

Ben Gerstein's Craven Apology – When He Had It Right the First Time (Part 3)

by Hugh Fitzgerald



And what more can Ben Gerstein, President of the Student Government Council at the University of Michigan, accuse himself of to satisfy his critics on the Council who will make sure that from now on he expresses all the right opinions about Israel and the Palestinians? He hasn't suffered enough to make up for his terrible past. He's deeply deeply sorry – please believe him – that he ever questioned the rights of the Palestinians, or ever spoke well of Israel, that hegemonic little Sparta that has brought nothing but pain to the inoffensive Palestinians, by stealing and occupying their land. Never again will Ben Gerstein defend those colonialist-settlers of Israel, never again will he overlook the “oppression” the Palestinians have suffered. Perhaps, to make amends, he could go on a speaking tour of campuses with a Palestinian handler, telling of the scales falling from his eyes, his new understanding and sympathy for the Palestinians, and his “shame” that he was ever taken in by Zionist propaganda. And if speaking tours are no longer possible, because of the coronavirus pandemic, then he can convey his new views, of the Palestinians (Good) and the Israelis (Bad) on Youtube.

“I feel my deeper understanding of history and multiple narratives now allows me to work as a stronger ally to others to dismantle the systems of oppression that perpetuate the suffering of the Palestinian people—but I also know that I have much more learning to do and am committed to continuing

that work," he wrote.

What "systems of oppression that perpetuate the suffering of the Palestinian people" does Gerstein have in mind? Israel has been trying to make peace with the Arabs since May 14, 1948, when it declared its independence and at the same time held out its hand in peace to the Arabs, nearly twenty years before the "Palestinian people" were invented. It has handed back to Egypt, not once but twice, the entire Sinai. It withdrew from Gaza in 2005, leaving the Palestinians in Gaza with 3,000 fully functioning greenhouses that the Israelis had hoped the Palestinians would use to continue the thriving business in fruit and flowers, for the European market, that Israelis had built; instead, the Palestinians vandalized and destroyed those greenhouses. Israel also provided work for tens of thousands of Gazans, paying salaries many times more than what they were paid in Gaza, until terrorist attacks required Israel to shut down the program. The Israelis have no desire to hurt the Palestinians economically; they want them to prosper; they have re-employed thousands from Gaza, and want to increase the numbers of Palestinians from both Gaza and the West Bank who are employed in Israel, as long as the security situation permits it. Israel has also encouraged Qatar, many times, to deliver billions – a few hundred millions dollars at a time – to the Palestinians. The latest request was made by the chief of Mossad who flew to Doha to ask the Qataris to keep funding the Palestinians. Does any of that sound like part of a "system of oppression that perpetuates the suffering of the Palestinian people"?

If we are to inquire into the "suffering" of the ordinary people in Gaza and the West Bank, it is mainly caused by the colossal corruption of the Palestinian leaders themselves. In Gaza, where Hamas rules, two of that terrorist group's leaders, Khaled Meshaal and Mousa Abu Marzouk, are – according to both Arab and Western sources – responsible for diverting \$2.5 billion each in aid money to their own pockets; in

addition, there are 600 Hamas millionaires in Gaza. In the West Bank, Mahmoud Abbas and his two sons have amassed a family fortune of at least \$400 million. And other large amounts have gone not to improve the lot of the Palestinian Arabs, but to the endless war against Israel. Armories full of rockets, and terror tunnels, cost a great deal.

The “blockade” of Gaza by Israel is, in truth, a blockade by both Israel and Egypt. It is designed to keep out dual-use materials, such as concrete, that can be used to build weapons emplacements. Contrary to what Gerstein may have been told, the Israelis continue to supply food and medicine to the Gazans. More than 400 trucks every day, laden with such provisions, enter Gaza from Israel. Israel also supplies water to Gaza; last summer it laid its fourth water pipeline to the Strip. One doubts that Gerstein is aware of all that Israel attempts to do to better the lot of the people of Gaza; it’s not something the mainstream media ever bothers to report.

Has Gerstein now chosen to forget the repeated attempts by Israel to come to an agreement with the representatives of the “Palestinians? Do the attempts by Israel to suppress the endless rocket attacks on Israeli civilians by Hamas in Gaza “perpetuate the suffering” of the Palestinians? Isn’t it the Israelis are “suffering” from those attacks? Aren’t the terror tunnels Hezbollah has built from Lebanon into Israel, so that its fighters might enter deep into Israel in order to kill or kidnap civilian and soldiers, all part of the continuing Palestinian war against Israel? When did Israel’s attempts at self-defense become an act of “oppression”?

The resolution [of the Student Government Council at the University of Michigan] stated that Gerstein’s 2017 comments are “Islamophobic and racist, and we formally condemn these comments,” and “we recognize the international plight of the Palestinian people, some of whom are constituents of this government.” It also stated: “We recognize that more work needs to be done to uproot racism and Islamophobia at the

University of Michigan."

The resolution is absurd. Gerstein did not express an "irrational fear and hatred" of Islam in his 2017 comment. He did not express any opinion about Islam at all. There was nothing "racist" either in his comments about Palestinian Arabs; he merely pointed out that the behavior of the Palestinians – especially their teaching their children murderous race-hatred of Jews and support for terrorism – ought to give one pause, and lead us to consider carefully whether such people at this time deserved a state.

Hillel executive director Tilly Shames told JNS, "We were sorry to see Ben Gerstein, student body president and active Jewish student, condemned in such a public manner. We are supporting him during this difficult time."

She said that "Michigan Hillel is a leader in working with students to proactively bring Israel to campus and address challenging anti-Israel moments. Whether it's leading efforts to oppose divestment resolutions, supporting students targeted on campus for their support of Israel, taking diverse student leaders to Israel, or offering opportunities to engage with Israel in positive ways, Hillel is the central address on campus for our students' Israel needs."

Perhaps Ben Gerstein can by degrees undo his craven – there is no other word for it, which is why I keep repeating it – volte-face, where he unconvincingly confesses to having been raised only on pro-Israel propaganda and never truly understood the "oppression" of the Palestinians.

He could say something like this to the next meeting of the Student Government:

I was confused and alarmed at the anger directed at me for some things I had said about Israel and the Palestinians as a

high school student three years before. And so, in that state, and feeling terrific pressure from every other member of the Student Government Council, I made other remarks, disavowing all that I had said in 2017. I now regret that I made that disavowal; it was a product of moral panic, and I wish to retract it.

I have had time to reflect more thoughtfully on my 2017 remarks, when I referred to the Palestinians' use, and glorification, of terrorism, as one of the criteria that ought to be considered as possibly disqualifying them from possessing a state. Any group that uses terrorism consistently over decades as a weapon, and refuses to abjure its use, should lose the support of the civilized world. I did not know, as I do know now, that Israel has repeatedly tried to help the Palestinians economically. There has been no "oppression" by Israel of the Palestinians; instead, Israel has made repeated attempts to help them. For example, there was the turnkey operation of the greenhouses in Gush Katif, in Gaza, which the Israelis had built into a thriving business with hundreds of millions of dollars in annual revenues, by, growing fruit and flowers for the European market. In 2005, the Israelis handed over those greenhouses to the Palestinians, who promptly vandalized and destroyed them. Tens of thousands of Palestinians, both from Gaza and the West Bank, have been employed by Israel, mostly in construction and agriculture, where they receive salaries that three to four times what they are paid at home. For obvious security reasons, sometimes the Israelis have had to limit the number of Palestinians who work in the country, but as soon as the security situation warrants, they are re-employed. Israel has also played a major role in raising billions in aid for the Palestinians, especially from Qatar. Recently the head of Mossad made a secret trip to Doha in order to try to convince the King to continue the aid that he has been sending to the Palestinians in installments, each worth \$480 million dollars.

I do think we have a right to examine when the "Palestinian people" were invented, and why. It seems clear to me, after having studied more of the history of the Arab-Israel conflict, that the phrase started to be used after the Six-Day War. It made the Arab cause more palatable. No longer would others view it as a gang-up by 22 Arab states against one small Jewish state. Now it was a conflict between "two tiny peoples, Israelis and Palestinians, each struggling for a homeland." The 1977 statement by Zuehir Mohsen, the Palestinian leader of the terror group As-Saiqa, at first startled me. But now I understand that it makes perfect sense. Mohsen told the Dutch newspaper Trouw that

The Palestinian people do not exist. The creation of a Palestinian state is only a means for continuing our struggle against the state of Israel for our Arab unity. In reality today there is no difference between Jordanians, Palestinians, Syrians and Lebanese. Only for political and tactical reasons do we speak today about the existence of a Palestinian people, since Arab national interests demand that we posit the existence of a distinct "Palestinian people" to oppose Zionism. Yes, the existence of a separate Palestinian identity exists only for tactical reasons, Jordan, which is a sovereign state with defined borders, cannot raise claims to Haifa and Jaffa, while as a Palestinian, I can undoubtedly demand Haifa, Jaffa, Beer-Sheva and Jerusalem. However, the moment we reclaim our right to all of Palestine, we will not wait even a minute to unite Palestine and Jordan.

I now understood that the "Palestinian people" are a useful fiction, that Israel has not been their "oppressor" but has been trying, since the 1948-49 war, to make peace and more recently, even to help bring prosperity, through employment opportunities in Israel and raising funds for them among the GCC countries, to those Arabs who choose to call themselves the "Palestinians."

I have learned a good deal about the conflict from reading [The Palestinian Delusion](#) by Robert Spencer. He has been called, wrongly, an “Islamophobe.” But he is not consumed with an irrational hatred for Islam. He is a student of Islam, and an islamocritic. These are very different things.

I wonder how many of you – my fellow members of the Student Government – will have their knives out for me, appalled that I have taken back my mea-maxima-culpas of the other day. And I wonder if any of you will yourselves dare to reconsider your own views about Israel and the Palestinians, and just possibly, will engage in the study of the Arab-Israeli conflict, and of the Qur’anic verses that command Believers to engage in violent Jihad. I allow myself to believe that some of you have not shut down completely your powers of ratiocination and study, and may come to agree with some of what I have said here tonight.

And that is all I wanted to say.

Doubtful, I know, that Ben Gerstein could ever bring himself to utter anything like the statement above that I’ve imagined him delivering to a meeting of the university’s Student Government. But you never know. It’s worth the old college try. [Strange things](#) are happening every day.

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