

## **The language of racism. Textual testimonies of Jewish-Arab hostility in the Israeli Academia**

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### **Abstract**

The persistent Jewish Arab conflict is present in every aspect of life in Israeli society and its echoes penetrate the everyday reality of higher educational institutions. Feelings of mutual hostility among Arab and Jewish students, faculty and administration are common experiences on Israeli campuses. This article analyzes two textual expressions of this mutual resentment which were circulated in 2011 in Tel Hai College, Israel. One of the texts was produced by Muslim Arab student association and the other by a Zionist Jewish organization. Both groups are present on every campus in Israel. Despite the significant difference of the political location occupied by each organization in the Israeli power structure, we argue that these texts share similar attitudes to the conflict and parallel operational strategies. The paper demonstrates the attempts by these texts to encourage the mutual hostility between Jews and Arabs by employing racist and violent discourse. The article tries to explain the silence of the college administration and faculty in the face of these racist acts, subsequently outlining a vision of a responsible academia which will banish any acts of racism.

**Keywords:** racism, dehumanization, Jewish Arab conflict, academia, stigma

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## Introduction

The persistent Jewish Arab conflict is present in every aspect of life in Israeli society and its echoes penetrate the everyday reality of higher education institutions. Feelings of mutual indifference, estrangement, anger and hostility between Arabs and Jews among students, faculty and administration are common experiences on Israeli campuses.

The present article has developed from our disturbing encounter with two textual expressions of this mutual hostility. These racist texts were circulated and distributed in 2011 in Tel Hai College, located in the northern periphery of Israel, where we have worked for over a decade. Over the years we had confronted many racist declarations, most of which were expressed in the midst of heated political debates. These disturbing expressions usually became the starting point for a reflective discussion on the Jewish-Arab conflict as a source of all sorts of injustices. However, the circulation of hateful political written manifestos prevented any possible discussion and thus, in our opinion represented an escalation of the aggression on campus.

One of the texts was a booklet in Hebrew entitled *Nakba Harta* (Nakaba bullshit)<sup>1</sup> produced by the Jewish Zionist organization “Im Tirtzu” (If you will),<sup>2</sup> which violently invalidated and ridiculed the Palestinian narrative of 1948 war. This text was distributed widely by members of the organization among all students sitting on the lawns between classes. The other was a letter written in Arabic and sent by email to Arab students by Iqra<sup>3</sup>, the Islamic Students Association. The letter warned them to stay away from the corrupt immoral events of Student Day.

Understanding these texts and their symbolic social and political meanings requires some information about the organizations which produced them. According to the internet site of “Im Tirtzu”, the movement was established in 2006 following Israel’s second invasion of Lebanon, aiming to renew Zionist discourse and ideology while combating any attempt at their de-legitimization.<sup>4</sup> This includes discrediting the work and funding sources of human rights movements in Israel as well as the work of academics who support the struggle against Israeli occupation of Palestinian territories. Iqra also promotes national awareness, yet its main target is Muslim Palestinian Arabs. It describes itself online as an association which helps Arab students to overcome obstacles created by the discriminatory official policy of the Israeli government, strengthening their Islamic, Arab and Palestinian identity and values, teaching them their political and civil rights as Muslims and Israeli citizens and developing national and religious leadership. Among its activities are offering scholarships to Arab undergraduates, negotiating prayer spaces for Mus-

lim students on campuses, organizing religious ceremonies and lectures and organizing commemoration events for the Nakba.<sup>5</sup>

Both organizations which are present on every campus in Israel endorse social and national aims of their respective communities. However, Im Tirzu, which is supported by many actors in the political and public sphere, reflects the position of the Jewish hegemony in Israel, consequently enjoying relative freedom of action on campuses. Iqra, on the other hand, is perceived as a threat to this same hegemony; therefore, its political events are often cancelled and its initiatives for Arab students are not always accepted.

Despite this significant difference, however, these organizations, we argue, share similar hostile attitudes to the other group and parallel strategies to sustain the conflict. Our following analysis of the texts demonstrates the attempts of both to maintain the mutual antagonism between Jews and Arabs by employing racist and violent discourse which excludes the existence of the other group as well as any effort at social and political change.

We begin by clarifying the meaning of racism in contemporary theory, subsequently examining the two texts through these theoretical lenses. Our analysis suggests that despite the writers' different location in the social and political power structure; they use similar racist and violent stances. Following this analysis we try to explain the silence of the college administration and faculty in the face of these racist acts. Finally, we outline our social and political anti-racist vision as Arab and Jewish women who have engaged in peace and multicultural work for more than a decade. We argue that academia which is committed to achieving equality, diversity and human dignity, in which students, faculty and administration protest against any racist and violent views, could become a social driving force for overcoming such an intolerable social phenomenon.

### **What is racism?**

In the theoretical and research literature, racism has many diverse definitions. The origin of the concept derives from the notion that human beings are divided into different races while the white race is superior to all others (Shenhav & Yona, 2008). The development of racial thinking is connected to the colonial and imperial eras and to the created distinction between the usually white settlers who arrived at the new lands with imperial armies, and the natives, who were often non-white.

From the nineteenth century onward, race became a category which has not only classified social groups according to essential biological traits (skin color, eye shape etc.), but rather according to no less intrinsic social and cultural differences.

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(Herzog, Leykin, & Sharon, 2008). As a result, whiteness turned into a signifier with no stable signified entity, as the identity of the “whites” no longer depended only or mainly on skin color but was the result of a cultural, national, and historical context (Shenhav & Yona, 2008). The changes in classification did not abolish the hierarchy of superiors and inferiors which continued to enable discriminatory and exclusionary treatment of various social groups (Herzog et al., 2008).

The changing meanings of “race” through the decades implies that we are not discussing a biological phenomenon but rather a cultural concept, an invention of people who can play around with it as they choose (Gillborn, 2008). The meaning granted to race is not biologically dependent, even when biology is mentioned, but it is a result of meanings which are accorded to biology. Thus, race is often presented as the result of cultural constructs of non-biological characteristics (Shenhav & Yona, 2008). Racism becomes an evasive and unstable phenomenon which is difficult to conceptualize analytically and it becomes established in a wide variety of official and unofficial practices (Rattansi, 2007).

This article deals with racism whose characteristics are not biological but national and cultural, called by Yehuda Shenhav and Yossi Yona “racism without race” (Shenhav & Yona, 2008). In the same vein, Neil Hopkins, Steve Reicher, and Mark Levine (1997) argue that to narrow the definition of racism to a supremacist viewpoint, according to which the white man is superior to other races, a view that most discourse – even racist discourse, in their opinion – opposes, is actually ignoring the complexity of the changing character of racist thinking. According to them, the argument: I am not a racist since I do not think the white man is superior to other races, or because I do not claim superiority to other groups and nations, is a sophisticated way to avoid censorship of racist attitudes and statements. A number of theorists term these variants as “racisms” in order to emphasize the variety and call this sophisticated racist discourse – the new racism (Hopkins, Reicher, & Levine, 1997; Balibar, 2008).

Researchers agree that one of the central assumptions of the new racism, just like the older racism, is the naturalness of the racist classification. Race is understood by those who refer to it as a taken for granted category and not as a social construct (Shenhav & Yona, 2008; Hopkins et al., 1997). Another assumption relates to the feelings of proximity based on unity of race and type, but the biological signifiers have been replaced by social and political ones (Balibar, 2008).

This connection between race and collectivity is also reflected in national and cultural identity. Hopkins, Reicher and Levine (1997) claim that culture and cultural difference, play a central role in the new racism. Culture is considered as a racial heritage, a basis for unity. And because there is a connection between culture and race, it is almost impossible for people to belong to a culture which is not theirs.

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Thus, the racial other cannot identify with us. And since our humanity and our instincts push us to remain with members of our own group because we have “congenital tendencies to be isolated” (Clarke as cited in Shenhav & Yona, 2008, p.35) and because we are pressed to establish “our own” nation – see, for example the Jewish nation and the Islamic nation – it is human and instinctual that they will keep to themselves and will not identify with our nation. This leads to the additional assumption that just as there are naturally close relations between members of the same race, there is natural antagonism between the members of different races and the development of prejudices is human. In another words, our mutual hostility is essentialist and thus, unchangeable (Hopkins et al., 1997).

Another assumption is that power relations and structured inequality are not relevant in an analysis of racism. Rather, racism should be defined as a psychological phenomenon. Balibar (2008) argues that the ideologues of neo-racism are not mystics of heredity but “realistic” technicians of social psychology (p. 422). That is how psychology explains racial deficiencies. For example, discrimination is explained as a problem of the victim of discrimination, a result of cultural mentality, of family realities, among others (Hopkins et al., 2008; Balibar, 2008). This is an efficient way to create explanations which justify social gaps and problems.

The theoretical analyses of racism indicate that it is usually embedded in an unequal and hierarchical reality and that it is often a tool of the dominant hegemony to subjugate weakened minorities. Cheryl Harris (1993) reminds us, for example, that “whites” have the privilege of defining the character of minorities with an abundance of characteristics which are viewed culturally-socially as negative (usually by the dominant culture and by the minorities). The qualities with which non-respected minorities are branded repeat themselves: they enjoy being dirty and crowded, they are greedy, unreliable, emotional, irrational, unaesthetic, hot tempered, battle hungry, bloodthirsty, and others (Harris, 1993).

In our case as well, power relations are clear. There is no doubt that “Im Tirtzu” is an organization which belongs to the hegemony while “Iqra”, an association of a minority group – Muslim Arab citizens of Israel – is perceived as a dangerous marginal group threatening Israeli society. But is the racist discourse only a strategy to oppress national minorities, cultures, religions? What happens when the weaker elements in the web of power create racist discourse towards the hegemonic group? Ali Rattansi (2007) argues that the automatic equation created by the accepted theoretical anti-racist discourse between power and racism does not stand up to the test of reality and is oversimplified. Moments of racism can also be found among minorities toward members of other marginal groups. For example, in Israel, the Mizrahi (Middle Eastern and North African) Jews from lower socio-economic strata show racist attitudes towards Arabs and towards refugees. And

what happens when a weakened minority expresses racism towards the dominant group? Do these expressions tell us anything about racism (Rattansi, 1992)? Do they, nevertheless reverberate the power relations between the minority and the dominant groups? And if so how?

Before we explain the complexity with regard to power relations as they appear in the two texts cited above, a few words are in order about the textual strategies of racist texts. Old and new racism also share some mutual discourse strategies. Rowan Savage (2013) asserts that one of the effective strategies of this type of discourse is dehumanization of the other group, the group which is not “us”. In order to define dehumanization, Savage uses the definitions of other researchers and theories of similar discourse strategies, such as devaluation, exclusion, delegitimization, de-personalization, social death, and demonization, among others. He argues that dehumanization is most common in situations of violent conflict and it serves as one of the tools to maintain it.

Dehumanization requires a perception of the other group as having essentialist characteristics and behavior in the spirit of the new racism, meaning that this is the way they really are, bloodthirsty, money-hungry, and dirty from the very essence of their being. Savage (2013) asserts that the discourse which creates dehumanization openly or implicitly denies the humanity of certain groups. The negation of humanity does not necessarily emphasize skin color but rather markers like values, mentality, character traits and others (Hopkins et al., 1997; Shenhav & Yona, 2008). If the members of the group are less human, they are not worthy of the moral treatment accorded to the members of “our” own group.

Many acts of racism may be categorized as institutionalized racism, a dense network of racist assumptions and conduct which creates a daily routine of preference for one group over another. In other words, racism is not expressed only in harsh acts, but also in a sophisticated exercise of power, usually concealed, which harms the other group (Gilborn, 2008). Acts of racism such as these often become invisible to the racists and their victims as they are in line with the norms which have been established in the dominant culture. Gillborn (2008) argues that this racism is no less destructive but as it is supported by the power holders, it arouses less condemnation.

### **The Blood is Dripping from the Dagger: Racism in *Nakba Harta***

The booklet entitled *Nakba Harta: The Booklet Which Fights for the Truth* clearly uses racist discourse in order to attack two groups which according to the writers threaten the State of Israel and Zionism. Erez Tadmor and Erel Segal, who wrote

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the booklet direct their arrows toward Arabs – and especially focus the discussion on Palestinians, in a refutation of the catastrophe suffered by the Palestinian Arabs following the establishment of the State of Israel. But they also defame the Arabs of the Middle East and North Africa, along with a group of critical Jewish academics.

This paper does not intend to discuss the authors' historical research of the Israeli-Palestinian conflict as it is reflected in the booklet or the way academia in Israel is presented, but rather, to outline the way the text constructs a racist discourse against two groups – the first having a different nationality and culture, and the second with a different ideological and political stance. It characterizes each of the groups as having negative traits and inferior moral identities. In this way, it establishes them as posing a threat and justifies their dehumanization, exclusion and expulsion from “our” group.

Hopkins, Reicher and Levine (1997) argue that one of the characteristics of the new racism is that the delegitimization of the other group is not all-embracing, but is partial and evasive. One of the textual strategies of the writers supports this argument. In the first part of the booklet, Tadmor and Segal (2011, p. 3) write:

But don't misunderstand us. No one is claiming that the Arabs of Israel did not experience a disaster in the 1940s. No one is trying to deny them their subjective pain.

However, some sentences afterwards they negate the legitimacy of the pain: “The myth of the Nakba is unprecedented fraud...according to which the attacker has turned into the victim...” (Tadmor & Segal, 2011, p. 4). Yet the expression of empathy for the Palestinians hovers in the background as a way of avoiding the charge of complete denial of the disaster.

Several pages later the process of dehumanization begins as the Arabs are presented as immoral, murderers, and insane. Azam Pecha, an Arab leader who fought against the partition plan is termed “the murderous psychopath,” but he is not the only one (Tadmor & Segal, 2011, p. 12). It becomes clear that, according to Tadmor and Segal (2011) the authors, most Arab leaders of 1947 were insane “as at every opportunity they had, the Arabs proved their excellence at killing Jews. The blood drips from the knife and the dagger” (p.12). The prototype of the violent Arab, bloodthirsty and insane, standing over the corpse of a helpless Jew, as his dagger drips blood casts doubt on the humanity of the Arab whoever he is.

According to the text, the Arabs have not been endowed with intelligence or humility. Their opposition to the partition plan is described as follows:

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The Arabs were not satisfied. They wanted more. They wanted everything. Their reaction to the Jewish compromise proposal was blood, fire and pillars of smoke. Death raised its head. In their unceasing cruelty, their stupidity and their arrogance, they brought their destruction upon themselves. (Tadmor & Segal, 2011, p. 14)

The Palestinian version of the numbers of refugees in 1948 is presented as “Middle Eastern imagination combined with avarice” while their morality is “the morality of rapists” (Tadmor & Segal, 2011, pp. 15-17). In this way, the Arabs gradually become a cultural-national group whose members share a number of negative character traits; they are bloodthirsty, greedy, arrogant, stupid, immoral, and this makes them inferior and unworthy.

In their description, Tadmor and Segal echo the “traditional” racist presentation of the Arab which has developed over the past decades in the Western world. Edward Said in his groundbreaking book *Orientalism* maintains that the Arab is described in this discourse “as atrophied and lust-driven who, although able to weave devious and crafty plots, they are actually sadistic, traitorous, and contemptible” (Said, 2000, p. 251).

The Arab in Tadmor and Segal’s book lacks individuality and has no specific nationality, and he represents a general threat. This representation, has characterized most cultural references to Arabs since 1973 and even more forcefully after the “twins disaster” (Said, 2000, p. 251; Gillborn, 2008, p. 19). Therefore, the behavior of the inhabitants of most countries of the Middle East and North Africa also testify to the character and the behavior of the Palestinians. The writers of the booklet include descriptions of the pogroms which took place in Arab countries through the centuries as proof of the bloodthirsty villainy of all Arabs. There is an agitated historical survey which presents various dates between 1033 and the nineteenth century, at the center of which are the acts of violence against Jews taking place in the Middle East and North Africa. Entire periods during which there was no hostility or enmity between Arabs and Jews do not appear in their report. Their aim is to prove that this has been “a history of national persecution with a few breaks” (Tadmor & Segal, 2011, p. 60). In other words, the Arabs have always hated Jews and have always persecuted them and have always been bloodthirsty and have “slaughtered Jews again and again when there was no conflict nor was there any military reason, but only because they were Jewish” (Tadmor & Segal, 2011, p. 61).

The hostility of Arab states towards the Jews can also be seen in their efforts “to create a hypocritical and manipulative definition of Palestinian refugees” (Tadmor & Segal, 2011, p. 36). Here the deception of Arabs is revealed as, accord-

ing to Tadmor and Segal, the wider definition of “refugee” initiated by the Arab states enabled some of the Arabs to pretend to be refugees and to receive rights that they did not deserve (Tadmor & Segal, 2001, p. 37). “Being a refugee is good business; you don’t have to work,” determine the authors (Id., p. 37). Again, the faceless Arab is presented as greedy and lazy, indolent and manipulative, exploiting everyone for his own needs.

Life in filthy and foul conditions, another significant element in the lifestyle of minorities according to the different types of racist discourse, comes up in this book as well as via descriptions of European visitors to the Middle East in the nineteenth century. The descriptions of travelers and visitors, more than testifying to what they themselves saw, tell us about their “orientalist” views towards natives whom they considered as “primitive and worthy of contempt...to the point of deserving to be re-conquered” (Said, 2000, p. 154). But Tadmor and Segal ignore the cultural baggage, the historical context (the harsh realities of living under the rule of the Ottoman Empire) and unsophisticatedly adopt the patronizing, racist and Eurocentrist views of the travelers towards the natives. So Mark Twain, who visited in 1867, is quoted: “Rags, wretchedness, poverty and dirt, those signs and symbols that indicate the presence of Moslem rule more surely than the crescent-flag itself abound” (Tadmor & Segal, 2011, p.41). Here Tadmor and Segal are hinting to their readers that even Twain, who was sympathetic to marginal peoples, viewed the Muslim as inferior, thus using his statements to confirm once again Arabs’ negative collective character.

In the last chapter of the booklet, the writers deal with a sensitive and unfortunate affair in its Jewish context: the connections between the Mufti Haj Amin al-Husseini and the Nazi Party. However, the manipulative linkages they construct among the historical facts, with the aim of condemning the Palestinians, turn this discussion into incitement:

The 15<sup>th</sup> of May is the date the Arabs present as Nakba Day. The 15<sup>th</sup> of May, 1944 is the date when a half million Jews of Hungary began to be sent to Auschwitz. That is the legacy of al-Husseini, the heritage bequeathed to Palestinian children until this very day. The combination of pathological hatred towards Jews, nauseating dehumanization, and the call for destruction of those who do not deserve to live. That is what we must remember on May 15<sup>th</sup>. (Tadmor & Segal, 2011, pp. 68-69)

That ending constructs the racist conclusion: The Palestinians of today are like their forefathers – character traits and mentalities are collective and are passed on from one generation to another – they lack morality, they are greedy, arrogant,

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corrupt, liars, foolish and exploitative. As they still believe and support Nazi doctrines calling for the destruction of Jews, there is no doubt that they are against us and we must defend ourselves against them. Thus, the victims of the Nakba by the end of the booklet have become the aggressors, responsible for their own fate – “The Arabs who have wished to slaughter the Jews and throw them into the sea have remained with the Nakba.” They are natural enemies of the Jews (like the Nazis) and hostility is essentialist and will never end (Hopkins et al., 1997).

But Tadmor and Segal are not yet satisfied with just that. Their racist discourse is also directed inward towards the Jewish community. They present a group of Israeli academics who acknowledge the Palestinian narrative and publically come out against the occupation and act to end it, as lacking morality and as liars. This is the way these critical academics are described:

They reach every corner of the earth...and they demand boycotts of Israel while they are earning their livings in Israeli academia...Using foreign funding they libel, fabricate, they do their work of deception...Zionism in academia is rare, if only because it is doubtful whether someone who holds this view could advance in the academic world...Besmirch Israel and the sky's the limit. So you will find post-Zionists in universities, in the junior and senior staff, in well-oiled hypocritical organizations termed human rights organizations. Some of them hold senior positions in the media, in the judicial system, and in the cultural fields. Intellectuals inflated with self-importance...blind to the sufferings of their nation... (Tadmor & Segal, 2011, p. 7).

According to this description, the academics referred to are a group separate from us, with a value system and a worldview different than ours. They are essentially different; they are morally inferior – liars, swindlers, the self-interested, bad-hearted, and greedy, exploiters busy with the creation of an “industry of lies” the aim of which is “to poison many good brains in Europe, the United States and even in Israel” (Tadmor & Segal, 2011, p. 18). As academia totally identifies with the anti-Zionist worldview, most of academia is becoming the enemy of the Jewish state.

In our opinion, the term used by the sociologist Erving Goffman “stigma” (1983) describes what is happening here. The writers of the booklet have built a very powerful and inclusive negative racist labeling, a stigma in Goffman’s terminology, against Arabs. But the stigma spreads to those who are close to the stigmatized group, that is, to those who oppose this labeling, and they too are condemned. The process of stigmatization is double. First of all, it harms researchers who are critical and identify themselves publically with the Palestinian cause, but it

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does not stop there. As most of these researchers remain in academia (although some of them are punished and censored in various ways) they also stigmatize it, and anyone who belongs to academia potentially becomes immoral, a traitor, and one who poisons brains. Therefore, there is no reason not to feel hostility towards academia and to struggle against it.

The process of dehumanization and stigmatization proves the point made by Hopkins, Reicher and Levine (1997) that the new racism is closely connected to the principles of the old racism. Although in this case, the signifier of the excluded black is more evasive – Arabs and leftist Jews no matter what color their skin, are perceived as one group – the negative essentialist characteristics which became established in the framework of old racist viewpoints towards minorities since the nineteenth century are an inseparable part of this racist discourse. So both Palestinians and Jews who support their struggle are presented as having dubious and inferior characters and deserve to be condemned and ejected from among “us”.

### **Corruption and Promiscuity: A Letter as a Racist Act**

Dubious morality and corruption are some of the negative characteristics that the Iqra organization attributes to the Jews and to those Arabs who establish a relationship with them. In a letter sent by email to Arab students 24 hours before the opening of Student Day in May 2011, the Arab students were called upon to boycott the Student Day events which were organized by the Student Association of the college, arguing that the events were not in line with Arab-Muslim cultural and religious views.

There is no doubt that Student Day events at Tel Hai College and other higher learning institutions in Israel usually ignore the Arab minority culture. This is just another of the manifestations of institutionalized racism (Gillborn, 2008), and as it is transparent, it is not discussed. A protest of Jewish and Arab students together against this exclusion could be a significant anti-racist political act. But the letter was directed only to Arab students, calling on them to boycott Student Day and thus, to cut off all contacts with Jews, while using vitriolic racist discourse both against Jews and against Arabs who wanted to take part in the events. The two groups were viewed as threatening Islamic and Palestinian identities and endangering their cultural-religious uniqueness. This reproach echoes the condemnation of the Palestinians and the critical academics as threatening Jewish identity by Im Tirzu’s booklet.

The Student Day which the Arabs were requested to boycott was described as “a day of all types of vices and despicable behaviors like drunkenness, rampaging,

nudity and prostitution. It is a day of complete corruption and moral anarchy, adultery and abandon, more than anything that you yourself can imagine.” The general negative description represents secular Jewish culture, the ruling culture on campus, as immoral and as a source of evil (Savage, 2013). The writers of the letter also accuse the organizers of deceit and of setting a fraudulent temptation to lead the innocent community of students (the Arab students) into a terrible trap:

This day hides under its fancy clothing things known only to God... They have led you astray and tricked you when they told you that the aim of this day was entertainment and easing the soul!!! The truth is that there is nothing in it except humiliation of the soul!!!

The description of Student Day and of course, of those who organized it as corrupt, promiscuous and fraudulent makes participation in the events dangerous. The text is filled with warnings to Arab students who are considering participation. The delegitimization of Jewish secular culture goes hand in hand with construction of a cultural hierarchy in which Student Day and its organizers humiliate the soul and corrupt it while Islam saves it from temptation and signifies correct values. The text includes quotes from the Qur’an which determine what is proper and correct to do. For example, it cites the words of Muhammad:

Do not be sycophants, who follow others and imitate their good deeds or their evil deeds. Know what you want, so that you will be joined to good deeds and you will avoid evil deeds.

The cultural hierarchy positions the corrupt-promiscuous entity (Student Day and its organizers) at the bottom and the pure and honest entity above (the Muslims who withstand the temptation), and it clarifies secular Jewish inferiority (Yona & Shenhav, 2008). Moreover the Jews are presented as having mentalities, desires and aspirations which are opposed to those of Muslims as well as fewer cognitive capabilities (Shenhav & Yona, 2008): “We must not forget that we have higher intelligence than they do, and a different way of thinking than they do, and a heart which loves what they hate and hates what they love.” So it becomes clear that not only the organizers of Student Day lack principles and are deceivers, but rather all of the Jews.

However, the Jews are not only culturally inferior; they are national enemies now and forever, as the letter makes clear: “The implications of the Nakba have not yet been forgotten by us. Our wound is still bleeding. Will we dance and enjoy ourselves at night with them over the ruins of our Nakba?” In this way, the abun-

dance of cultural, religious, national, cognitive and moral characteristics become the convincing excuses to exclude the other, to turn inward and to ostracize him. Such discourse does not challenge the well established institutionalized racism reflected in the events of Student Day, nor does it expose the exclusion and the disregard of the Arab minority, but only confirms these practices with inverse reasoning.

Like the booklet *Nakba Harta*, the letter demonstrates a racist attitude internally as well, regarding Arab students who join the Jews. We maintain that despite the fact that the letter uses racist discourse towards the Jews, its target audience is the Arab students on campus, and especially those who intend to come to the events of Student Day. Thus, for example, the letter writers chose to write it in Arabic, a language that, despite its legal status as being equal to that of Hebrew (both are official languages of Israel), most Jews do not speak it and it is clearly the language of the Arab minority (Saban & Amara, 2002).

But while they relinquish the attention of the Jews, the letter was sent by email to all of the Arabs on campus and because not all of them are Muslims, the opening of the letter, “to my Muslim brothers” is surprising at first glance. However, this opening indicates that the writers are intentionally ignoring religious (Muslims, Druze and Christians of all types), national (Palestinians, Syrians) and socio-political (religious and non-religious, farmers and Bedouins, urban and rural dwellers among others) heterogeneity and implies that the wide range of identities is not relevant. There is actually one significant legitimate identity – the masculine-Muslim-Palestinian identity which presents “moral, masculine and proper behavior” and hold correct values. Implicitly, the letter constructs a hierarchy within the Arab community between a person who is Muslim and a man, and all other identities

While the inequality of the Jews is essentialist, the letter clarifies to the Arabs that they can save themselves from corruption and humiliation if they boycott Student Day. “You must remember,” write the members of Iqra, “that when your soul continues to sin, you must remind it of the words of God. And if it does not repent, you must remind it about what appropriate moral masculine conduct is. And if it still does not repent, you must remind it of the bad name that may adhere to you if your behavior becomes publicly known. And if, despite everything, it still does not repent, you must know that at that moment, you turn into the devil”.

While the Jewish others are presented as promiscuous, immoral, culturally and cognitively inferior, the internal others, the members of “our” group who cross over the borderline and break the cultural hierarchies have themselves become sub-humans, demons, and monsters by virtue of their deeds – “the devil.” Only “God will protect us from all that.” In addition, by choosing to approach the Jews,

they lose their independence and become an inferior version of the Jews. As the letter claims scornfully: “So why, my dear Muslim, do you insist on being a copy of them” Thus, the letter signifies young Arabs who choose to live a secular Western life as nonentities who are dangerous to the tribe and therefore deserve punishment – God will not forgive them, but neither will the community. The price for a bad name in a traditional society, the oppressive system of supervision, is also exploited by the writers of the letter to threaten those who choose to join with liberal Jewish society that their deviation will extract a heavy price.

As holders of a monopoly on the voice of God and on correct values, the letter writers declare at the end:

It is befitting, my brothers that you avoid promiscuous acts such as these, and then you may expect to receive your positive reward from God. And may you create a group who will instruct you as to how to do good, who will command you to do deeds of benevolence and who will forbid you to do deeds of heresy. Those who belong to this group are the beneficiaries.’ The great God is just ...

In other words, they determine that the divine reward is awaiting only those who do not join the Jews.

The Lebanese Shiite Muslim philosopher, Ali Harb (2007) has pointed out the danger in the tendency of Muslim organizations like Iqra to grant themselves a monopoly over belief and truth and to negate all those whom it perceives as being the Other. That, he argues, leads to violence towards others, who lose their humanity in this discourse.

Shehav and Yona (2008) indicate that the need to negate the other and to eradicate him/her expresses the anxiety of social mixing and the “necessity of purifying the social body and protecting the personal or group identity from any proximity, involvement or incursion” (p. 19). Maintaining the group requires delegitimization, demonization and dehumanization (Savage, 2013) of anyone who seems to threaten our unity, even if, according to other ethnic and cultural parameters, he is a member of our own community. A similar process of incrimination was apparent in the booklet *Nakba Harta* against Jewish academics who support the Palestinian struggle.

Although there is great similarity in the strategies of the two texts with regard to both external and internal others, Iqra is a minority group organization acting in a reality of hostility and discrimination towards Arabs and the structural inequality reverberates through the text. The writers do not sign their names to the letter, but choose to send it in the name of the organization. This is striking considering the appearance of the names of the writers of *Nakba Harta* on the bind-

ing. The use of Arabic lessens the chance that the letter will be read by the majority group which might see the letter as a threat. The letter writers also choose not to mention the Jews by name and signify them as “Student Day” and later, using the third person plural “they.” Avoiding the mention of Jews by name is, to a great extent, a survival strategy when facing the Jewish hegemony and its representatives at the college.

In addition, the threats, warnings and reprimands are not directed against the Jews but against the Arabs, meaning that the direct violent discourse is internally Arab and, as such, is less threatening at first glance to the Jewish hegemony in general and to the governing body of the academic institution in particular. We argue that this is an obvious illusion, as racist discourse creating a cultural hierarchical division based on essentialist characteristics and justifying the system of one-sided or mutual exclusion, should concern all of us (Hopkins et al., 1997).

### **Why Not Denounce Racism Publicly?**

The encounter with the two racist texts on campus evoked our anger and even fear. Israel today abounds in manifestations of racism in discourse and in the media as well as in politics and law. And because academia echoes the outside realities, it is no wonder that racism on the campus has become worse. In any case, up to now, in Tel Hai College we have not come across such egregious examples as these, despite the fact that instances of institutional racism are not rare. In both cases, concerned, insulted and angry students reached the offices of the Center for Peace and Democracy which we established and fought for together, attempting to turn Tel Hai College into a multicultural campus.<sup>6</sup> We felt that the two texts were sabotaging this aim as they primarily threatened and warned those students who were building friendships and partnerships, and who were trying together to create a different social reality of mutual learning, curiosity and interest. These students, Jewish and Arab, who were perceived by the two texts and the organizations behind them as evil, actually provide an opportunity for social change and for the discourse of peace.

In both cases, we immediately turned to the administration. In the case of the booklet, its distribution on the grass was stopped after two hours. In the case of the letter from Iqra, which prevented some of the Palestinian students from participating in Student Day, in fear of the organization, nothing was done. Even more significant, at a Student Day event, a film was shown during which criticism was expressed about the three religions – Judaism, Christianity and Islam. Iqra was the only organization which demanded an apology. The college administration,

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which did not apologize for the harm done by the racist texts to the students, quickly apologized to Iqra for the insult to the believers. The racist letter written by the representatives of the organization had been forgotten.

There are a few reasons why the lecturers, students and administration ignored these racist texts and did not exploit the opportunity to condemn racism.

One of the accepted arguments on campus was that these texts, more than being racist, were expressing the different worldviews of the two sides in the conflict. The title of the booklet seemingly indicates that it is dealing with a political dispute. The Nakba is part of the Palestinian narrative about the Israeli-Palestinian conflict since 1948 and thus, its negation is supposedly part of the legitimate struggle between Jews and Arabs. In the case of Iqra's letter, the argument in the hallways was that this was an ethical dispute between religious and secular Arabs and racism played no part in it. But it is important to pay attention that in both texts it is the weakened minority who is being attacked by the racist discourse and not the hegemonic group. In *Nakba Harta* the fury is directed towards Arabs and towards a small group of leftist academics while in the Iqra letter warnings and threats are directed towards the "traitorous" Arabs who interact with Jews and their culture. Racist discourse which attacks the weak does not threaten the Jewish hegemony. It is even less threatening in a reality of conflict and mutual hostility in which public discourse in any case advances separation and segregation between the groups.

The situation on campus perhaps echoes that of American campuses. Shaun R. Harper (2012) claims that research of campus racial climates discloses, that race and racism have been deemed unspeakable topics. That is to say, students, faculty and administrators have reportedly adhered to an unwritten code of silence regarding racism, mostly to avoid making others feel uncomfortable, but also to signify that the environments of higher education institutions are not emotionally loaded or politically risky as is the term "racist".

In Israeli academia avoidance of concepts like race, racial formation and racism is common not only on campuses but also among researchers who do not hesitate to get involved in political discourse and to attack the Israeli social power structures (Yona & Shenhav, 2008). Yossi Yona, Haggai Rom and Dalya Markovitz (2010) argue that these researchers prefer concepts such as nationalism, ethnicity and culture, and the discussion of systems of discrimination and exclusion over discussion of racism. Nevertheless, the discussion of racism in academia has not completely disappeared, but implicitly exists in writing about anti-Semitism – which is greatly similar to discourse about racism, as pointed out by Said (2000) and Etienne Balibar (2008). In studies by Israeli researchers, anti-Semitism is per-

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ceived as a wide-ranging concept describing attitudes to various non-Jewish groups (Yona, Rom, & Markovitz, 2010).

According to Yona, Ram and Markovitz, the main reason for relinquishing racism is this category is the legacy of Nazi German racism and the Holocaust, which lessens the value of any racist act in the present (Yona et al., 2010). Thus, the memory of the Holocaust prevents Israeli discourse from recognizing less traumatic racist attitudes and practices.

However, when the language describing racism becomes illegitimate, racist conduct disappears from the eye, is normalized, and turns into an inseparable part of the landscape even for minorities which are harmed by it (Gillborn, 2008, p. 27). Thus, in a reality of higher education institutions where Arabs and Jews seemingly receive equal treatment - they learn in the same departments, take the same courses, are measured by the same tools of evaluation, spend their free time on the same lawns and in the same cafeteria – identification and reaction to acts of racism become possible only when they are extremely harsh. The distribution of the booklet which denounces the Nakba and the intimidating email, as we discovered, were not harsh enough.

Furthermore, it should not be ignored that the call for academic freedom also contributes to the normalization of expressions of racism. The British sociologist Les Back (2004) asserts that academic freedom is one of the dangers to academia as it creates the possibility to present racist attitudes as deserving to be heard, while ignoring social responsibility and ethics. Anat Matar (2011) points out that academic freedom as it is presently customary in institutions of higher learning is actually the freedom not to ask irksome questions and it is often exploited in order to suppress real criticism.

The members of academia in Israel and throughout the liberal world in general, boast of ‘academic freedom’ precisely in order to cover up the fact [...] that not every opinion deserves to receive the same respect as any other opinion, and that there is no symmetry between truth which is anchored in ‘human rights’ and truth which draws its strength from the power of ‘crimes against humanity’. (Matar, 2011, p. 12)

### **Conclusions: On the Role of Academia**

In a lecture given by Toni Morrison about educational values she warned:

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If the university does not take seriously and rigorously its role as a guardian of wider civic freedoms... then some other regime or ménage of regimes will do it for us, in spite of us, and without us. (as cited in Back, 2004, p. 5)

The aspiration for an academia which is socially and politically engaged is also shared by Matar (2011) and Back (2004) who point to institutions of higher learning as providing an opportunity to investigate and to examine complex ethical-social-political problems, among which are the way academia itself contributes to and cooperates with mechanisms of social-political oppression. Henry Giroux (2007) asserts that academia must be committed to meaningful political action. It must become a site of resistance to corporate economy and to militarization and be a participant in a variety of political-social struggles going on outside. In other words, it must also be morally committed and act concretely and tangibly against injustices such as inequality, racism, the alliance between government and capital and others. Such an academia will encourage teachers to foster understanding and respect for all cultural and national groups, employing suitable pedagogic practices, addressing social and political wrongs without fear of censorship or sanction, inspiring their students to examine these issues.

In Israel the potential for academia to become a site of resistance to injustice is great since it, itself, is a meeting place between groups which usually do not come in contact with one another in the social reality. Due to a structured policy of geo-political segregation, which ensures that Jews and Arabs live in separate cultural, social, learning, economic and political frameworks for most of their lives, the two groups do not often meet, except randomly. These are usually asymmetrical meetings as Arabs mostly find themselves in inferior positions. The first meaningful encounter between Jews and Arabs usually takes place in academia where, for a few years, they spend time together. The dialogue between the groups on campus is coincidental, superficial and instrumental, and it reproduces realities off campus. But the fact that it goes on continuously should not be ignored.

Thus, one of the obligations of higher education institutions, as sites of knowledge building, is to reveal the open and implicit appearances of racism both within and outside of its gates and to formulate a substantive plan of action to fight against it. Substantive and tangible action is certainly possible as the presence of Jews and Arabs in the same space has the potential to challenge moments of racism in real time, to struggle against them and to create social alternatives of dialogue, cooperative work and solidarity, even in the uneasy reality of living in the shadow of a violent and persistent national-political conflict.

If this potential could be realized, there is no chance that racist texts like those presented would appear at the college without thundering opposition by the stu-

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dents, lecturers and administrators. There is also a chance that texts like those would arouse a wide ranging discussion about the reasons, interests and meanings of racist discourse and the heavy damage to those who are exposed to it (Arabs and Jews). This would be a serious and in-depth discussion which would clarify that racist expressions which are voiced either by the minority or the majority are completely forbidden.

### Notes

<sup>1</sup> Nakba (in Arabic catastrophe) is the term which describes the 1948 Palestinian exodus when approximately 711,000 to 726,000 Palestinian Arabs fled or were expelled from their homes, following the war among Israel and the Arab states.

<sup>2</sup> This is part of a phrase coined by Binyamin Ze'ev Herzl, the father of Zionism. The phrase: "If you will it, it is no dream," is the motto of the Zionist movement.

<sup>3</sup> Iqra means "to read". It is the first word of the initial exchange between God and Muhammad. God said: "Read in the name of God who created man..."

<sup>4</sup> See Im Tirtzu's internet site [www.imti.org.il/](http://www.imti.org.il/) Retrieved in January 25, 2013).

<sup>5</sup> Iqra's internet site [www.eqraa.com](http://www.eqraa.com) Retrieved in January 25<sup>th</sup> 2013)

<sup>6</sup> In Tel Hai Academic College, in recent years, about 14% of the students have been Arabs. (Twenty percent of the Israeli populations are Arabs.) Arab lecturers make up 6% of the faculty. (These figures have been taken from the work plan submitted to the Council for Higher Education by the Center for Peace and Democracy in January 2014) The Center for Peace and Democracy was established in 2007 after five years of grassroots work among students and faculty.

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