

2024 High School Essay Contest Third Place Winner

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From Rockets to Rhetoric: The Echoes of October 7th

I woke up to a distant siren, still half-dreaming. At first, I brushed it off—probably just an ambulance—but it didn't stop. My cousins and I, groggy-eyed, tried to ignore it. Then, I heard banging on the door. "Girls! Wake up! Get to the shelter NOW!" My heart jumped. I scrambled out of bed, adrenaline flooding my veins. As I bolted up the stairs, my mind raced: "This can't be happening. Not here." The sirens wailed louder, and fear spread through the house like wildfire. Faces around me were pale, some crying, others in shock. We huddled together, waiting for the siren to stop. Seconds felt like hours. After many more sirens, I understood this wasn't a drill. This was real. Rockets were flying over Jerusalem. War was at our doorstep, and every minute felt like a countdown to the next siren. I was terrified, yet helpless, trapped in a nightmare with no end in sight.

That was October 7th, 2023. When I returned home on October 13th, I discovered that the hate that fueled October 7th followed me across the globe. Yet the weapon in the United States was rhetoric rather than rockets. The weapon of hate-filled speech sowed fear and insecurity in my community that remains almost one year later.

The unfettered speech that followed October 7 introduced me to terms like "From the river to the sea," "Intifada," "Apartheid state," "Zionism is racism," and more. This hateful speech not only filled protests at the White House, but also permeated throughout college campuses nationwide.

"Unfettered speech" became a tool of intimidation and suppression of intellectual exploration. It facilitated hate and fear instead of "civility and mutual respect." Just look at the recent report of the Columbia University Task Force on Antisemitism to see how antisemites exploited "unfettered speech" to shut down free expression in the academy.

Here is what unfettered freedom did to learning at Columbia University:

A Jewish student walking out of campus encountered a group banging on the gates, chanting, "We're all Hamas, pig!" and "Long live Hamas!" The vitriol and aggression were palpable, chasing the student with each heavy blow on the gate.

In the campus courtyard, a stolen Israeli flag was torn from another student's hands and set on fire while crowds chanted hatred. Rocks were thrown, and slurs like "genocidal maniac" and "Go back to Poland" filled the air, transforming a place of learning into a battleground.

As Jewish students walked toward their dorms, the route home became a gauntlet of slurs. "Yahoodim, yahoodi, f*ck you!" a voice screamed, while others hurled accusations like stones. "Stop killing children!" shouted another, the words laced with venom. The students kept their heads down, trying to block out the hatred. "Go back to Poland!" someone spat, their words as

cutting as any weapon. The path, once familiar, had turned hostile, with every step haunted by the ugly weight of hatred.

As Jewish students hurried off campus, a voice tore through the darkness, filled with malice. "I'M GOING TO DO JUST LIKE THEY DID TO ALL THE SOLDIERS ON OCTOBER 7TH!" someone screamed, the terrifying promise lingering in the air. "Nazi b*tches!" came another shout. The shove that followed was just as violent as the words, leaving the students shaken, the atmosphere thick with danger.

These aggressive acts, cloaked in the protection of free speech, did not encourage intellectual discovery—they silenced it. Jewish students walking home from campus faced a plethora of slurs and threats. In this atmosphere of intimidation, the so-called freedom to express oneself resulted in the suppression of others' ability to speak or even feel safe on their own campus.

The Woodward Report argues that intellectual growth requires the right to "think the unthinkable, discuss the unmentionable, and challenge the unchallengeable." While I agree with this sentiment in theory, these experiences reveal that there must be limits to the kinds of speech we allow, especially when that speech leads to intimidation, violence, and the silencing of others. The ethical considerations of preserving civility and mutual respect must sometimes outweigh the absolute freedom to say anything, particularly when the speech in question breeds hatred and fear.