

Four Sons in College by Meira Maierovitz Drazin

In 2002, students at Ohio State University built a Palestinian refugee camp on the quad in which they lived for a week “to represent the aggression of the Israelis against innocent civilians.” At University of Maryland, Israel Week celebrations were constantly interrupted and vandalized as pro-Palestinian students ripped down flyers, defaced advertisements, and blocked entrance to events until police arrived. Just this October, the University of Michigan hosted the Second National Student Conference on the Palestine Solidarity Movement; its goal was to promote an end to US aid to Israel and to encourage divestment by universities and corporations from the Jewish State.

The American university is not only a microcosm of society, but also a stage on which opinions and emotions are highly dramatized and any voice can be heard, as long as it shouts loudly enough. For students of every background, campus life is an opportunity to reconsider their belief systems in the face of all the convictions and passion vying for their attention. For Jewish students coming from day schools, college is often their first opportunity to interact with peers of widely divergent upbringings. For Jewish students coming from a more integrated background, college presents access to all forms of peer-run Jewish life. In any political condition, college is a time when Jewish students are establishing, reevaluating, and reaffirming their Jewish identity. In today’s political climate, however, Jewish students are being challenged to justify themselves in ways in which few of them are prepared or equipped. Caravan for Democracy is a program specifically designed to empower Jewish students to respond to the anti-Israel crusade surrounding them on their campuses today.

Caravan for Democracy was initiated last year by Jewish National Fund (JNF), Media Watch International (MWI) and Hamagshimiml to promote constructive dialogue about the Middle East crisis on American college campuses. By bringing high-level speakers from Israel to discuss the shared values of freedom and democracy that connect Israel and the United States, as well as the challenges Israel faces as the only democracy in the Middle East, Caravan reaches out to thousands of students. The program is structured so as to build a cadre of pro-Israel student leaders who will continue to initiate constructive campaigns in relation to pro-Israel, pro-democracy, and anti-terrorist topics.

The parable of the Four Sons from the Passover *Haggadah* is a useful way to think about Jewish college students’ reactions to the onslaught of campus anti-Semitism and anti-Israel activism and how Caravan for Democracy is tailored to meet their needs. Like the wise son, the wicked son, the simple son, and the son who is unaware that there are questions to be asked, Jewish students now define themselves, respectively, as pro-Israel activists, anti-Israel activists, confused and even ashamed about their obligation to their Jewish identity versus their sense of justice and human rights, or simply desirous that everyone should just forget about the Middle East.

The Four Sons’ Questions

According to the Passover liturgy, the wise son asks: “What are these testimonies, statutes, and judgments which the Eternal, our God, hath commanded you?” We are taught that although he questions the commandments, he is not disputing them so much as trying to understand them in better detail. It is clear that he considers himself subject to them because he refers to their prescriber as “our God.”

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On college campuses today the “wise sons” are asking: “I am proud to be Jewish, I am a committed supporter of Israel, but how can I respond to the anti-Israel campaign on my campus that seems to be winning the hearts and minds of everyone around me?” Whether they consider themselves right wing or left wing, Orthodox or Reform, gay or straight, these students are ready to be galvanized to play their part in supporting the continuity of the Jewish people and their homeland — they only need the tools.

In contrast, the wicked son asks: “What mean you by this service?” and the Haggadah advises that “... it is clear he doth not include himself, and thus has withdrawn himself from the community.”

During the *Yom HaZikaron* (Israel Memorial Day) service at the University of Berkeley this past spring, one Jewish student took the microphone and proceeded to recite the mourner’s kaddish for all the Palestinians killed by Israeli “terror.” The parallel between the wicked son’s question and those students manipulating what they know about being Jewish into dramatic anti-Israel statements is the desire not to be implicated with the Jewish nation. Both the wicked son and the Berkeley student’s challenges are rhetorical; their questions are structured in ways that make clear that the intention is to undermine and not to receive a genuine response. Perhaps it is impossible to ever provide these students with answers they can accept or even deign to hear. Nevertheless, it is imperative that we do answer so that the simple son and the uninquiring son have other voices to listen to.

To the simple son who can only ask, “what is this,” we are advised to respond: “... with a mighty hand did the Eternal bring us forth from Egypt from the house of bondage.” This response implies that we need to start from the very beginning. To those students who are unsure of where they stand and suspect that the Israeli cause is unjust, because they have never been offered any evidence to the contrary, we need to provide that evidence. Not only do we need to present the Arab-Israeli conflict in its historical context, but we also must do so with powerful rhetoric in order to counter all the emotional media hype being manipulated from the pro-Palestinian side. We need to make them understand that not only is Zionism not racism, and that Israel is the only democracy in the Middle East, but that Israel shares intrinsic American values, such as the value of human life. Moreover, we need to do the same for the students who don’t even know that there are questions to be asked. As it says in the Haggadah: “But as for him who hath no capacity to inquire thou must begin the narration.” It is incumbent upon us to reach even those who are not looking for answers.

Caravan for Democracy

Sponsored by Jewish National Fund, Media Watch International, and Hamagshimim, Caravan for Democracy is a multi-faceted strategy designed as a response to all four sons. At each campus visited by Caravan for Democracy, the following takes place:

- A free lecture by a prominent speaker from Israel is followed by a question-and-answer session. Speakers come from all fields — politics, journalism, academia — and address the shared values of America and Israel, the current Palestinian violence against Israel and the issue of media bias, including practical steps to fight media bias and anti-Israel propaganda on each campus.
- A reception following the speech, allowing for informal discussions between the guest lecturer and the audience. This portion of the event also enables students to network and reinforce one another’s

enthusiasm to take action.

- Distribution of a comprehensive activist's kit on a CD-ROM containing a step-by-step guide for identifying and combating media bias, talking points, historical reference materials, and other resources to assist activists in promoting discussion and educating fellow students about Israel.
- A briefing and question-and-answer session with the guest lecturer for professors.
- A meeting and interview with campus press with a two-fold agenda: coverage of the event including an interview with the guest lecturer, and a discussion on bias in the media regarding the current Middle East conflict.

The driving forces behind Caravan for Democracy are the student leaders. On each campus, two student activists are chosen to help organize and run the Caravan event. Working with staff as well as a student committee, these leaders are involved in all aspects of planning and implementing the program, from arranging the venue to ensuring publicity and media coverage.

Caravan for Democracy works closely with a coalition of campus organizations looking to promote pro-Israel programming on campus. In most cases, Hillel professionals assist in recruiting students, identifying potential student leaders and offering support through their knowledge base and contacts on the campus. Academic departments, Jewish sororities and fraternities, and other organizations help by promoting the program to their constituents and identifying student leaders.

Follow-up and communication with students after the initial program is key to the overall success of Caravan for Democracy.

In order to enhance the sense of community and facilitate future activities, lecture attendees from each campus are sent articles and photos from their event as well as updates on Caravan activities on other campuses; Israel-related program opportunities; scholarship and Israel trip information; and examples of media bias with suggested responses.

Financial resources are available to assist the student leaders in their future pro-Israel programming efforts.

Caravan for Democracy takes its two student leaders from each campus on a two-week summer mission to Israel to give them the best media and Israel-advocacy training available. The trip is intended to inspire the students, strengthening their connection to the country and empowering them to be confident in their abilities to run pro-Israel programs on campus, respond to issues not being treated fairly in the media, and be future leaders in the Jewish community.

Caravan for Democracy held its first semester of programs, events, and leadership development on 24 campuses during the Spring 2002 semester. The lectures alone touched over 4,000 students and 100 professors. Articles and editorials reached thousands of students at every university, promoting Israel awareness and constructive dialogue. Student leaders on many campuses reported that the Caravan for Democracy lecture was the largest pro-Israel event that they had ever seen on their campus.

In August 2002, Caravan student leaders from the past semester were taken to Israel for a two-week training seminar. The students trained with top political leaders, Foreign Ministry spokesmen, journalists and academics. They learned how to write a letter to the editor in under 200 words, filmed themselves in mock

interviews, and observed first-hand the human challenges Israel faces.

Caravan for Democracy will travel to 50 new campuses over the 2002-2003 academic year, with speakers including Jerusalem Mayor Ehud Olmert, Israeli Embassy Spokesman Mark Regev, Jerusalem Post Editor Elli Wohlgelemer, Journalist Ehud Ya'ari and Ariel Sharon's senior advisor Ra'anana Gissen, among

Some Answers

When the students who participated in the leadership-training seminar in Israel this past summer were asked to think about Caravan for Democracy as a response to all four sons' questions, many of them described how this analogy from the Haggadah plays out on their respective campuses. Danielle Leff of Ohio State University (which hosted a Caravan event last spring amidst mounting anti-Israel campus sentiment) wrote:

The Jewish population at Ohio State, where I am a student, is extremely apathetic and almost hidden. Although there is the presence of the "wise son" and "wicked son," it seems that most students are both unaware of, and/or choose to separate themselves from the issue of Israel, its politics, history, future etc. This idea applies to the campus climate in general, not just Jewish students. I think in general the campus aspect of the [Caravan for Democracy] program probably served to fulfill each of the four different populations in some way. For the "wise son"—the activists like myself—it helps further the knowledge of the situation and what needs to be done. For the "wicked son"—the anti-Israel groups—it makes known that Israel is not going to go away and we will not be passive. For the other two sons, [the Caravan] program hopefully helps to pique the slightest interest in Israel and its importance to the Jewish people. By bringing a big name speaker, students of all kinds are more apt to attend, and if they can get an understanding and an appreciation for the Israel situation in the process, all the better.

On a different note, the summer training which was part of the Caravan program was intense and powerful. It made us, the "wise sons," more wise and gave us the means to affect the three other populations. Not only did we learn more background about the issues directly from the source (the politicians and negotiators), we also learned specific arguments and talking points to both counter and question our adversaries. Likewise, we learned how to get the accurate information out there in a friendly and interesting yet informative way—thus discrediting our anti-Israel groups on campus, correcting the misinformed, and educating the ignorant.

Caravan for Democracy is designed to meet the needs of all the different types of Jewish students on American college campuses today. Caravan equips pro-Israel student activists with the resources to combat media bias by providing them with a solid knowledge base through position papers and talking points. By targeting actual and potential campus leaders interested in becoming spokespeople and community educators, Caravan takes advantage of what the wise sons have to offer. The leadership-training seminar in Israel hones the skills of each campus's two selected student leaders and helps channel their passion into viable and continuing campus campaigns.

In fact, it is significant to mention that Caravan for Democracy was Danielle Leff's first pro-Israel or Jewish leadership position. The program gave her the tools to combat the negativity and apathy about Israel she was seeing all around her and she returned to her campus this fall eager and confident of her skills to promote a concerted and constructive pro-Israel campaign on her campus.

Indeed, the best answer to those Jewish students who consider Israel their enemy is the intelligence, preparedness, knowledge and organization of those who rally together to support Israel. The wise son and the wicked son, however, represent only two extremes in the spectrum of political college campus life.

Recognizing this polarization, Caravan for Democracy places major emphasis on targeting the simple and uninquiring sons and to this end an integral part of the Caravan program is to engage students who have never affiliated with Jewish or Israel activities on campus. By reaching out to all organizations and academic departments on campus, Caravan widely broadens the spectrum of students aware of a pro-Israel presence, allowing a larger population to engage in a constructive Israel dialogue. Jewish tradition is built upon the necessity of dialogue, dispute, and questioning in order to understand and accept. Caravan for Democracy pushes to create a forum for a dynamic Israel dialogue on campus so that people are able to converse with facts and not just dramatic hearsay, or even worse — silence.

Today, the drama of the four sons is being performed on college campuses across the United States. According to popular interpretation, the wise, wicked, simple and uninquiring sons represent the characters of all of the Children of Israel, and the Haggadah guides us in how to tailor our answers to best suit their questions. With the Jewish homeland and our children's Jewish identity at stake, it is imperative that our answers are timely, appropriate, and powerful. We must do whatever we can to ensure that our children are prepared to assume their own responsibility to Israel and the Jewish people now and in years to come.

For more information on Caravan for Democracy and upcoming campus events, please visit www.caravanfordemocracy.org.

Endnotes:

1. Each organization contributes its unique strengths to the partnership. Founded in 1901, Jewish National Fund (JNF) is a non-profit organization celebrating its 100th anniversary as caretaker of the land of Israel. Over the past century, the organization has planted over 220 million trees, built over 120 dams and reservoirs, developed over 250,000 acres of land, created more than 400 parks throughout Israel and educated students around the world about Israel and the environment. Media Watch International (MWI) is an independent non-profit organization, dedicated to promoting accurate and impartial media coverage of the Middle East. MWI monitors coverage of Israel and the Middle East in the American and international media with the goal of educating the public about these issues. Hamagshimim is a University Zionist Movement, serving students on campuses all across the United States. Hamagshimim is religiously pluralistic, politically non-partisan, and is sponsored by Hadassah, the Women's Zionist Organization of America.

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