

Free speech at universities? To what end?



John Milton (second from left) meeting Galileo (right), oil painting by Solomon Alexander Hart, 1847.

by Lev Tsitrin

Reporting and opining on the astonishing saga of university presidents' inability to call the calls for genocide of Jews a violation of their institutions' policies (on which *New York Times* alone had at least a dozen pieces) falls into two broad categories: of either lamenting those presidents' amorality, or decrying their hypocrisy: hiding behind "free speech" may have some lawyerly sense, the commentators stress, but is not

moral given the kind of “speech” in question; or that in the context of so many instances of their universities’ prior cancellation of ideologically undesired speakers, their “free speech” pleas are hypocritical. While there are variations on those themes (the lawyers find the very notion of “free speech” at a private institution laughable – they point out that the First Amendment is binding only on the government, so hiding behind “free speech” legalese is a dishonest and ridiculous ruse), such is the basic argument of the debate.

What’s in my view is missing, is a broader question of how the calls for genocide of Jews fit into the purpose of academics. Since universities’ presidents chose to use the free speech framework as justification for allowing such calls, the key question should be, how does this kind of “speech” serve universities’ function?

After all, universities are not there just for the exercise of free speech – for that we have Facebook, and Twitter, and the streets. Form follows function – and the form of speech should follow the function of speech. The function of universities is twofold – research (i.e. discovery of new information about the world we live in) and teaching (i.e. perpetuation of knowledge we already have, by passing it to the next generation so it does not get extinguished). So how does the call for genocide advance those goals?

Is free speech like “f- you! – no, f- you!” helpful in either education, or research? Does the speech that has only emotion and no reason in it (and the “speech” quoted above is exactly of that kind – all hateful emotion, and no intellect at all (as does the speech calling for genocide) help one learn, or discover?

I do not think that either learning or discovery benefits from such speech. To John Milton, whose *Areopagitica* is unequalled in its eloquent defense of free speech, the purpose of freedom of speech is finding the truth; free speech is important

because without an occasional error, there can be no finding the truth – and the truth is, ultimately, the highest virtue; all else follows.

And universities seem to understand this – in the case of Harvard, its official seal even features the word VE RI TAS – “truth” – written on the pages of three open books. But what “truth” is there in its students’ calls for genocide of Jews – other than that those students are so filled with blinding hate that they completely abandoned rational argument, and descended to the level of a mob, to the level of an “argument” devoid of rationality, to the argument of “f- you!” kind?

So, the question for university presidents should be, does unbridled – and unhinged – “free speech” civilize? Or does it result in [what Milton called “licence,”](#) that turns those using it thus:

... hogs,

That bawl for freedom in their senseless mood,
And still revolt when truth would set them free.
Licence they mean when they cry liberty;
For who loves that, must first be wise and good.
But from that mark how far they rove we see,
For all this waste of wealth and loss of blood.

The same comparison, and the same complaint, is valid today. By calling calls for genocide “free speech,” university presidents don’t help their students rid of their “senseless mood;” “Licence they mean when they cry liberty” applies even to presidents of major institutions of learning, As to making their students “wise and good” by stressing the need for articulate intellectual argument rather than “senseless brawling” – no one seems to care, at Harvard, U Penn, and MIT. If even the major institutions of learning and teaching can’t learn from history, where are we headed?