

The Other Battlefield by Jodi Schneider Neelin

My daughter's irritation was brimming under the surface as she indignantly told me how unfair it was that she wasn't even given a choice about college, how it was just a foregone conclusion that she would have to go. I reminded her, as I always have, that while it seems like a huge mountain to climb at the time, an education is the most important thing she could do for her future and even if she decides to pursue something else one day, is never wasted. I smiled inwardly, knowing that at sixteen she couldn't see the value of continuing her education past high school, but that one day she would appreciate it and understand.

I thought of that innocent conversation we had had in our kitchen, while I typed the words "universities that are safe for Jews" into my Google search. It was shocking to have to type them, and now that my daughter is eighteen, college is no longer an abstract eventuality but the door to her next chapter, and as she stands on the threshold with her hand on the doorknob to open it, I am the one with misgivings.

She was thrilled when she was accepted, but I noticed a specter of reticence tempering her excitement. This morning, she quietly confessed she does want to go to college, but doesn't feel she would be welcome there.

What do I even say? She is *not* welcome on a college campus right now. Her fellow Jewish students are being spat on, jeered at, blocked from going to class, assaulted. They are called baby killers and colonizers, trying to cross the university greens while listening to frenzied mobs literally chanting for their deaths in a language these protesters don't even understand.

Unless she wore an outward sign of her heritage, my daughter could pass quietly as any other student without giving herself away. My husband's Anglo surname would provide some cover, and until it starts raining and her carefully flat ironed hair starts to curl, people might not even ask her The Question.

I have been asked The Question many times myself. I can see it forming in someone's eyes as they narrow involuntarily for the briefest of flickers, scanning my face as we talk, trying to add up my Semitic features but coming up blank so that when I stop speaking they say, "Where are you from?" When I tell them, their brows remain slightly furrowed as they continue to attempt to make sense of me, to put their finger on it. "No, where are you *from*? Are you Greek?" No. "Hispanic?" No. "Italian?" No. I don't let them off the hook, I don't tell them I'm Jewish even though I know that's ultimately what they're asking even though they may not know it. I have recently come to the realization that many people in my adopted country have never even met a Jew. Or so they think. And in the diaspora these days, answering this question doesn't just put the puzzle together for someone, it's a potentially hazardous admission. I don't deny my roots, but I don't volunteer them, either.

Besides, whether or not my daughter "looks Jewish" isn't the point. Will she be able to go to class without being harassed? Will her roommate hate her for being a "Zionist?" Will she be in actual danger by attending?

As I tried to search for a university whose library hasn't been destroyed, or hasn't sprouted a tent city that has ironically colonized and occupied their public spaces in protest of a so-called colonial occupier, my mind wanders back to the recently released footage of the group of young women who were taken hostage into Gaza on October 7th. These women are girls really, just a little older than my own daughter. Now nearly eight months later, I realize with horror that if these girls are even still alive, instead of focusing on college, they might be almost mothers themselves, the telltale sign of their induction into captivity inscribed on the seats of their bloodied sweatpants. My heavy heart feels like a sandbag crushing my chest. We are not welcome. We are not safe.

But we are here.

As the ancient volcano of antisemitism sleeps and then explodes, alternating through the centuries between periods of relative tolerance and then erupting into a furious detonation of hatred, here but for the grace of God - and the incredibly courageous souls who fight against the tide of billions and stand with us - go we.

I look my daughter in the eye and tell her she has just as much right to be there on campus as anyone else. I tell her to focus on her studies and work hard. I think of the tenuous notion of acceptance, and how it is never promised, especially to the Jews. I tell my daughter she will do what her people have always done; she will persist.

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