The Bard ISM Student Organization Controversy

written by Leon Botstein | June 29, 2011

Over the past several weeks, Bard College and I as its president have been the object of unsubstantiated, exaggerated, and often vitriolic accusations regarding a student group on campus that has chosen to affiliate itself with an organization called the International Solidarity Movement. Some of those who have posted on blogs and written emails claim that ISM is a "terrorist" organization committed to the destruction of the State of Israel and its people. The information on the Bard ISM student website is being misrepresented to suggest that the College and its students are involved in illicit activities, encouraging and training terrorism.

When the first allegations came to our attention, I asked that College representatives meet with the students involved and find out the facts. The facts are, first, that ISM, like all student organizations at Bard, is neither sponsored nor endorsed by the college. No student organization represents or has ever represented the College. Student organizations are founded and supported by students and speak for them alone. Second, ISM's activities, like those of all other student groups, are guided by the general rules of the College. There are dozens of student groups at Bard, ranging from the Bard Christian Fellowship, Chess Club, and Black Student Organization, to the Jewish Students Organization, Musical Theater Company, and Darfur Action Campaign. The policies of the College include a steadfast commitment to the fundamental civil rights of freedom of speech and freedom of assembly. With respect to violence, the College has a clear no-tolerance policy. Although there may be a constitutional right to bear arms under certain circumstances, that right cannot be exercised on the Bard campus. We aspire to a standard of civility, including freedom from fear of violence, appropriate to an institution of higher learning.

Our investigation has shown that the students affiliated with ISM have done nothing that remotely resembles the accusations leveled against them and the College. They have exercised their proper right to free speech and assembly. They have invited speakers and held meetings. I have asked members of the College administration to maintain close contact with the group to insure that their actions remain within College regulations and U.S. law. Contrary to what one might assume from recent hostile postings, the ISM operates legally within Israel and the United States and does not appear on any State Department terror watch list.

From what I have read, I personally do not share the views of ISM or the members of the small Bard student group, but that difference of opinion is precisely what needs protection. The students have every right to organize and to affiliate so long as no laws are violated. Accusations regarding improper use of facilities or improper conduct require evidence and due process. Slander and hyperbole are insufficient.

Particularly in the wake of the shooting of U.S. Representative Gabrielle Giffords, I want to take this opportunity to urge those who are outraged by ISM to temper their rhetoric and look at the facts. At stake here at Bard is not terrorism or violence, but a deep disagreement regarding politics in the Middle East and the Arab-Israeli conflict. Colleges and universities must be safe havens for freedom of expression and dissent on the most sensitive and contentious issues. Crucial to a democracy and the education of its citizens is the ability, with civility, to listen, learn, understand, debate, and rebut ideas and claims, particularly those we find wrong or dangerous. Ideas we fear cannot be fought through censorship. If we believe the views of others to be seriously in error, we need to use argument, reason, and evidence to persuade. Creating a climate of fear by obscuring the truth, engaging in character assassination, exaggerating the facts, and suggesting the existence of activities that do not in fact exist is not constructive. Insulting those with whom one disagrees, vilifying them, and impugning their integrity are not proper means in a college environment — or in

the public arena of democracy — to register dissent and advocate one's opinions.

We would like to think that the Internet has become a vehicle of diversity and free expression that will enhance public debate. But it appears that the opposite is also true. The Internet is capable of fueling a new kind of hysteria that spreads like wildfire, encouraging guilt by association and the forging of premature conclusions without benefit of evidence, poisoning personal relationships and the atmosphere of public debate.

For all those who are writing about ISM in an effort to create a campaign to badger the College into preventing the students from maintaining their group, the following statement constitutes my answer as the President of Bard. The College will maintain its firm commitment to the right of students and all members of the community to exercise free speech and the right of assembly and association. The rules of the College will be maintained. All activities at the College center on the free exchange of ideas, public service, and the education of individuals. Furthermore, the College maintains no political positions. Each individual on the campus is entitled to his or her own beliefs. The Bard community, I am pleased to report, has representatives of every imaginable political and philosophical persuasion, and has in its chaplaincy representatives of all major religions, just as it supports and honors atheists and agnostics. The College is therefore neither liberal nor conservative. It is committed to a high standard of excellence in the conduct of inquiry, scholarship, research, teaching, and debate.

On a personal note, for those who have cast aspersions on me as an individual and as a member of the Jewish community, I am pleased to put the following in the public record. I was born to Russian-Polish Jewish parents, most of whose family members did not survive the Holocaust. My father was the only survivor in his family. I came to the United States from Europe as a small child. Two of my uncles died in the Warsaw Ghetto. My aunt was a righteous gentile honored by Yad Vashem. I am a long-standing member of the Conservative Synagogue in Kingston, NY. I am a contributor to the UJA Federation. I have served since 2003 as Music Director of the Jerusalem Symphony Orchestra, the Orchestra of the Israel Broadcasting Authority, pro bono. As a proud member of the Jewish community, I cherish the heritage to which I was born. That heritage is defined in part by the thinking of Maimonides, Spinoza, Moses Mendelssohn, Martin Buber, Hannah Arendt, and Abraham Joshua Heschel. The Jewish spiritual and intellectual tradition with which I associate myself is one of dissent, debate, and commitment to reason and argument. As a Jew who is a citizen of the United States, I am particularly indebted to this country's protection of fundamental civil rights, including free speech, freedom of religion, freedom of assembly, and the equal protection of all, particularly those in the minority.

It is ironic that the dissent that our constitution protects and that exists on our campus about the politics in the Middle East (as it does on many other campuses throughout the nation) is no wider than the dissent that flourishes today in the State of Israel among its citizens, which can be followed by any willing observer in the pages of the Israeli press. Therefore I urge those who disagree with ISM and wish to protect and strengthen the State of Israel to take a step back from slander, distortion, and vilification, and instead make the best arguments they can as to why the views they fear are wrong.

There is no doubt that the maintenance of democracy and its freedoms contains the inherent danger that freedom will be abused by those whose purpose is to undo it. That risk is unavoidable in a democracy and one that we must take. This country is already reeling from the inevitable fear and self-censorship that will follow in the wake of the shooting of Representative Giffords. A climate is brewing in which people will be increasingly reluctant to assemble and express their views out of fear for their safety. Our universities and colleges need to resist this trend. We must, with courage, take the risk of defending freedom and democracy by the exercise of freedom itself.

Footnotes