiesel has been for the most part silent. For an interesting take on Wiesel see Mark Chmiel, *Elie Wiesel and the Politics of Moral Leadership* (Philadelphia: Temple University Press, 2001).
10. 10. For the text of Hillary Clinton's address to AIPAC see <http://www.scribd.com/doc/3265728/Hillary-Clinton-speech-at-AIPAC>. For Barack Obama's address to AIPAC see <http://www.imra.org.il/story.php3?id=39525>.