



TRANSCRIPT- Hadassah Magazine Presents: What Jewish Students Face on Campus with Shai Davidai and Izabella Tabarovsky

[00:00:00] **Shai Davidai:** The problem is that we send a lot of our kids to this fight unarmed and unprepared. We basically put them on campus in college. We drive off when they're 18. We say, "Good luck. You've learned math. You've learned your English. You've scored great SATs, and you're in, and you deserve it." But now we've basically left them as sheep surrounded by wolves without giving them the education about who they are, where they came from, what is the Jewish people, what has the Jewish people overcome, what were the reasons for the state of Israel, what has Israel done, the good and the bad?

[00:00:38] **Lisa Hostein:** Hello. Shana tova, and welcome to Hadassah Magazine Presents, a program and podcast for those who love *Hadassah Magazine* and want more, and for those who have never heard of the magazine and are looking for stimulating conversations with acclaimed Jewish authors, thinkers, celebrities, and culinary stars.

I'm your host, Lisa Hostein, the executive editor of *Hadassah Magazine*. I'm delighted to be in conversation today with Izabella Tabarovsky and Shai Davidai, important thinkers and authors for our time, both of whom have new books that take deep dives into the issue we are addressing tonight, *Textbook Anti-Zionism: Understanding the Climate on Campus*.

The topic is timely as colleges and universities around the country start back up for a new school year. There has been so much discussion about what's

happening on campus, especially over the past few years since October 7th, whose third anniversary is also rapidly approaching. But both Izabella, with her new book, *Be a Refusenik: A Jewish Student's Survival Guide*, and Shai, whose forthcoming *American Intellectual Antisemitism: The Anti-Jewish Movement Tearing Through Our Universities*, bring new perspectives and insight to the topic, which continues to roil our world.

And now to introduce our guests. Izabella Tabarovsky, a scholar of Soviet anti-Zionism and contemporary antisemitism, is currently a fellow with the Woodrow Wilson International Center for Scholars in Washington, DC. She's a senior fellow with the Z3 Institute for Jewish Priorities in Palo Alto, a fellow with the London Centre for the Study of Contemporary Antisemitism, and also at the Komper Center for the Study of Antisemitism and Racism at the University of Haifa. A contributing writer at *Tablet*, she has published in many other outlets as well, including *Newsweek*, *Sapir*, *The National Interest*, *The Forward*, and the *Jewish Telegraphic Agency*.

And her essays have appeared in several edited volumes, including *October 7: The War Over Words and Deeds*, *The Rebirth of Antisemitism in the Twenty-First Century*, and *Jewish Priorities: 65 Proposals for the Future of Our People*. Her work has been translated into Spanish, French, Portuguese, German, Polish, Russian, Czech, and other languages.

Izabella, who grew up in Siberia and immigrated to the United States from the USSR with her family in 1990, now lives in Jerusalem, but spends a lot of time in the US as well. Since October 7th, 2023, Shai Davidai, a former Columbia University professor, has emerged as a prominent voice against antisemitism and against support for terrorism in North America.

The host of two podcasts, *Here I Am* with Shai Davidai, and *Pragmatic Judaism*, he also garners a large social media following. He was named one of the *Jerusalem Post's* 50 most influential Jews of 2024, was honored by the Israeli Parliament, and awarded the Jerusalem Prize at the Jerusalem Conference in New York City.

His writing has been featured in *The New York Times*, *The Washington Post*, *The Wall Street Journal*, *CNN*, and *Fox News*. He holds a PhD in social psychology from Cornell University and has taught at Princeton, The New School for Social Research, and Columbia. He lives in New York City with his wife and two young children, and he spends a lot of time in Israel.

They pass each other in the sky. Welcome to you both.

[00:03:51] **Izabella Tabarovsky:** It's wonderful to be here.

[00:03:53] **Shai Davidai:** It's incredible. Thank you so, so much.

[00:03:55] **Lisa Hostein:** Thank you for joining us today, and congratulations on your new books. As I said, I highly recommend them to our audience. Go out and buy several copies. I'm especially delighted that we introduced you two to each other and are bringing you together for the first time.

Your work overlaps in important yet distinct ways, and you have said you have each learned from the other's work. You both bring scholarly research, and you also both believe that courage and action are more important than outrage and performance when it comes to fighting antisemitism and anti-Zionism.

We're gonna dive deep into the problems on campus, the roots of those problems, as well as some potential solutions and calls to action. So I want to start by asking each of you to talk a little bit about your backgrounds. Neither of you set out to focus in your careers on writing and speaking out about antisemitism and anti-Zionism, but here you are.

So tell us where you were and what you were focused on when your lives took this dramatic turn and you were propelled toward researching, writing, and speaking out about these issues. Let's start with you, Shai. You call yourself an accidental activist, sparked by what you saw on the campus of Columbia University immediately following the October 7th massacre in Israel.

So share with us a little bit about that story.

[00:05:04] **Shai Davidai:** Thank you, Lisa. So I am an accidental activist. I did not plan on doing this, but now that I've been dealt this hand, I'm trying to do the most of what I have. But if you'd have met me on October 6th, 2023, while my values were the same, while my personal appearance was the same, I was a very different person.

I was a professor at Columbia Business School. I have received my PhD in social psychology, and what I was really interested in, still am, but what I was doing is researching and studying how people understand the world when it comes to economic inequality and could come to conflict and resolution, and I was teaching negotiations.

So all of those things I feel like prepared me for that moment. Because for me, it really started on October 12th, 2023. Obviously, October 7 is the most

important date that we should always focus on. But for me at Columbia University, five days after the massacre was the first protest, and it was the first time that I saw hatred w- with my own eyes.

I mean, I, I'd always known that there's hatred in the world. I knew that people hate the Jews, that people hate Israelis. I assumed that I am hated because I'm part of those groups, but I've never seen it face to face. And on October 12th, 2023, was one of what would then become more of an years-long protest at Columbia, where people that we've now known for because for other reasons, Mahmoud Khalil, Mohsen Mahdawi, and many, many of other students and professors really just were celebrating our worst moment in our nation's history, and they were gleefully celebrating it.

And when they looked at us, the Jewish students and a few faculty that were standing maybe 10, 15 yards away, they looked at us with anger and with hatred. And at that moment, it was as if I felt like this is not acceptable, not here, not anywhere, and I have to do something about it because no one else will

[00:07:13] **Lisa Hostein:** We'll get back into more details as, as we go on.

But Izabella, let me turn to you. You emigrated from the Soviet Union. You were about 20, I think, and you were immersing yourself in a professional career when about a decade ago you pivoted. So where were you at the time? What was the spark for you, and what led to this book?

[00:07:30] **Izabella Tabarovsky:** Exactly. So we came to America in 1990 with that big wave of Russian Jewish immigration.

You know, we emigrated because of anti-Semitism in the Soviet Union. We expected that in America we would not encounter it again. And for 25 years, for almost 30 years actually, America completely fulfilled that promise to me. I completely forgot that anti-Semitism existed. The Soviet Union fell apart, and it was like, "Okay, all of that is in the past.

There is no anti-Semitism in this country." I got great jobs. I got into great universities. This is where Soviet Jews would have encountered anti-Semitism. There was none of it in America. And then a moment came, I think it was 2018, when I turned on the news and I saw an item that reported one of those protests on campuses that have now become so familiar to us.

But back then, it struck me as something really shocking. It was a group of young people, students on an American campus carrying those signs. You know, "Israel's an apartheid state. Zionism is racism." And I was truly shocked because to me, there was immediately an association with something I couldn't quite place because I think I had already forgotten what it was.

And I often tell this story. I called my dad because I was so confused, but I felt like I needed to talk to him about it, and I said, "Dad, here's what's going on. And by the way, they're saying they're not being anti-Semitic, they're just being anti-Zionist." And my dad laughed, and he said, "Oh, this we've heard before."

That was that proverbial kind of light bulb. I think I tell the story in the book where I thought, "Okay, that's it. We have heard this before, but why is it here? Why is it here 28 years after we emigrated? Was it here always and I just hadn't seen it?" All these questions came up in my mind, and so I started researching them a bit.

By then, I had already been researching and writing mostly about the Holocaust. I was writing a lot about the Holocaust in Russia as it took place there, the Holocaust by bullets. And then that really changed everything for me. This became the main topic of my research and writing, and it became the foundation for the book ultimately.

[00:09:36] **Lisa Hostein:** So in the forward to your book, Natan Sharansky, who of course is probably the most recognizable figure from the Soviet Jewry movement, he cites an article he wrote in the Israeli daily *Maariv* back in 2003. When he already began seeing the writing on the wall, and he has long been involved in college initiatives.

He wrote, "As Middle East study centers were beginning to flourish on American campuses, for the first time, I had seen American Jewish students and faculty afraid to speak openly in support of Israel for fear it would damage their careers. American universities are the main battleground for the future of the Jewish people," he told then Prime Minister Ariel Sharon.

That's a pretty powerful statement. So you both in your books give histories of the campuses that make clear this is not a new problem. You're talking about 2018. He's already going back to 2003. But the rootedness of the problem is what led to the explosion of the anti-Israel, anti-Semitic activity in the wake of October 7th.

So let's talk about those roots. So Shai, your book, *American Intellectual Antisemitism*, makes the case that universities have become particularly fertile ground for anti-Zionist and anti-Semitic narratives. So what role do faculty, curricula, and student organizations play in shaping this hostile environment?

[00:10:56] **Shai Davidai:** I think that's the main question. And for me, actually, the way I got to writing my book was because I had no idea. Because I, unlike Sharansky, I didn't know. On October 12th, 2023, like I said, it really hit me like, "Wow, there's a problem here." But instead of seeing the problem evolve, as Natan Sharansky mentioned in 2003, like Izabella in 2019, I really just saw the consequences of it and had to really figure out the way backward.

And, and once I realized what I was seeing, I felt like I had to show other people, and that's why I wrote the book. And for me, what I was seeing was a closed intellectual system that was not generated spontaneously, but created. Created theoretically or ideologically based on 1950s, 1960s moral relativism, post-colonial thought, then taking operationally things from Hamas, the Muslim Brotherhood, Qatari funding, and really putting everything together into this environment where you have professors, and we must remember professors who are not accountable to anyone other than themselves, and they have created this system where there's a new language.

And in that new language, Jews, the Jewish state, and Jewish collective as a whole are evil, and opposing them is resistance and is liberation, and therefore is something virtuous. And once we've created that language- The new reality started cropping up. So it started with professors that's just teaching their PhD students and writing academic articles that no one reads, or very few people read.

But then those PhD students got to become faculty, and all of a sudden they had their own PhD students, and they started exchanging PhD students. So they created a network, and then they started teaching undergraduate students who then go to graduate. They go to *The New York Times*, *The Washington Post*, they go to cultural institutions, and those graduates of the universities keep hiring people that come from those universities, therefore indoctrinated in this closed ideological environment.

Now, this is almost like taking a barrel and stuffing it with explosives, and October 7 was the match that lit it all up. But the ideological infrastructure, which is what I get into in the book, was really there preparing just to explode.

[00:13:36] **Lisa Hostein:** So in the book, you cite a study of 50 syllabi on the Israeli-Palestinian conflict at 40 colleges.

I'm not exactly sure what the date of that study was, but that found, unsurprisingly, a significant anti-Israel bias in assigned course readings. And you write that Edward Said's work, and I'm sure you'll get to him as well, *Orientalism*, which was found in over 16,000 course syllabi, more than any other work in the Western canon, that's actually quite a statement, includes its assumptions about nationalism, colonialism, and imperialism.

And you write, "In presenting the Jewish homeland through a uniquely critical lens, the imbalance imposed a one-side, anti-Jewish, anti-Israeli, and anti-American ideology on otherwise uninformed students. Shaping how students see the world long after they graduate, this intellectualized ecosystem normalizes anti-Jewish sentiment as socially acceptable, conditions students to equate Israel with oppression and Jews with white supremacy, and leaves many ill-equipped to critically evaluate competing narratives, historical evidence, or moral complexity."

Has the problem gotten worse over time? And also, how widespread? We spend a lot of time talking about the elite, the Ivy League schools, and we know that there's some schools who actually were much more successful in even navigating the October 7th issues that were going on. So how widespread is this, and has it gotten worse?

[00:14:59] **Shai Davidai:** The unfortunate answer is yes, it's gotten worse, and it's widespread. Now, it might not be as widespread as some people feel, and, and there are much better schools than others, and we should acknowledge that and celebrate those schools. But it really is, when I was researching for my book, everywhere. And one of the things that I do in the book is really just give as much specific examples of anti-Jewish and anti-Israeli rhetoric and actions because I want people to understand it's not just Columbia, it's not just Harvard.

It's at Middlebury College, and it's at Penn State, and it's in the West Coast, and it's really is everywhere. Now, it has gotten worse, and partially because naturally, when you let a lie, and really this ideology, this American intellectual antisemitism rests on certain lies, and you let a lie exist on its own without any contradictions, it slowly takes over.

So if you have 55% professors who are vehemently anti-Israel, the next professor to be hired by majority vote is going to be an anti-Israel professor, and then so on and so forth until you get entire departments that are completely anti-

Israel. Sometimes they have that one professor who isn't, not necessarily pro-Israel, but isn't, and just to say that we're not that bad.

Now, I wanna make clear that the problem is not necessarily just the fact that they're ideologically biased. The problem is that they do not let the students really consider two sides of the question, right? To me, that is a problem. There is lack of respect for students because if you assign Edward Said's *Orientalism*, which I think you should, it's an important piece, even if you only want to refute it, you should also assign Bernard Lewis's work against *Orientalism*, which is almost never assigned.

You can also assign *Occidentalism*, that basically flips the argument on its head, which is never assigned. So really, the problem is that you have professors that are not accountable to anyone other than their peers, who, through a democratic process, let these lies spread and really cut away anything that might refute them.

And so you have a slow process of indoctrination that is getting worse and worse. And of course, this is-- I get into this in the book, but also if you enter a traditional media and social media, it becomes combustible

[00:17:37] **Lisa Hostein:** And just briefly, can you clarify for anybody in our audience who doesn't know Edward Said's thinking, what the *Orientalism* thesis was?

[00:17:46] **Shai Davidai:** Yeah. So Edward Said was really... I mean, there's a lot in *Orientalism*, but really the point he is making is that if you are not from the Middle East, you should not judge the Middle East. With a caveat, if you are from the Middle East but happen to be Jewish, then also you don't, you're not allowed to judge the Middle East, right?

But he's basically looking at Princeton, which is a few miles away from where he was at Columbia University, and he sees Bernard Lewis, which is one of the most important historians of Middle East, of Arab culture, and of Islam, but he is a white American. And for that, Edward Said sees this as the ultimate sin, and he basically is able to dismiss every view that we as people in the West have on people not in the West.

Which of course, he doesn't say that others can't judge the West, only the West can't judge others. Now, once you take that as the premise, everything follows from it. Our moral judgments are therefore not really something that should matter, and they are relative. So if you split the world into oppressor and

oppressed, the moral judgments of people in the West saying, "This is good," doesn't matter, and if you say, "This is bad," doesn't matter.

All that matters is what the actors on the ground, the post-colonial actors do, and that's completely anti-intellectual, of course.

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[00:19:58] **Lisa Hostein:** Izabella, one of the aspects of your book that I really appreciate is the depth with which you tell and retell the history of the Soviet Jewry movement, both through the individual stories of refuseniks and dissidents in the USSR, and also the Soviet Jewry movement to help free them, a movement that sparked a whole generation of activists, young and old, in this country.

So your book compares today's campus climate for Jewish students to the experience of refuseniks in the Soviet Union. So what are the most important parallels that you are describing, and where do you think the comparison doesn't apply so well?

[00:20:33] **Izabella Tabarovsky:** I have to say right away that, of course, I'm not saying that America today is the same as Brezhnev's USSR.

Obviously, the systems are different. We can't compare it literally. But what's similar is the particular climate that Jewish students and Jews increasingly, Jews as a whole, but in particular young Jews in America, are experiencing, and that's the anti-Zionist climate, the anti-Zionist rhetoric. The first thing that caught my attention when we're talking about where it all started for me, the first thing I noticed is that already in 2018, 2019, the language on campuses related to Jews and Zionism repeating virtually 100%, like, it was almost exactly what Soviet

propaganda had been spreading in the '60s, '70s, and '80s, equating Zionism with all of humanity's ills.

You know, Zionism is racism, Nazism, settler colonialism, imperialism, apartheid, genocide. All of that is already in Soviet propaganda back then, 50 years ago. It's not only tropes, it's also sort of explanatory logic, explaining, thinking that anything that's wrong with the world, always look at Israel.

Everything is Israel's fault. Everything is the Zionists' fault. Zionists are everywhere. They control everything. And just like what we've seen recently, right, Zionists are the ones who drag America into the war. They control the White House. The tiny population, 16 million Jews, basically, control that superpower. So that creates a climate that is surprisingly similar to, kind of emotionally and intellectually, to what Soviet Jews experienced. Now, the range of actions that was available to Soviet Jews was different from what is available to American students. Obviously, they still live in a free country. But you know what?

I think that before you can take action, external action, you actually need to go through some internal change. And I realized after interviewing young student activists in the United States, I realized that interestingly enough, there were some internal changes that they went through that reminded me of the stories of the refuseniks, and the strategies they chose, and then ultimately the external actions they chose were in many ways similar as well.

[00:22:49] **Lisa Hostein:** And I love the way that you pair a refusenik story and a current student or recent student in the United States and talk about the similarities in terms of methodology and strategy. So one of the refuseniks that you highlight is Marina Furman, whom I actually happen to know as a longtime Jewish communal professional in Philadelphia, where I live.

But she also has a dramatic story as a refusenik and a Soviet émigré. So share with us a bit of Marina's story.

[00:23:16] **Izabella Tabarovsky:** So Marina's story is really incredible because since you know Marina, you know that she is petite, very small. You would never think that she could threaten anyone, and yet this tiny woman managed to threaten the entire KGB of the Soviet Union.

Marina was born in Kiev and grew up in Kiev, and experienced really terrible things as a Jew. She realized very quickly that she didn't want to live there. She

wanted to emigrate, but couldn't. She was refused, and so she ends up having to move to Georgia, which is a different part of the Soviet Union at the time.

She meets her husband there, but gradually she finds herself in the environment of Jews who are dissidents. She realizes that it's not a country she wants to live in, that it's a country that oppresses people, not only Jews, but Jews especially. She's so brave and she's so defiant. One of the actions that she takes is on that Freedom Sunday when 250,000 Jews in America came to the National Mall to protest for Soviet Jewry, and she and her husband lived in Leningrad at the time.

And so the two of them take their newborn baby, and they march kind of in solidarity with a big march in Washington. And of course, they're immediately arrested and taken to jail. But I just think about the courage that it took, incredible courage to just walk out, just the two of them with their newborn baby, and walk out into the main square of this big city knowing that they would be arrested immediately.

And there is another part of the story which relates to Hadassah. A student comes to visit her, I think from Brown University, I'm not sure, but she writes an article about her for Hadassah, and she was so impressed with Marina's courage. She describes how she came and it was the first days of Hanukkah, and she describes how Marina, even though they were watched all the time by the KGB down in the street, she made sure to put her Hanukkah out there so that the KGB minders would actually see them.

So it's like it's courage and defiance every step of the way, refusing to back down, refusing to cooperate, despite really terrible things that could happen to them, and did happen in some ways to her.

[00:25:23] **Shai Davidai:** I think it also embodies how we fight back, how the students on campuses fight back, and how, what I try to present in the book, which is a non-violent way of fighting back.

She wasn't out there in the streets screaming for the death of the Soviet Union, for the death of the leaders. She was screaming for or standing for something, and I think that is an important part that's really missed as our campuses evolved into physical and a lot of rhetorical violence that we never responded or tried not to respond that way.

[00:25:59] **Lisa Hostein:** So I was gonna say, I was at the march in Washington in 19, I guess it was '87. Clearly didn't take much courage for me to go down,

except it was a little crowded, certainly compared to what she experienced. So you take one of those examples that Shai is referring to, and you cite a woman named Alissa Bernstein from Occidental College.

So tell us how her activism was reminiscent of Marina's.

[00:26:25] **Izabella Tabarovsky:** Alisa also, she went to school not really thinking that she would need to stand up to anything. She thought that she would just go to school, do her studies, have fun, and that would be it. Her activism happens even before October 7th, if I'm not mistaken now.

But some things happen, and she realizes that she has to stand up for what's true. And you know what's interesting here is, of course, we can't compare the threats from the KGB to peer pressure, but when you're a student in college and everybody around you, just like what Shai was saying, is against you, your professors are against you, there's this one-sided way in which they present the story of Israel.

Alisa says that she had never actually met anyone, especially Jews, who would be so negative toward Israel, who would be really so aggressively anti-Israel. And so she gradually begins to notice the hostility. She begins to notice also the cowardness of a lot of people around her, cowardice. And so she realizes that it's up to her.

This is kind of a, a through line in many of the stories in my book, and I think it's both from that era and from today. Ultimately, when you're in that position, you realize that it's up to you. And it's very popular now to be complaining about leaders of our established kind of organizations. But you know what?

You can sit and complain about those leaders. It's fine. There is a lot to criticize. But also, at the same time, I think we're living in a moment that I call a grassroots moment, and by the way, the Soviet Jewry movement very much started with a grassroots movement before the establishment joined. It was a student movement.

So I think each of us needs to understand, just like Alisa did and just like others in my book, it's up to us. It's up to us to change at least something in our environment. Try to change whatever your sphere of influence is, however small it is. It could be just your family. It could be your neighbor.

That's enough. But that mentality, I think, is really important.

[00:28:25] **Lisa Hostein:** It's interesting you mention the student initiative with the Soviet Jewry movement. So in fact, Columbia, which of course was ground zero post-October 7th for anti-Israel incitement, but it also has a history of proud Jewish activism, right? It was in the birthplace of the Soviet Jewry movement that started with students, and also where, for example, Bari Weiss began her writing and political activism.

She co-produced a 2005 documentary, *Columbia Unbecoming*, about one of the problems that, Shai, you focus on, the bias in the Middle East studies at the school. And as you highlight, Izabella, some of the early Jewish Zionist activism even also happened there. So Shai, how did these two forces play themselves out on the campus while you were there?

Was there any dialogue or was it all confrontational that you were seeing?

[00:29:13] **Shai Davidai:** There was a lot of attempts to dialogue. For my understanding, almost all of them were responded to if with some conflict, with some confrontation, or just simply utter rejection. Complete rejection of attempt to dialogue. And in fact, that is one of the points of this movement.

One of the tenets of this movement is anti-normalization, which is the idea that if I engage with someone who is Israeli or somehow supports Israel's existence, I am normalizing the existence of the Jewish homeland. And by me engaging with that person, I've already betrayed our movement or our ideology, whatever it is, right?

And, and by the way, and I mentioned this in the book, but this goes all the way back to the 1967 Khartoum Resolution, where the League of Arab Nations all said the three nos, right? No negotiations with Israel, no recognition, no peace, right? So there was a lot of attempts, and one of the things that really pained me, not as an Israeli and not as a Jew, but as a professor, as someone who believes in the truth and in the values of enlightenment, is that there was rejection of conversation and rejection of discussion.

Because typically what happens is that the side saying, "I don't wanna hear anything," is the side that knows that they are wrong. Unfortunately, that was also the side that was, for all intents and purposes, on control on campus. So there was really no ability to engage with that side and say, "Let's find the middle ground.

Let's agree on some basic principles." And even that was too much

[00:31:00] **Lisa Hostein:** So Izabella, you make an important point in your book also about the distinction between the human rights connection with the Soviet Jewry movement. There was a love affair there. You have a quote that, "There was a real love affair between the human rights movement and our cause," speaking of the Soviet Jewry movement.

But yet here in the West, you write, "There's a love affair between the language of human rights and the anti-Semites." So is this all because of the trends that you're talking about, the inculcating the culture with the anti-Israel bias? Is that the sole reason for this, or is there something more?

[00:31:35] **Izabella Tabarovsky:** Well, I think it's bigger than that, and I wanna clarify that this is actually from Natan Sharansky's forward to my book, so this is his idea.

Look, I think that the bigger part here is that the anti-Israel propaganda and sentiments are connected deeply to anti-Western and anti-American propaganda and sentiments that began to be cultivated again already in the '60s and '70s. The Soviet Union played a huge part of it, the UN played a huge part of it, and it was very much under the influence of the Soviet communist and then also post-colonial bloc.

The putting on its head of what human rights are about, the kind of the turning of the tables with when the communist bloc, together with the Third World bloc, as it was called then, suggesting that really the worst violators of human rights are the West and the United States. And that idea began to be inculcated on the left, including among people who became academics and journalists and intellectuals, the idea that it's America that's really the worst violator of everything, right?

And gradually sort of this creed forms where if you want to be a card-carrying progressive, and certainly a socialist, a communist, or further to the left, then you must be against the United States, American imperialism, the West, against capitalism, and also against Zionism. So all of this gets fused together already in the '60s and '70s and '80s.

Since the end of the Cold War, we have sort of forgotten to retell our part of the story. So I think young people today are used to this idea that the West is at fault for everything without realizing something that's very clear to me, someone who came from behind the Iron Curtain to the West, what a major victory for freedom America won at the end of the Cold War.

We have forgotten to make this case, and it's one of the elements that we need to do. We need to remind ourselves what is it that we're so proud of, what is it that this country stands for that's so important and powerful, and really that, that America stands for good in the world

[00:33:41] **Ad:** Hadassah, as you probably know, is a women-led organization.

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Learn more about the Associates at the Associates page at www.hadassah.org. And we encourage you to become an Associate or make someone you love an Associate by signing up at hadassah.org/join.

[00:34:33] **Lisa Hostein:** So neither of you are on campus now, but I assume you're still keeping an eye on what's going on. So do you have thoughts about what students can expect this year as the semester moves into high gear?

[00:34:44] **Shai Davidai:** Uh, I have a lot of thoughts . But I would, I would say one thing. We have to separate everything into the visible fight and the invisible fight.

The visible fight is the fight that we saw really erupt on campuses post-October 7. And that's the, the protests, the teachings, the die-ins, the encampments, the violent building takeovers, and all those other things. And those things have to be pushed back, pointed at, and mostly from the administration side, right?

So we have to hold the administrators accountable for enforcing the laws, making sure that not just Jews, but everyone on campus feels safe, can go and study whatever they want, and express their full selves. But that's the visible fight, and the visible fights happens in waves, right? It happened in a wave after October 7.

We've seen it in the 2021, and we've seen it in the 2014 war. And unfortunately, unless something happens in the future, we will see it again when things heat up in the Middle East again. The invisible fight is the one that I am actually more worried about, and what I want everyone to prepare their kids and their grandkids for.

And that invisible fight is a fight over ideas and a fight over the truth, where the students need to know that they will be at least exposed, if not attempted to be indoctrinated, by these anti-Jewish and anti-Israeli and anti-American ideas. The problem that we send a lot of our kids to this fight unarmed and unprepared.

We basically put them on campus in college. We drive off when they're 18, and we say, "Good luck. You've learned math. You've learned your English. You've scored great SATs. You've got a incredible essay, and you're in, and you deserve it." But now we've basically left them as sheep surrounded by wolves without giving them the education about who they are, where they came from, what is the Jewish people, what has the Jewish people overcome, what were the reasons for the state of Israel, what has Israel done, the good and the bad, right?

We have to remember the bad as well and teach them about that. And what has the West... Like Izabella said, what has the West done? How has it made mistakes, and what has it learned from it? Unless we give them that information, that knowledge, and the knowledge on how to stand up for themselves, we're really sending them off to fight an invisible fight with no tools.

So what I push people is to not ask, "Where will my kids be safest?" But rather, "How will I prepare my kids to be safest wherever they go?"

[00:37:31] **Lisa Hostein:** Hmm. I wanna get to some of the *tachlis* of how we accomplish that because what I hear is More education, which is what people have been saying for a really long time, and somewhat successfully and mostly not so successfully.

And then maybe we're at this, like, critical moment that maybe people will take it a little bit more seriously, but it is definitely a question. To the point about where do I send my kids, we have a question from the audience. "What do you think of the debate about giving up on universities that seem unfriendly to Jewish students, for instance, Columbia, in favor of schools that seem actively willing to support and defend Jewish students?"

Do you think it's important that Jewish students remain at universities like Columbia so they can defend their rights, or should they make a break from them?"

[00:38:15] **Shai Davidai:** Well, I think that if we remove all Jewish students from the places that are inhospitable to Jews, they will get worse. If they think

about how bad they are right now, now imagine how bad they were if Jews weren't on the ground fighting back and just modeling what being a good, kind, compassionate Jew is.

First of all, your kids and your grandkids deserve to go wherever they want and wherever they're able to. They are working really hard throughout high school. They deserve to go wherever they can. But they should go also where they can feel that they can have the most impact. If they go to a school like Columbia and Harvard, they should be prepared not to duck down and hide their heads when something happens, but actually to stand up and articulate why it's wrong.

But if they go to a school that's hospitable for Jews, they should go and organize to keep it that way. Hadassah wasn't just created to fight against, it's to fight for. And a lot of times we Jews are, are very comfortable when things are good, so we don't fight for, and only when things are bad, we wake up and we fight against.

And I think we all need to have some sort of basic level of representing ourselves, our people, and our state, both against the bad, but also to create more good.

[00:39:38] **Izabella Tabarovsky:** I'll add to that, because I don't think that everybody's necessarily made to be an activist. And so I will say something that may seem a little bit contradictory, but I think not every Jewish student wants to be marching or standing up for their identity.

Not everybody's capable, and I don't even think that everybody needs to. You know, as I, I often say that everybody doesn't need to be Natan Sharansky. Or to take a contemporary example, not everybody can be a Shabbos Kestenbaum who is one of the people I profile in my book. If you look at the Refusenik movement inside the Soviet Union, I would say there were a few people who were like Sharansky, who were public symbols and really sacrificed a lot, really found themselves in prison, right, in the name of their cause.

Then there was maybe a kind of a nucleus of couple hundred people who supported them and were known to the authorities. And then there was an unknown number of people who maybe all they did was quietly deliver dissident literature from point A to point B in their backpack. And maybe all they did was in their kitchen tell their children who came from school and said, "You know what?

What they told you about Israel being an aggressor or committing genocide, that's just not true." I think there are different ways to make a difference, and there are different ways to approach it. I think that it's really important that internally students, especially the ones who go to the Ivy Leagues, and I completely agree with Shai, if they wanna go there, they should go there.

But I think it's actually even more important what's going on on the inside, whether on the inside they recognize that who they are, what their values are, and don't let this attack change that.

[00:41:13] **Shai Davidai:** You know, I don't like revisionist history, but I don't know if Natan Sharansky could have become Natan Sharansky if not for also Avital Sharansky.

And I personally could not have done any of what I have done without my wife, Yardenne Greenspan. I meet a lot of parents and grandparents and they ask me, "What can my kid do in college?" I tell them what we just said, and different ways of being an activist and write in the student newspaper and all of that.

But I also tell them that you also have to model for them what it means to be an activist, and to have their back if something happens. Because they might be in over their head, or feel that they're in over their head, and that is where the adults need to come in and help them. Not take over for them, but say, "I am fighting this with you."

You need to make sure that you're fighting in the right values and everything, but I am here for you." And I think that is an important thing for every Jewish, and ally, but every Jewish kid on campus to understand and hear.

[00:42:14] **Lisa Hostein:** Speaking of advice, do you have any advice to students who may be in classes where professors are creating uncomfortable environments, how to speak to these professors?

Shai, did you ever see any examples of that? I assume there were some colleagues at Columbia who were, who were with you, even if they weren't necessarily as public.

[00:42:34] **Shai Davidai:** My first advice is record everything, keep a paper trail. Because as I've seen in the past three years, unless it's not documented, it's very easy to say it didn't happen.

Now some states have a one-side consent, so in New York State I don't need to ask or tell anyone I'm recording. Others have a different, so you wanna make sure that you're within the law of wherever you are. Now in addition to that, I would say always come with grace and the idea that there's a misunderstanding.

Give your professor a chance. Maybe your professor is as indoctrinated as these students marching on the street, and maybe they don't understand that what they said is hurtful, hateful, ignorant or whatever. Also, as you give your professor a second chance and you explain yourself to them, if they then reject your viewpoint altogether, I would say that's when you escalate.

So you slowly go through the administrative processes. I think that is extremely important. But at the same time, nothing stops you from writing an op-ed for the student newspaper. Nothing stops you from organizing an event on campus refuting that professor's lies and ignorance. Nothing is stopping you from organizing your own book club or journal club on campus, Jews and non-Jews, and showing people that there's another side to the story.

The only thing that you shouldn't do is duck your head and say, "You know, after this class I won't see this professor ever again." Because that's exactly how this hatred and this ideology keeps becoming so persistent wherever we go. I

[00:44:14] **Izabella Tabarovsky:** think it's really important that students find people who will listen to them.

It's like, yes, there is that policy of among the radicals there is a policy of non-engagement and non-normalization, and we focus so much on them, on the real radical anti-Zionist, anti-Israel activists. But you know, I think it's just as important for us to be recognizing that there are actually a lot of people who are not so convinced, who are actually willing to engage with us and are willing to be persuaded.

And I think it's really important that we find people like that and talk to them. Because not everybody can persuade somebody who is already convinced so much that they won't change their opinion. But speaking to people who are genuinely in good faith want to understand, it's very important to find people like that.

And I actually have a chapter in my book where I discuss this. Basically find people of your own tribe. Make yourself known so that these people find you. You find them or make yourself known so that they find you, whether it's

through a book club or some other activity, and then you will find that you're not alone.

[00:45:20] **Lisa Hostein:** And I think it certainly has been documented that there's a huge middle ground, particularly of Jewish students. They don't really know or understand or even care all that much, and it's better to be able to reach out to them that they may be susceptible to education and understanding. So another question is the JVP crowd, the Jewish Voice for Peace crowd is very challenging.

How can we handle this issue?

[00:45:44] **Shai Davidai:** When I was writing my book, I had a very big problem of how do I talk about anti-Zionist Jews? And at first, I didn't wanna talk about them at all because we know that they are a tiny percentage of the Jewish world population. We know that they get so much attention for all the noise that they do without much substance.

And I thought that maybe I can just put them aside. But then I realized that because I'm writing about this very alluring ideology, I have to discuss the fact that it's so alluring that it also is taken up by some Jews So I go in the book into detail about the psychology of what could lead Jews to become anti-Zionist Jews, basically go against their own people as a people.

And I talk about the history of how anti-Zionist Jews have never succeeded, from the Hellenistic Jews, Hellenistic Jews in the first century, the Yevsekctiya obviously, the anti-Zionist Jews in Iraq, and in Tunisia, in Egypt, in the Bund of course, and how it never succeeds. The truth is that our way of dealing with them is not giving them attention.

When we are on campus, we shouldn't be focusing on those very, very few anti-Zionist Jews making a lot of noise, but we should be focusing on the very, very many quiet people who are listening to their noise. And in order to make sure that they hear a real representative side of the Jewish story, history, so past, present, and also what we see for the future, which is very different from anti-Zionist Jews.

I think that's where we diverge the most.

[00:47:31] **Izabella Tabarovsky:** Mm. Well, and I want to add, because th- this is something that in fact happened on the Columbia campus, which it, it's in the very first chapter of my book. When I describe how Columbia University

students, I interviewed Lisha Baker from Columbia. He describes how they were protesting and how they gradually developed their tactics and, and what they thought worked, what didn't work.

And then eventually they write a letter called In Our Name, which goes viral. It was signed by hundreds of students at Columbia who all say, "Look, you're all focusing on the few token Jews, anti-Zionist Jews who are telling you something that actually most Jewish people don't share. So let us tell you what we think and how we think about it."

And again, the letter went viral. It was covered by The New York Times. So there was passion, there was real feeling and conviction in it. When Jewish students think about how can they break through the noise, you know, this is one of the ways to do it, to be authentic and to really say what's important to you.

And it's not easy to break through noise, but you can. There are examples.

[00:48:35] **Lisa Hostein:** So I want to end with two questions for each of you. One is, again, you really address solutions. You have ideas. Shai, you have a movement that you're really trying to build here, Hineni. Talk about what it is that the message is beyond what you've already articulated, which some of it I think you both have already, in terms of what needs to happen for the future.

[00:48:58] **Shai Davidai:** I would really, really like that at the end of my book, after reading everything and people have all the knowledge of what is happening, how we got to this point, I would like people to understand that no one is coming to save us. And I think that is a very, very scary understanding. But then when you internalize it, actually it's very liberating because this is a problem that can't be solved by one large Jewish organization or by one politician or by one lawsuit.

It really does require all of us to take stock of what's happening around us and activating ourselves. I start the book by, my, let's say, viral moment of activism, that video that went viral and, and started everything. But I end the book with my basic understanding of what it is to be an activist for me.

And I've really boiled it down to being an activist is asking three questions, which is, first is saying there is a problem. I recognize that there is a problem. Do I understand the problem? So that's where I write the book, understand the problem. Second is the understanding that something needs to be done, right?

So can something be done about this problem? And that's where most people stop. They say there's a problem and something needs to be done. What I'm hoping that people will come out with this book is the third point, which is there's a problem, something needs to be done. Why not me? Because the moment you ask yourself, "Wait, why can't I be doing these things?"

And you demystify what being an activist is, and it's not devoting your entire college career to it, it's not devoting your, quitting your job like I did. It's the small everyday acts of activism. It's attending webinars like this and then telling someone else about it rather than just, like, keeping the knowledge to yourself.

To me, that's activism. That's going above and beyond seeing a problem and not waiting for someone else to solve it. So that's my hope

[00:51:08] **Lisa Hostein:** And Izabella, that's Be a Refusenik. That's the title of your book. What more do you have to add to that in your view?

[00:51:15] **Izabella Tabarovsky:** Look, one of the reasons I wrote this book is I realized after October 7th, that's when I really started writing it, that we actually have a shortage in our collective memory of Jewish heroes, of heroic stories.

Now, Israelis have, the Israelis don't have this problem. Israelis have heroes every day. They have heroes. I think in America, I will often speak to audiences and I would ask them, "Well, who are the Jewish heroes that you can name?" And they will often say the Maccabees, and then they will say the heroes of the Warsaw Ghetto Uprising, and that's really where it ends.

And I wrote my book to give people examples of Jewish heroism, and defiance, and reclaiming, and kind of the, the courage of being a dissident in the kind of environment that we live in. And I think it's really important. I want people to have these models. I think I want them to realize, and this also comes from the Soviet Jewish experience, as much as this rhetoric, the anti-Zionist rhetoric that we're hearing today, as much as it's directed at Israel ostensibly, right, and at Zionists, whatever that word even means anymore, it's been so redefined, but really the target is all of us as Jews, and the target is really our Jewish identity.

And so what I want young Jews to understand is they will tell you, "Slice off this piece of your identity and that piece of your identity. Give up your Zionism, give up your attachment to Israel, and then we will love you, and then we will embrace you, and then you can be one of us." That is a trap. You will only end up living in a world of doublethink.

That's Sharansky's and Orwell's phrase. Don't fall for it. I think the answer really is to be reclaiming every bit of your Jewish identity and more

[00:53:02] **Lisa Hostein:** So maybe we can end on a note of a little hope. Looking ahead maybe 10 years from now with a little bit of hope, what would success look like, and do we think it's possible?

Shai?

[00:53:16] **Shai Davidai:** Success for me would be that every Jewish person anywhere can be their full selves wherever they want and feel safe being that. So building on Izabella's point, bringing your entire identity and being a Zionist and is part of my identity, just like being a father is part of my identity. And just as I would never want to hide the fact that I have children, I would never want to hide the fact that I am a Zionist.

If there is a room, a campus, a downtown, a city, a state where I don't feel comfortable saying that, being myself, to me, that is something that is unacceptable. So 10 years from now, I'm hoping that we're able, only through this reclaiming and normalizing it, be who we are. And by the way, not just Jews.

Everyone should feel comfortable being who they are as long as it doesn't come at someone else's expense.

[00:54:14] **Izabella Tabarovsky:** I will say, I'm gonna make it very specific. If in 10 years every young American Jew knows at least some Hebrew, I would say we're moving in the right direction.

[00:54:27] **Shai Davidai:** I love that.

[00:54:29] **Lisa Hostein:** That's a great note to end on, with a little hope perhaps.

Realistic or not, we'll, we'll say we'll hope. Very important and inspiring conversation despite its sobering aspects in terms of the examples that you bring and the heroes that are out there. So such a pleasure to talk with you both today, and here's another call to buy their books.

[00:54:51] **Izabella Tabarovsky:** Thank you so much.

It's been really, it's been a pleasure.

[00:54:53] **Shai Davidai:** Thank you so, so much.

[00:54:55] **Lisa Hostein:** I wanna thank Arielle Kaplan, the magazine's digital editor, who both produced and promoted this program and also produces the podcast, and Leah Finkelshteyn, our senior and book editor, who helped plan and implement the program. And a shout-out as always to our partners in Hadassah's Membership, Outreach & Engagement, and Marketing and Communications divisions who always play important roles in these events

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