

Re “[Behind CUNY graduation speech furor, a university divided over Zionism](#)” by Arno Rosenfeld

To the Editor:

I write in regard to the *Forward*'s June 30 article, “Behind CUNY graduation speech furor, a university divided over Zionism,” which included an image of a flyer accusing me and three other academics on a panel that I moderated of having a “role in anti-Palestinian racism.” Allow me to give some context.

The flyer was originally distributed during a panel that I moderated, on Dec. 8, 2022, at the CUNY Graduate Center. The discussion featured three academics speaking on the language of the Israeli-Palestinian conflict. Earlier that day, a faculty and student group calling itself CUNY4Palestine sent out mass emails assassinating our four characters in an attempt to intimidate us against speaking and paint us as bigots. CUNY4Palestine also came to the event that evening where they distributed the flyer in question and attempted to shut down the event as it began.

According to the flyer, my supposed transgression was that, as the then-chairperson of the sole Department of Judaic Studies at CUNY, I testified at the hearing of the New York City Council Committee on Antisemitism on College Campuses on June 30, 2022, and related some of my students' experiences, fears and concerns along with my own observations. These observations were based on attending numerous talks by anti-Zionist CUNY faculty and student groups, including the Cross CUNY Working Group Against Racism and Colonialism.

During these events, I listened to colleagues pontificate on how the “tentacles” of Zionist corporations were reaching around the globe to export their genocidal ways, from which none of us were safe. This was barely a modification of the centuries-old libel found in antisemitic fabrications like *The Protocols of the Elders of Zion*. At another talk, I listened to a speaker proclaim that the “Zionist colonial project” was a white supremacist and racist endeavor, aimed at the extermination of the Palestinian population, all of which was supposedly stated by the founder of Zionism, Theodor Herzl. No citation was given. To the contrary, in *Der Altneuland*, Herzl envisaged Palestinian Arabs welcoming Jewish immigrants and living peacefully and prosperously together with them.

Zionism has always defined itself simply as the need and right of the Jewish people to self-government and self-determination like every other people. It was born out of the Jewish reaction to the racist, white supremacist and genocidal antisemitism of the late nineteenth and early twentieth centuries that led to the Holocaust and the expulsion and threatened murder of Jews in North Africa and the Middle East. While we can and should critique the Israeli

government's policies as we do any other government, and while we can and should critique Zionism as we do any other form of nationalism, redefining the movement in terms of the very thing it was fleeing and fighting is extremely problematic.

This is not to say that Zionists cannot be racist or that we should not speak out against such racism when we encounter it. But the twenty-first century attempt to redefine nineteenth and twentieth century Jewish victims of white supremacy and genocide as the perpetrators of that very racism and genocide is an attempt to falsify history in the service of a political agenda, all while targeting the scholars, like me, who point that out.

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