

THE PRESIDENT OF ISRAEL'S OPEN LETTER TO US UNIVERSITIES

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American University

and College Presidents,

Over many years as a leader in Israel, I have often returned to my days at Cornell and NYU. It was on these campuses that I gained critical thinking skills that have served me throughout my life. It was there that I was exposed to the highest standards of academic inquiry and of debate. I benefited from brilliant and patient faculty, from the diverse student body, and from the distinctly American atmosphere of intellectual freedom.

Never, as someone who has always looked up to the standards of the American university, could I have foreseen the images and voices that have reached me since the tragedy of October 7.

As President of Israel, I have spent the past month traveling among devastated Israeli communities, more than 1,400 grieving families, and the relatives of more than 240 hostages. I've been trying to comfort survivors of the largest massacre of Jews since the Holocaust, a sadistic atrocity that included rape and torture.

And while doing so, I hear of Jewish students harassed at Harvard University. A Jewish student assaulted at Tulane, Jewish students locked in a library at the Cooper Union as a mob shouts outside, signs accusing Israel of genocide, swastikas painted on dorm-room doors, hateful and intimidating demonstrations – too many examples to list.

All of this is happening not on the fringes of society but in the very temples of scholarship, in halls meant to be beacons of humanism, progress and rigorous inquiry. And it is happening not in Europe a century ago, but in the United States in 2023.

Debate is welcome on any topic, including Israel's actions. This goes without saying. As America has learned in its own wars, the trial of fighting heartless terrorists who hide among civilian is agonizing and offers no easy

choices. But the events on campus are not debate but a defilement of the university and its principles.

How can anyone endorsing, excusing, or glorifying the Hama atrocities have a place in any college, or in the civilized world?

I have been encouraged by those who have spoken out clearly. I was heartened that a Cornell professor who pronounced himself “exhilarated” by the massacre was placed on leave, and that students at Harvard Hillel received a visit from the university’s President. If I can be helpful to you, I’m always available for a sincere conversation, and am happy to answer even the toughest question.

We are all students of history. As such, we know that foul ideologies targeting Jews always signal a broader intellectual collapse. The events we are seeing are not just a threat to Jewish students but to the health of institutions crucial to our civilization and thus to our civilization itself.

Moral leadership is vitally important at this fraught moment. It would be of great consequence for you, the Presidents, to condemn the barbarous acts of October 7 publicly and unequivocally.

Students and faculty, I believe, also need a clear voice saying that free speech is of the highest value, but speech promoting violence against individuals or groups and calls for the elimination of a whole country, Israel, are unacceptable on campus and should not be tolerated.

Each institution can lead the way in combating the scourge of antisemitism by creating a Task Force that will develop a plan of action for the campus and serve as a beacon for the wider community, as well.

This conflict is far more than a clash between Israel and Hamas: At stake is whether the enlightened world will defend the basic norms of humanity or choose to accept, even support, their violation.

This will either be a teaching moment that moves us toward constructive action – or a moment of irreversible decline. All citizens of free countries must decide where they stand, but few have the responsibility you carry as custodians of knowledge and culture. Your choices now will shape history and will be remembered.

Yours sincerely,

Isaac Herzog

President of the State of Israel

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