

# Shabbat + Humus = A New Zionist Vision

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On Sunday night, February 27, more than 200 people, mostly “gap year” students who will attend North American colleges next fall, jammed into the Yad Ben Zvi Institute’s headquarters in Jerusalem. In the simple hut, once the Israeli president’s official greeting hall, over a dozen speakers honored Avi Schaefer’s memory by Re-imagining Israel on the North American Campus (livestreamed [here](#) [2]). Schaefer was a Brown University student from Southern California who survived three years of volunteering in an Israeli combat unit only to be killed by a drunk driver last year. He championed Israel at Brown – while befriending Palestinians – insisting that advocacy and empathy are not contradictions. When he died, the Brown campus was festooned with Israeli flags in his memory. For four hours Sunday evening this extraordinary 21-year-old’s spirit permeated that historic hut – challenging a new generation to find personal and Jewish fulfillment by becoming Zionist thinkers and doers, speaking about Israel from their hearts, in their language, through their networks.

In truth, the conversation often was sobering. MK Einat Wilf’s intelligent overview put this “new mutation” of anti-Zionism into historical perspective. The Arab effort to destroy Israel evolved from trusting military force between 1948 and 1973, to economic boycotts and “international terrorism,” which all failed. Today’s “intellectual assault” is “no less” threatening than “physical danger,” Wilf warned, because “Israel was an idea before it was a country.... If this idea of the Jewish people’s right to a homeland is undermined, the fundamental vision of Israel” as a Jewish state “is undermined.”

The noted author Yossi Klein Halevi, from the Shalom Hartman Institute, analyzed how “anti-Zionism” has “restored respectability to anti-Semitism.” Defining anti-Semitism as “the tendency of a given civilization to identify the Jew with precisely what that civilization considers its most loathsome qualities,” he showed that making Israel, the collective Jew, the “arch violator of human rights ... corrected the aberration of Nazism.” Classical anti-Semitism masqueraded as a benign force fighting bad Jews until Nazism’s evil destroyed that illusion. Modern anti-Zionism, blessed by Jewish skills, rehabilitates this historic hatred, going beyond legitimate debate over the outcomes of 1967, meaning Israel’s boundaries, to rejecting the results of 1948,

treating Israel's existence as criminal.

Speakers proposed solutions too. The Reut Institute's Daphna Kaufman recommended the [Restoring Sanity petition](#) <sup>[3]</sup> which distinguishes between legitimate criticism and delegitimization (Full disclosure: I helped write it and we used the name before Jon Stewart did). For those seeking to repudiate the upcoming anti-Israel week falsely peddling the Apartheid libel, encouraging debate about the petition – and collecting signatures – are easy first steps. Aviva Raz-Shechter from the Foreign Ministry described how students successfully “delegitimized the delegitimizers” at Durban II. Ilan Wagner of the Jewish Agency moderated an important panel emphasizing individual students' power to change campus dynamics through thoughtful, constructive, sincere activism, as part of a broader quest to build positive Jewish identity.

This “Power of One” idea is the theme of Stand With Us, which co-sponsored the event with the Avi Schaefer Foundation through the effective organization of the educational consultant Dr. Elan Ezrachi. And Mark Regev, representing the Prime Minister, spoke movingly, endorsing Avi's message of empathy in advocacy and true love in patriotism – a mature love acknowledging that “Israel isn't perfect” while working to make it “better.”

Summarizing the event, as the only professor there, I reassured the students that most North American campuses are not aflame. In fact, this is a Golden Age for Jews on campus – there have never been so many Jewish professors and students, so many Jewish Studies programs and strong Hillels. That it is also a Golden Age for campus Israel-bashing requires subtlety. If students come ready to fight they risk forgetting to learn and misreading their campus's political culture. So, yes, the Campus Jihad inflames *some* campuses. And the Academic Jihad turns most Middle East studies courses into anti-Israel propaganda exercises, helping make Zionism politically incorrect on campus. But most students succumb to the careerist snoozefest, ignoring politics. Hysterics won't cure these leaders of tomorrow of the anti-Israel poison; appropriate, tempered, democracy-loving, proactive strategies will.

Ultimately, the evening's message was best articulated by Avi Schaefer in an opening video, echoed by his twin brother, Yoav Schaefer, who also volunteered in the IDF. Yoav Schaefer described his brother's “deep idealism,” noting how Avi used his credibility as a soldier and his personal humility to inject humanity into a conflict that too frequently polarizes. By “listening deeply to others,” Avi helped change the tone at Brown. One Palestinian friend in the video thanked Avi for “helping me unclench my fist” – an impressive achievement in today's atmosphere.

Avi's secret lay in respecting Palestinians but not forgetting to respect himself, his people, our story. He understood that Judaism is not just a religion. The Jewish people constitute a nation – and like other nations deserve to express our national rights in our homeland. Avi spoke passionately about Shabbat and about humus. He loved wandering Jerusalem, the Jewish people's home base, wishing people “Shabbat shalom” and feeling normal, understood, accepted. And he loved the little things, including Israel's national foods.

Young Jews should follow Avi's example, creating their own Zionist vision rooted in some of our most profound religious traditions and national expressions – like Shabbat – while delighting in the fun details that make a place feel like home. And they should build this Zionist identity not to score points, not to defeat anti-Semites, but to forge the kind of rich, fulfilling human identity, Avi's parents Rabbi Arthur and Laurie Gross-Schaefer clearly gave him. In so doing, as a bonus, today's students – tomorrow's Zionist thinkers -- will rise to Yoav Schaefer's challenge and “build

for Avi the world he would have built for us."

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