

■ COMMENTARY

# Bigoted speech threatens unity

Samuel Gechter

My name is Samuel Gechter, and I am a University student and the President of Hillel: The Foundation for Jewish Campus Life. I speak not for the Jewish community but as member of it — a member who cannot stand to be silent when bigotry and hate return to our campus.

Last year was not easy for ethnic groups on campus. Jews included. Incorrect, ignorant or blatant anti-Semitic remarks were frequently made in letters to the editor published in the *Emerald*, in a demonstration after the Hebron massacre and by speakers brought to this campus. Comments of this nature were so common and so visible that sometimes it felt almost dangerous for us to express our culture.

At the beginning of this school year after one of Hillel's welcome-week events, a number of us were sitting outside on the grass by the EMU. The sun was setting and we were playing guitar and singing songs in Hebrew. Someone, a second- or third-year student said "You know, this is the first time that I feel comfortable being Jewish on this campus."

Why am I telling you this? Because creating an environment that welcomes the expression of a people's culture can be a fragile thing, easily disturbed. I am telling you because today a speaker who last year made inflammatory, anti-Semitic comments has returned to campus. The Muslim Student Association has invited Mohammad Al-Asi to speak on Palestinian/Israeli issues.

Let me make it clear that I do not intend to detract from the right of the MSA to bring Mr. Al-Asi to campus or from the right of people to go and hear him undisturbed. I have nothing

against the MSA. After a meeting with its director and with the former and present directors of the Jewish Student Union, I am glad to say that we all have much more in common than not. I have much respect for the director of the MSA, and he is clear on the distinction between American Jews and Israeli Authorities.

I sense that the people who prepared the fliers may not be as clear on those distinctions or on the distinction between genocide and other forms of oppression.

But that is not what I am writing about.

I am writing to express my extreme disapproval of inviting speakers who have made racist or bigoted comments, no matter what the topic of their speech is. Inviting a bigot to speak on our campus is, however unintentionally, supporting bigotry.

As Guido Calabresi, Dean of the Yale Law School, said in a statement he issued when a similar situation occurred on his campus in 1990. "The support such invitations give to blatant bigotry, and the hurt they do to others in our community far outweigh what one can learn from directly experiencing the bigot."

Bringing a bigot to speak on campus, no matter what the topic, gives tacit approval to that bigot and damages the culturally welcoming environment we strive to foster here.

I am not speaking out to denounce anyone of this community; I am not intending to slight the MSA or anyone else who supports bringing Mr. Al-Asi to campus. We are all part of the same community here, and my intention is to strengthen our community, not divide it. I am speaking out against what is, for me, their error: insensitivity to the needs of other groups, and

unintentionally, support of bigotry.

I believe in change. If this man has shifted his beliefs, then let him say so today and everywhere he goes so that we may know. Until that time, if ever, I urge the campus community to speak out in support of the welcoming environment we wish to create here — to speak out against bigotry and those who wish to incite hate.

We have said we are a campus committed to diversity. We have said we do not just tolerate diversity, but honor, celebrate and empower the diverse cultures of this community.

This is not just about the Palestinian/Israeli issue. It is about the type of climate we live in — a climate that affects the degree to which we can or cannot express our heritage, our ethnicity, our culture, ourselves. Let Hillel and the Jewish Student Union know your stand; let the MSA know your stand. Write to the *Emerald* and tell the campus your stand.

To quote Mr. Calabresi: "I pray that all in this fragile but worthy place will try to understand what motivates those who hold, so deeply, views, so different, on this issue, in the hope that in time the wounds that this event is causing on all sides may heal, and even from these wounds we may all have learned something of value about the needs, weaknesses, and fundamental humanity of all our sisters and brothers in this school."

(Anyone wishing to obtain a complete copy of Mr. Calabresi's statement or just wishing to further discuss this issue may send me an e-mail message at [sgechter@gladstone](mailto:sgechter@gladstone).)

*Samuel Gechter is a pre-business major at the University, and he is also the executive president of Hillel: The Foundation for Jewish Campus Life*

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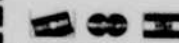


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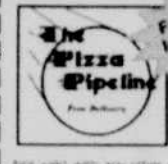
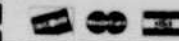


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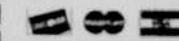


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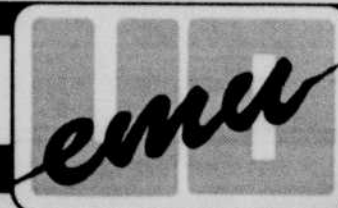
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SATURDAY MAY 20, 1:00 PM

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