

29 Elul 5764

MAARIV
international15
September,
2004Wednesday
9:54 AM
Israel Time[Print This Article](#)

Shame on the Hebrew University

Invoking academic freedom, the heads of Israeli academe defend venomous expressions against Israel. But the Rector of the Hebrew University has mustered his authority to silence criticism of the venom spreaders.

Anat Perry

In August 2001, I published an article in Haaretz dealing with the political and ideological use that Europe does in comparisons between Israel and the Nazis. Inter alia, I argued that Germany, which cannot make such comparisons herself, provides financial support to every Israeli entity that makes such comparisons. By way of an example, I mentioned Professor Moshe Zimmermann, who, several weeks earlier, in a letter to "Musaf S'farim" (book supplement) of Haaretz, likened the Eichmann Trial to the burning down of the Reichstag trials that the Nazis staged.

Zimmermann then sued Haaretz and myself for libel. The suit was repelled, and Zimmermann has appealed the ruling. In her ruling, Justice Yehudit Shevakh determined that Zimmermann has indeed received support from German sources, and that he has indeed likened Nazi entities to Israeli entities. Based on the evidence, the judge also found that Zimmermann has admitted to doing so.

Several weeks before the court ruling was handed down, the erstwhile head of the Berlin Jewish Community, Dr. Alexander Brenner, received a letter from Prof. Zimmermann, typed on Hebrew University stationary, which read: "On January 27, 2004, you referred (on the Israeli Broadcasting Service) to professors of the Hebrew University of Jerusalem, who likened the conduct of the SS troops to that of Israeli soldiers. I was also informed by other sources that you have made similar statements in other contexts. Since the faculty of the Hebrew University might infer that you were alluding to me ... I must demand of you to either apologize for your allusions in writing to the Rector of the Hebrew University, or to explicitly name the professors to whom your expression referred.

Brenner ignored Zimmermann's demand, but then received a letter from Professor Haim Rabinowitch, Rector of the Hebrew University [in Israel, a rector is a faculty elected provost]. In his letter Rabinowitch wrote. "In consultation with the Hebrew University legal counsel, we drafted a short sentence that suggests an apology, Words were said in error, without an intent to harm any of the Hebrew University Professors. I hereby apologize before the Rector for any offense, if committed, against any of the professors of the University ". Brenner declined to respond.

An assault of Zimmermann on Brenner is likely to increase even more the formers popularity in Germany. The German public is often angered by the leaders of the German Jewish community, who protest displays of anti-Semitism, and who

criticize the Germans' propensity to gloss over their nation's history, preferring to try and present it as victim rather than perpetrator.

But the grave matter in this case is the behavior of the Hebrew University Rector. There have been past protests over Zimmermann's proclamations, and, for that matter, over Professor Van Kreveld's vulgar, sexist declarations. However the University itself abstained from intervening, citing freedom of expression and academia.

But are only boorish anti-Semites and sexists entitled to freedom of speech? Should a Jewish leader, who has fought anti-Semitism, including the kind that Jewish professors inflame, be apprehensive of maltreatment by the Hebrew University? Can the universities absolve themselves of censoring venomous expressions of Israeli academics against Israel on account of academic freedom, and simultaneously also muster their authority to silence their own critics?

The Hebrew University Rector's letter is a disgrace to Israeli academe and yet another manifestation of its moral bankruptcy.

The author is a researcher of anti-Semitism

The Hebrew University response: The letter stems from a misunderstanding. The Rector surmised, in light of information that he received, that Dr. Alexander Brenner was interested in apologizing to professors of the Hebrew University. Therefore, a wording of a letter was suggested to Brenner to enable him to retract his comprehensive accusation against them. Post factum, the Rector thinks that there was no room for his intervention in this matter.

(2004-07-14 15:55:54.0)