

Students Wage On-Campus Battle for Israel

When Jase, a young catholic student from Mississippi returned home from a summer-long congressional internship in Washington D.C., he emailed his student body in an effort to start a pro-Israel student organization.

Moments after pressing “send,” the replies started coming in. His peers accused Israel of being an “apartheid state” and berated Jase for supporting an “oppressive” country.

Like many students who call our office for help, Jase knew the accusations were false, but felt inadequately prepared to respond. On campuses across the country, Israel’s detractors blame Palestinian suffering and violence on Israel’s “occupation” and use sensationalist, emotional stories to drive their message home. These shrill attacks often drown out pro-Israel students’ efforts to be heard.

While many attribute Israel’s challenges on campus to apathy, it is more likely that today’s university students face ideological overload, bombarded by passionate students focused on a myriad of issues and movements. In this environment, a personal, emotional message wins. An argument that seems complicated or distant is lost in the noise.

To be successful, Jase, and the thousands of pro-Israel students like him, must grab their audiences by prefacing their messages with a powerful phrase: “I’ve been there, I’ve seen it, I’ve met them.”

That is why, in addition to the day-to-day efforts to recruit and train pro-Israel campus activists, every year Christians United for Israel (CUFI) sends 40 student leaders on a two-week campus advocacy mission to Israel. Participants experience first hand the land of the Bible and the epicenter

of current events.

CUFI students get up close and personal with Israeli soldiers, meet with journalists, political pundits and defense officials, and visit the hotspots and flashpoints with which they must be familiar if they are to be effective Israel advocates.

“I was hit with the reality of it all—that Israel is not just a political theory or intractable conflict.” explained Charity, a student from a leading Christian school in Tennessee after returning from Israel. “I saw that Israelis are real people, who are fighting for their right to survive and live peaceably. They are people who live in scary, uncertain times and are forced to make scary and impossible decisions.”

For some students, it’s the small size of the country that has the strongest impact. A trip participant from Missouri explained that when raised in the middle of the U.S., our enemies seem very distant, but that being so near to hostility on all sides blew her “western mind” and gave her a new sense of the daily burden under which Israeli citizens live.

“I can’t imagine being at a park with my children and wondering how quickly we’ll be able to find shelter, or allowing them to only climb so high on the jungle-gym for fear of not making it to the bomb shelter in the 15 seconds we’d have to take cover,” Charity said after visiting Sderot, an Israeli town outside the Gaza Strip.

Testimonies like these are what turn the campus conversation about Israel around; judging from recent trends, they couldn’t come at a better time.

While support for Israel remains strong nationwide, the picture on campus isn’t so bright. Ideological overload coupled with a growing and vocal anti-Israel campus chorus—often supported by faculty—has resulted in a majority

of students, Christian and secular, either tuning out the issue or graduating with generally negative perceptions about Israel. A recent poll found that while nearly 70 percent of Americans express support for Israel, only 32 percent of college students agree.

Most Christian students walk onto campus predisposed to supporting Israel, but this attitude often withers in the face of an onslaught of anti-Israel misinformation. Few things can strengthen students' resolve and equip them with the knowledge and ability to push back like experiencing Israel first-hand.

Turning the tide on campus necessitates that the Christian community develop more young leaders like Jase and Charity. And if they are brave enough to come forward, we owe it to them to provide the resources and training they need to be successful.

For Jase, the fight that began before his trip to Israel only intensified upon his return. His is a lone voice for truth on a campus where classmates openly support Hamas, professors attack Israel on a daily basis, and Christian Zionism is denigrated. But Jase is undeterred.

The battle for Israel on campus can be won, but now is the time to act.

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