

A Wrongheaded Assumption

By David Kraemer

In a recent “address at morning prayers,” reported in *The New York Times*, Lawrence Summers, President of Harvard University, expressed at some length his concern for evidence of rising anti-Semitism, on campuses and abroad. What was most remarkable about this address was neither its substance nor the quality of its analysis, which were neither new nor otherwise notable. Rather, what was significant was who delivered the address, where, and what he said about himself in the process.

One can agree or disagree with different elements of Summers’ speech. Basically, Summers directs our attention to the well-known and much reported instances of anti-Semitic vandalism in Europe over the past year and connects this phenomenon with the initiatives in European and American academic communities to exclude Israeli participants in protest against Israeli government policies vis-à-vis the Palestinians. Now, there is no doubt that the acts of anti-Semitic vandalism in Europe are reprehensible. But they must be put in perspective. Most have been perpetrated by recent Muslim immigrants, whose anti-Jewish attitudes are hateful and ignorant. But contemporary Muslim anti-Judaism testifies primarily to conditions in Muslim countries, not to those in Europe. In fact, on a recent trip to France (Burgundy and the Alps), reputedly one of Europe’s most anti-Semitic countries, I witnessed no anti-Semitism at all. What I witnessed, instead, was graffiti representing reverse-swastikas, labeled “anti-Nazi,” and other graffiti condemning Le Pen for being a “Nazi.” Asked about French anti-Semitism, my educated and enlightened host at a wonderful B & B outside of Beaune, insisted that there is no *French* anti-Semitism in France, and though I suspect he was being a bit naïve, I have no doubt that he was accurately reflecting his common experience in the French countryside. We don’t hear *these* things reported much, do we?

But the poorest and most interesting section of Summers’ analysis is where he equates “anti-Israeli” with “anti-Semitic” and then goes on to express his alarm over “anti-Israel views...in progressive intellectual communities [= universities] ...that are anti-Semitic in their effect if not their intent.” Now, I have no doubt that many of the anti-Israel initiatives on campus represent a highly misguided liberalism. But this does not make them anti-Semitic. Notably, even the ADL, in its recent, much-noted report on anti-Semitism, characterized anti-Semitism on American college campuses as “virtually non-existent” (the language is that of the report, not mine). How can this be so? Because, according to the findings of the report, members of college communities, students and faculty alike, are evidently able to distinguish between their opinions regarding Israeli government policy (which they condemn) and their attitudes concerning Jews (whom they respect highly). Anti-Israel does not necessarily lead to anti-Semitic, despite what many Jewish community spokespeople would have us believe.

It is this latter point that I want to emphasize. The organized Jewish community has long equated these two “antis,” and they have evidently convinced Summers of the correctness of this equation. In fact, if we were to remove Summers’ personal comments, his speech could easily have been penned by a spokesperson for a Jewish Federation. I say this not to detract from what he says—though, as I have said, I believe his argument is flawed—but to note that his speech is, in both form and substance, an act of profound identification with the Jewish community. It is, in both its strengths and its weaknesses, Jewish through and through. Near the beginning of Summers’ remarks, he affirms quite publicly that he is “Jewish, identified but hardly devout.” What the substance of his talk shows is that he is Jewish in ways that he does not even recognize. He has so internalized the views of the Jewish community that he espouses those views without subjecting them to the thoughtful critique that should typify academic discourse.

Summers’ speech was delivered at morning prayers in the Memorial Church in Harvard Yard on September 17, 2002. Can we fail to be astounded that in our time, at the beginning of the 21st century, the Jew who is president of Harvard University, the most prestigious university in the most powerful nation on earth, steps up in such a setting and publicly makes an expression of Jewish affiliation that is extremely powerful? The Jewish community should be vigilant in the face of anti-Semitism, Muslim and otherwise. But it should at the same time recall where we stand as a community—in the Memorial Church in Harvard Yard, or in any of the many other halls of power that are open to us today as they have never been open before.