

Education, then and now

By Lev Tsitrin

By long habit, my initial impulse upon waking up is to resist the urge to run to what I would call, to respect readers' fine sensibilities, "physiological room," but to turn the radio on. The short delay of the much-needed relief helps me shake off the vestiges of sleep.

This morning, the web of strange associations typical of dreamworld apparently superimposed itself on the words coming out of the radio (which sounded alarm about "climate of fear in education") and my half-sleeping, half-wake mind threw me

back decades ago to a long-forgotten visit to a bookstore.

With the astonishing reality and freshness so typical of dreams, I relived my amazement of randomly opening a book at a strangely charming page that showed a medieval



teacher threatening his medieval pupils with a whip. It was a pricey book – a facsimile of a fourteenth-century Hebrew manuscript known as *Sarajevo Haggadah* – but I was so enchanted by the oddness and old-fashioned naivety of the comically

threatening image that I bought the book right away.

I thought this image was a deliberately ironic and unique comment on the teaching profession – only to discover (now that I started noticing) that such imagery was rather ubiquitous and universal at the time. Another utterly lovely example was Hans Holbein's marginal drawing in a copy of Erasmus' 1509 classic *In Praise of Folly* that shows a learned pedagogue energetically applying a whip to a young pupil's naked behind. Apparently, back then the "climate of fear" that instilled discipline was thought indispensable to learning – though nowadays, "spare the rod, spoil the child" no longer serves as an educator's guiding principle. Times change.

Despite this daydreaming, I discerned that the radio was not talking of corporal punishment in schools – but of Trump's taking on "diversity," and of his policy of compelling universities to expel their unruly anti-Israel protestors (which in the case of foreign students also means that they lose their student visa – since they no longer attend a school, their presence in the country is no longer justified.) Since universities refuse to thusly enforce the discipline, the State Department took the initiative, and started to revoke visas on its own.

The stated reason why universities dig in their heels on enforcement is rather interesting – and was the subject of [the very segment](#) to which I woke up. It covers reactions of a bunch of university presidents – though, needless to say, there were no cynical "come on-s" – like "don't be naive: the foreign students pay cash for everything, they need no financial aid – so how can we expel them? It will hit our bottom line!". Michael Roth, the President of Wesleyan University, was quoted at length, providing (at 3:27) a strictly pedagogical rationale that looks far beyond paltry considerations of money and straight at the big, "mission statement" picture: making an error and failing is the key part of education experience, which cannot be removed without

hurting a student – a kind of “learn through the nose” philosophy that in reality is but a somewhat modernized variation on the good old “spare the rod” theme.

Unfortunately, the NPR journalist who conducted the interview, Elissa Nadworny, did not ask President Roth the natural follow-up question: “but what if the student fails to realize that his or her position is wrong, that they advocated for a bad cause, that they acted in error? What if those students are so self-righteous that they cannot even see how crazy is what they are saying – and how illegal is what they are doing? How can they learn from their mistake if there is no correction, if they remain unaware of having made a mistake in the first place?”

This question not having been posed, we do not know President Roth’s answer. That, frankly, is not particularly good journalism – though I won’t venture a guess on whether this is a fault of our journalism schools that educated Ms. Nadworny, or that of her own.

That campus encampments are no manifestations of free speech – despite what the likes of NPR like to tell us – is obvious from the free speech law itself. Constitutionally protected public speech is not unconditional; it has to meet the requirements that are designed to protect the right of others to not hear the speakers – the requirements of time, place, and manner in the delivery of speech. You cannot take over a space and bellow your grievances through a loudspeaker at all who happen to be in the vicinity.

Campus encampments grossly violate those requirements – irrespective of the context of speech being broadcasted. The media-concocted grievance that “students are punished for pro-Palestinian speech by the Trump administration” is utter garbage. Those students are punished – and rightly so – for violating the conditions that turn speech into “free expression” – and not for their “free expression.”

Put simply, campus anti-Israel student protesters violate the law – the free speech law, that is – and the likes of NPR (and of Wesleyan President Roth) prefer not to notice, claiming that to look the other way serves some educational purpose.

It doesn't, because it does not help students to turn away from their error – thus failing the primary (and for that matter, only) goal of education – to guide students towards truth.

Nowadays, the whip may not be a right tool for attaining that goal – yet discipline is indispensable. The “climate of fear” – fear of breaking the law – is a must, both in education and in life. And despite protestations from NPR and college presidents, Trump's visa policies do precisely that; they enforce discipline. Simply put, Trump is a better educator than college professors and presidents are.

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