Wanted: Safe spaces for Jews at CUNY

BY YOSEF KESSLER / NEW YORK DAILY NEWS / Monday, November 16, 2015, 3:16 PM

At last Thursday’s Million Student March, a nationwide student demonstration for free public college tuition, I along with three other pro-Israel, Jewish Hunter students became the target of verbal abuse. Protestors screamed at us that we did not belong in CUNY. Some even threatened us with physical harm — to drag us down the street because we expressed our support for Israel.

I’m a freshman at Hunter. I grew up and went to school in the Bronx. After high school, I lived in Israel on a gap-year program. I studied Hebrew with immigrant Jews and Arabs, volunteered at a petting zoo, hiked across the country and visited my Israeli family.

I support Israel’s right to exist and wish for a free and prosperous Palestinian state living peacefully alongside her. I am a proud Zionist. I never thought I would be subject to violent hate speech for supporting Israel in my home city, at my own school.

The Million Student March was not supposed to be about global politics or Zionism — but somehow that’s what it became to some people who manipulated the march at Hunter College to include an anti-Israel agenda. Hunter Students for Justice in Palestine announced on Facebook their intention to use the rally, in their words, to criticize “the Zionist [CUNY] Administration” that “reproduces settler colonialist ideology through Zionist content of education.” They came out in force.

All those truly interested in lower tuition should be outraged that their cause was hijacked for an Israel-bashing session.

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As we approached the march, we saw many demonstrators holding anti-Israel posters. It was clear that the rally’s focus was not the cost of education. We joined the march, holding signs with the message that we were pro-Israel and pro-lower tuition. My sign read, “We support lower tuition, not terrorism against Israel.”

One protestor read our signs and shouted, “The intifada is coming! Zionists better leave Palestine!” Intifada is an Arabic term for violent struggle against Israel. The last Intifada involved waves of Palestinian suicide bombings in Israel. One such attack at a Tel Aviv nightclub killed 21 students. Soon dozens of them were screaming at us, “Long live the intifada.”

**RESTAURANT BANS PATRON WHO CALLED OUT AUTISTIC EMPLOYEE**

Slowly, as more demonstrators realized our presence, shouts of “Zionists go home” echoed around us.

As we arrived back in front of Hunter, the shouts of hatred and threats escalated. Many of the nearly 100 protestors began berating us four pro-Israel students as we stood holding our signs.

“Zionists out of CUNY!” and “There is only one solution: Intifada Revolution!” emanated from the crowd. Protestors called us racists and white supremacists. One attacked our signs. In the background, another demonstrator yelled, “Jews are racist sons of bitches!” Another spewed lies, such as that Israel is euthanizing and sterilizing her Ethiopian citizens, and that Israel is committing genocide. In spite of this onslaught, we stood strong against the shouting, cursing, lies and anti-Semitic hatred directed against us.

As I left the rally, someone yelled, “We should drag the Zionists down the street!” It took a few seconds to register that I was a Zionist walking down the street. A CUNY public safety officer protected me from being attacked. He made sure I made it to the subway safely. Although I was not physically harmed, I took this verbal attack the hardest. Somebody hates me so much for my beliefs that he threatens to harm me because of them.

I thank the Hunter administration for condemning the anti-Semitic comments made at the rally and reiterating CUNY’s commitment to creating a place of “inclusion, not exclusion.”

I hope that we as a Hunter community can make Hunter a place where all students feel safe, and important issues can be debated constructively not hatefully. I hope we can create an environment where groups and individuals who care about the Israeli-Palestinian conflict are civil toward each other and can work together to construct a vision of peace and respect, not hate and violence.

*Kessler is a freshman at the Macaulay Honors College at Hunter College.*

TAGS: cuny , college campus violence , israeli-palestinian conflict

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