

Mitchell's Musings 10-6-14: Dialogue or Balance in the Ivory Tower?

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Academia is often described pejoratively as an Ivory Tower. I say "pejoratively" because the image of the Tower is one of a world somehow isolated from external reality. There is some truth to the image, but not entirely. The real world in fact constantly intrudes into academia. There are always the usual constraints of budgets, resources, and the pressures of competition with other institutions. Sometimes conflicts from outside the Tower make their way in.

One special value that runs through academia, however, is *academic freedom*, particularly for tenure-track and tenured faculty. But when academic freedom is considered, the discussion is often inconsistent. Let's take "civility" for example. Recently, the chancellor at the University of California (UC)-Berkeley was criticized for suggesting that differences of opinion are best discussed with civility. Outside the Tower, such an assertion might be greeted with a yawn. It's motherhood and apple pie stuff! But within certain circles of academia, alarm bells went off. You see, in those circles the chancellor was arguably talking in code about something else. Spoiler alert: It was the Middle East and Israel-Palestine to be more exact.

Before we get to the details of the "something else," let's note that the dispute over civility at Berkeley spilled over to my own campus at UCLA where the student newspaper wrote an editorial saying that the Berkeley chancellor just shouldn't be talking about civility.¹ That is, in defense of academic freedom and free speech, the editorial prescribed what the Berkeley chancellor should and shouldn't say! Did anyone notice the paradox? If anyone did, I didn't notice.

On another campus – this time at UC-Santa Barbara – we had an incident in which a professor got into a physical altercation with an anti-abortion high school student/demonstrator. The professor argued in her defense that her reaction was the result of "triggering" by a placard carried by the demonstrator.² It was OK to be uncivil because, well, she felt like it. (That sort of defense, unfortunately, is taken more seriously in academic circles than in the court system where she was sentenced to three years of probation plus some community service and anger management classes.) The Santa Barbara incident took place among a more general discussion of whether university syllabi should have "trigger" warnings about topics that might upset a student. That is, students should be warned about possible ideas in courses that might upset them. (Fortunately, the trigger wave seems to have passed after a good deal of ridicule from outside the Tower.)

¹<http://dailybruin.com/2014/09/15/natalie-delgadillo-civility-should-not-enter-into-the-campus-discussion-about-free-speech/>

²<http://articles.latimes.com/2014/mar/31/local/la-me-ra-the-liberal-professor-antiabortion-trap-20140331> and <http://www.independent.com/news/2014/aug/18/ucsb-professor-sentenced-probation-community-servi/>.

In short, there seems to be a desire among some folks in academia not to be confronted with opinions with which they disagree and, if they can't avoid such ideas or control them, to be free to be as uncivil about it as they like.³

So let's get back to the "something else" behind the civility issue at Berkeley. What was actually being discussed by the Berkeley chancellor, in the view of his anti-civility critics, was the Israeli-Palestinian conflict in the Middle East. Now the Middle East is a complex place with many, many conflicts and lots of forces intent on fanning those conflicts. There are some students and faculty, however, focused only on Israel-Palestine and who are pushing for university divestment of, and academic boycotts of, Israel. Rhetoric around the issue sometimes gets out of hand and there are then learned debates about whether particular anti-Israel statements are actually anti-Semitic or just critiques of a policy.

Calls for "civility" are thus generally seen more aimed at the anti-Israel group than the pro-Israel group. This interpretation was particularly likely to be drawn after the arrest and conviction in 2011 of some Moslem students who attempted to interrupt a speech by the Israeli ambassador at still another UC campus.⁴

I don't know if the local anti-civility agitation has prevented the UCLA chancellor from making a public call for civility comparable to the one at Berkeley. Maybe it has; maybe not. If you read further, you will find an official UCLA reference to "civil dialogue" as a Good Thing. There is at UCLA, however, an alternative strategy to deal with the Israel-Palestine problem by demonstrating that there is "balance."

The balancing act idea may actually have started with the UC Regents. The Regents annually select a student regent-elect who serves one year and then becomes a student-regent for the second year. There is some process – I have no idea what it is – that presents the Regents with a student candidate that they end up choosing, usually without much debate or fanfare. But two years ago, the process produced an anti-Israel Muslim woman student who supports divesting and boycotting.⁵ The Regents spent time on the issue – more time than usual – before selecting her. Somehow, the next year the very same process produced a pro-Israel Jewish male student – "balance" don't you see?⁶

There is something of interest not necessarily foreseen by the Regents that came out of the dual and "balanced" choice. The terms of the student regent-elect and the student regent overlap for one year. Somehow, the two of them decided they could work together on matters

³Full disclosure: I am on the executive board of the UCLA Faculty Association which voted to take a stance against what the Berkeley chancellor said. I voted AGAINST the resolution (I was the only negative vote) because a) I agree with what the chancellor said and b) there are too many other pressing issues facing faculty – tangible economic concerns – to engage in obscure side issues.

⁴https://www.insidehighered.com/news/2011/09/26/students_found_guilty_in_uc_irvine_heckling_case.

⁵<https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=3LxXT8ocax4>.

⁶<https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=5l-e3rRDZxE>.

of concern to students. As far as I know, the Middle East simply hasn't come up as one of those issues. The lesson seems to be that if you push people together with very different world views, at least sometimes they can cooperate. Balancing is not the key; fair-minded, civil dialogue is.

I recently attended a presentation by a fellow named Ali Abu Awwad, a Palestinian who lives on the West Bank. He was imprisoned on two occasions by the Israelis during demonstrations and his brother was killed in a confrontation at a checkpoint. At some point, however, he decided that dialogue was a better approach than violence and confrontation. He is currently touring the U.S. with an Orthodox Jewish Rabbi *from a West Bank settlement* with whom he made contact under sponsorship of a Christian organization. You can find out more at <http://www.friendsofroots.net/>.

At UCLA, when there are complaints about anti-Israel faculty and events – one research Center (the Center for Near Eastern Studies) seems to be the focus of those people and events – the official response is that UCLA has another Center which is pro-Israel. Events and programs can be trotted out to demonstrate “balance,” i.e., some are pro and some are con. Consider a recent official UCLA response to the issue:

*“Academic units all across our campus are constantly working to provide programming that exposes our students and the public to a vast range of perspectives and topics. In fact, three centers at UCLA focus on Middle Eastern Affairs and regularly provide programming on Israel, among other topics: the Center for Near Eastern Studies, the Younes and Soraya Nazarian Center for Israel Studies and the Center for Middle East Development. Israeli academics, students, speakers and artists are regularly part of programming at UCLA. We recognize many subjects may engender passionate debate and difficult conversations and we encourage **civil dialogue** that appreciates the paramount importance of free expression, academic freedom and a respectful exchange of ideas.”⁷ [Bold face added.]*

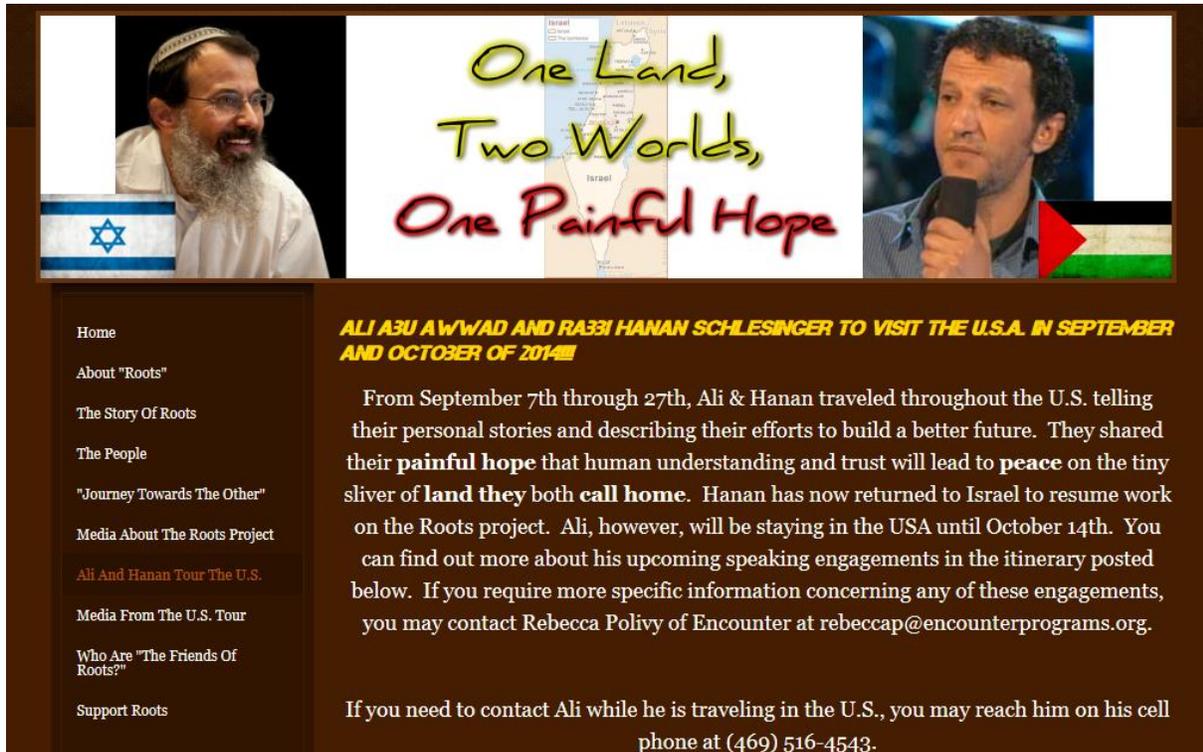
Any student of labor relations (my own interest) or any other form of conflict resolution can see the problem with this official response. There is no dialogue inherent in balancing, civil or uncivil. Balance is marginally better than imbalance, I suppose. But unlike the student-regent and the student-regent-elect, who were forced by their positions to engage each other, and unlike Ali Abu Awwad and his rabbinical associate who voluntarily chose to engage each other with civility, there is nothing in the balancing approach that brings about any engagement.

Yes, with balance, you could wander from program to program at UCLA and hear different views on the Israeli-Palestinian conflict. But the holders of those views remain separate and in isolation. Separate but equal and lack of dialogue is itself a problem – not an answer - and the larger problem isn't solved by demonstrating balance. Every program doesn't have to be

⁷<https://www.insidehighered.com/quicktakes/2014/09/18/pro-israel-groups-question-federal-funds-middle-east-centers>.

precisely balanced and there certainly shouldn't have to be "trigger" warnings to protect anyone from hearing something he/she doesn't like. But just having different messages and opinions in totally separate presentations and classes (hopefully, at least, expressed in civil terms) – while better than no balance at all – can't be the complete solution. Civil dialogue is needed, perhaps with encouragement from the powers-that-be if faculty cannot do it themselves.

Maybe on some future trip to the U.S., Mr. Awwad might drop by the UCLA campus. Maybe someone in authority might want to invite him. His phone number can be found below.



Home

About "Roots"

The Story Of Roots

The People

"Journey Towards The Other"

Media About The Roots Project

[Ali And Hanan Tour The U.S.](#)

Media From The U.S. Tour

Who Are "The Friends Of Roots?"

Support Roots

ALI ABU AWWAD AND RAZI HANAN SCHLESINGER TO VISIT THE U.S.A. IN SEPTEMBER AND OCTOBER OF 2014

From September 7th through 27th, Ali & Hanan traveled throughout the U.S. telling their personal stories and describing their efforts to build a better future. They shared their **painful hope** that human understanding and trust will lead to **peace** on the tiny sliver of **land they both call home**. Hanan has now returned to Israel to resume work on the Roots project. Ali, however, will be staying in the USA until October 14th. You can find out more about his upcoming speaking engagements in the itinerary posted below. If you require more specific information concerning any of these engagements, you may contact Rebecca Polivy of Encounter at rebeccap@encounterprograms.org.

If you need to contact Ali while he is traveling in the U.S., you may reach him on his cell phone at (469) 516-4543.

And if there are other universities with the same campus problems, the same advice applies.