

Middle eastern conflict threatens freedom of speech in America, says a long-time observer

When he was a Jewish kid growing up in Albuquerque during the 1950s and 60's, Joel Weisberg got the impression that "Judaism" and "Israel" were pretty much the same thing.

But now, the retired professor is among those American Jews who revere Judaism, but who criticize the government of Israel.

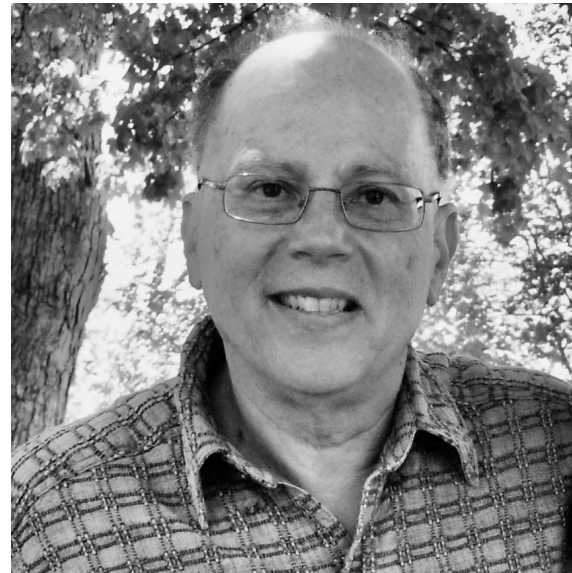
"Judaism contains a tradition of fighting for justice," Weisberg told an audience of 40 people in the Northfield public library on Oct. 26. This conviction has led him to support organizations such as Jewish Voice for Peace, and to subscribe to the "Not In Our Name" point-of-view that opposes Israeli oppression of Palestinians.

However, Weisberg DOES condemn anti-semitism.

"Jew-hatred is a real thing," said Weisberg. "But criticism of Israel is not anti-semitic."

Although support for Israel's government has been strong within both Democratic and Republican parties, Weisberg says that the "weaponization of anti-semitism" has become stronger under the current Trump administration.

Example of this happened last summer at Columbia University.



Joel Weisberg

The Trump administration, apparently believing that antisemitism was rampant on that campus in New York City, withheld \$400 million in federal funding to the school. Federal authorities — Immigration and Customs Enforcement (ICE) — also detained a student activist, Mahmoud Khalil, at Columbia. Other Columbia student activists were threatened with deportation.

Weisberg, who taught physics and astronomy at Carleton College, explained how a recently proclaimed definition of “anti-semitism” has altered the nation’s focus both domestically and internationally.

In 2016, the International Holocaust Remembrance Alliance (IHRA) released its own definition of anti-semitism. This IHRA definition has been used by the American government to squelch what had been free expression under the First Amendment, Weisberg said.

It has been used recently to control the speech of university faculties. IHRA has been used by government agencies that want to weaponize antisemitism. IHRA has been codified into law in many states, according to Weisberg.

Some Jewish organizations, such as “Jewish Voice for Peace,” reject the IHRA definition, according to Weisberg.

More recently, an even more controversial effort has come onto the scene by way of “Project Esther,” he explained.

The conservative think-tank known as The Heritage Foundation devised “Project Esther” in 2024. Its goal is the defeat of the pro-Palestinian movement in America.

The Trump administration’s blueprint document known as “Project 2025” looks favorably on efforts such as “Project Esther.” In other words, a

restructured executive branch would view the defeat of pro-Palestinian attitudes as a goal of the U.S. government.

An aspect of the “anti-semite” discussion that bothers Weisberg lies in the fact that both Jews and Palestinians are Semites, he said. Their languages (Hebrew and Arabic) both derive from semitic roots.

“But when someone like Trump uses the term “anti-semitism, he is referring only to hatred of Jews,” he said.

Some other points made by the retired academic:

- It is mostly the Christian Zionists who want the United States to have an official religion, he said.
- The American Israel Political Action Committee (AIPAC) lavishes large amounts of money on political candidates, he said.
- Main purpose of the Anti-Defamation League has been to defend Israel, Weisberg said.
- Removing Netanyahu from power would not solve the Israel/Palestine problem, he said, since the majority of Jewish Israelis continue to support the war effort against the people of Gaza.

Weisberg, who considers Israel to be a western nation rather than a middle-eastern nation, continues to bring what he considers to be true Jewish values to the discussion.

“It was only about 20 years ago that I learned that (Jewish) Israelis and Palestinians rarely even encounter each other, and I was shocked to learn that,” he said.

Weisberg's talk was sponsored by Northfielders for Justice in Palestine/Israel, and other local groups. He was introduced by Scott Anderson.

Article written by Bill McGrath