

# Rutgers University Must Deal with Antisemitism

by Michael Curtis



Michael Chikindas

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On the Banks of the old Raritan stands Rutgers, the State University of New Jersey, with its 30 schools and colleges making it one of the top 25 public universities in the United

States. Committed to academic inquiry and scholarship it is dedicated to principles and values of respect for people of all backgrounds. Its reputation has been enhanced by its history as the birthplace of college football since it hosted the first intercollegiate football game, beating a team from what would be Princeton University in 1869.

That reputation has continued to be upheld by its academic programs, its Scarlet Knights football team, once graced by Paul Robeson, and by a song in the 1947 Broadway musical *High Button Shoes*. However, that reputation is now being questioned by manifestations of bigotry and antisemitism and perverse comments about the State of Israel and by anti-Israeli animosity exhibited by some members of the faculty. A Rutgers football song proclaims *The Bells must Ring*. The question now is whether the bells are discordant.

The Rutgers administration and faculty, are now confronted, as are so many other academic institutions, by an issue involving the nature and limits of free speech, and by behavior in public statements and social media that violates the principles and values held by academic institutions such as Rutgers.

The present issue is concentrated on the behavior and opinions of three members of the faculty: Michael Chikindas, professor of food science, Jasbir Puar, associate professor of women's and gender studies, and Mazen Adi, political scientist and adjunct professor of international law, who served as a Syrian diplomat at the United Nations between 2007 and 2014.

Chikindas, a microbiologist, is director of the Rutgers Center for Digestive Health but has issued statements and Facebook pronouncements that go far beyond his academic field. It is troubling to see the extent and variety of those statements, reported in the journal, *The Algemeiner*. Some of the reported allegations of those statements go beyond the edge of racism, since they hold that Judaism is the most racist religion in

the world. The *Talmud* is said to feature racist and supremacist passages.

Chikindas appears to be a believer in the tropes of Jewish conspiracies. The conspiracies are past and present. Israel, he is quoted in one post, is the terrorist country aimed at genocidal extermination of the land's native population, Palestinians. Yet, also in incredible fashion, the Jewish conspiracy was also present in the events starting in April 1915 with the extermination, of at least 1.5 million Armenians, the so-called Armenian Genocide, by the Young Turks, the Turkish government at the time. He holds this was orchestrated by the Turkish Jews who pretended to be real Turks. He appears to believe that Ottoman crypto Jews, descended from the 17th fake messiah Sabbatai Zevi, infiltrated the Young Turks and were behind the Genocide. It is not coincidental that Chikindas was educated in schools in Armenia, and gained a doctorate in genetics in Moscow.

Other academics outside Rutgers have joined in similar lunacy. Rutgers officials should note the case of Joy Karega, assistant professor of rhetoric at Oberlin College who asserted that ISIS is really an arm of Israel, and US intelligence agencies, and that Israel was behind the Charlie Hebdo massacre in Paris in January 2015 committed by gunmen from the al-Qaeda branch in Yemen. Oberlin authorities decided, as Rutgers should do, that academic freedom does not cover inaccurate or false facts, and dismissed Karega because of failure to demonstrate intellectual honesty.

Rutgers must consider a similar approach towards Chikindas who among other insights has held that American Jews and Israel were behind 9/11. For no apparent reason he also touches on the fact that Israel has one of the highest percentage of gays in the world; according to him 25% of Tel Aviv inhabitants are gay or lesbians. Rutgers officials should heed the argument of Karl Popper in *Open Society* that conspiracy theories draw on imaginary plots stemming from paranoid scenarios based on

tribalism, chauvinism, or racism.

Chikindas has denied he is antisemitic and said his Facebook account was hacked, but the images on the graphics he published are telling. They show the Jews, portrayed with large, hooked noses, controlling the Federal Reserve, Hollywood, and sex trafficking, and an Israeli flag over the White House. As expected, he supports the BDS movement, as well as making uncomplimentary remarks about a variety of figures, Ayelet Shaked, Israeli justice minister, Israeli culture minister Miri Regev, and Melania and Ivanka Trump.

The views of a second individual Mazen Ali are pertinent in this inquiry. Ali, appointed at Rutgers in 2015, was previously a legal adviser to Syria and part time charge d'affaires for the Syrian Foreign ministry for 16 years, including a stint as a Syrian diplomat at the UN between 2007 and 2014.

In that role at the UN it was natural for Ali to defend the atrocities and killings committed by the Assad regime, and to argue that Syria was restoring security and stability. But it was not appropriate for him on April 25, 2012 to argue that international gangs led by some Israeli religious figures were trafficking in children's organs. Israel, he argued, is committing crimes against humanity, adopting a slow kill policy against 1.5 million Palestinians, and is responsible for ethnic cleansing, war crimes, and genocide. He did not realize this was a new, if indirect, reference to the old blood libel against Jews.

His conclusion is that acts of international aggression, occupation, and piracy by Israel cannot be hidden from the international community. Perhaps the best comment on this view is that Ali on the law of the international community is as sensible as the view of Harvey Weinstein on preventing sexual harassment.

A third controversial figure is Jasbir Puar, though nominally academically involved in women's and gender studies at Rutgers, and seemingly a disciple of queer theory and of Michael Foucault, made known at an event sponsored by a number of departments at Vassar College on February 3, 2016 that she is an expert in Israeli nefarious activity. The Vassar students two days earlier had anticipated their future internal deprivation by approving a resolution upholding the BDS movement, and calling for disinvestment from and no purchases, and therefore no eating, from Ben and Jerry's ice cream, apparently known to Vassar for its link to international Jewish conspiracies of ice cream.

Puar, in barely comprehensible language, held that Israel and Jewish populations in general "have thoughtfully hijacked the discourse of trauma through exceptionalising Holocaust victimization." In similar fashion to Ali, she is reported to have alleged that the "bodies of young Palestinian men were mined for organs for scientific research," by Israel. This according to her is genocide in slow motion. Therefore what is needed is the boycott, divestment, and sanctions movement as part of organized resistance and armed resistance in Palestine.

What is disappointing in this event is the mild response of the Rutgers administration, especially President Robert Barchi at an event on November 16, 2017 to this painful and harmful nonsense of three of the faculty. He correctly regarded some of the alleged remarks as repugnant but said they were constitutionally protected. The University is reviewing the issue. University spokesman have articulated that the University seeks to foster an environment "free from discrimination as articulated in our policy prohibiting discrimination." In the matter of Chikindas it will see if "actions taken in the context of his role as a faculty member" about Jews and their role in the massacre of Armenians in 1917 may have violated that policy." But the absurd remarks of

Chikindas hardly need examination.

Everyone know that free speech must be upheld as far as possible, but that speech should be based on facts and reality not on bigotry. Academic freedom must be strongly defended but hate speech must be outlawed and punished. The least that university officials can do is to be forthright on this. The Rutgers bells should be ringing the right notes.