

Secretary of Education Betsy DeVos
U.S. Department of Education
400 Maryland Avenue, SW
Washington, D.C. 20202

Representative George Holding
1110 Longworth House Office Building
Washington, DC 20515

Dear Secretary DeVos and Representative Holding,

Madam Secretary, I believe that at the request of Representative Holding, you are investigating allegations of anti-Semitism at the joint UNC-Chapel Hill-Duke University conference called “Conflict over Gaza: People, Politics, and Possibilities,” at the end of March. which I attended. Since as we know all too well, there is real Anti-Semitism in this country—I am Jewish and alert to it in my environment—it is a prejudice worth guarding against. I did not see evidence of it in the singer, speakers, or videos at the conference. I saw it only in the placard held by a demonstrator outside—“Gazans die like dogs because they choose to act like rabid dogs.” Not anti-Jewish, but an ethnic slur against Palestinians from Gaza, who are also Semitic. Inside, there was discussion of Hamas, the party currently governing Gaza. None of it was either promotional or hate speech. Most of it was scholarly, especially that guided by Sara Roy, a distinguished political economist from Harvard—A Jew, by the way. I have been reading her books and articles about Gaza for years and was thrilled to see her in person. I also read writing of Lara Friedman, another speaker and another Jew. She is quite critical of the Israeli government, but a supporter of the state. She does not confuse the two. Other speakers and moderators included other experts in Middle East studies.

As for the singer, accused by many of being anti-Semitic, he wasn’t either. His song, “Mama, I fell in love with a Jew,” is a variation on Shakespeare’s Romeo and Juliet—young people from two opposing cultures fall in love, defying social norms. The Palestinian falls in love with not only a Jew, but a Jewish soldier. When they meet in an elevator, she was in uniform and armed with a military rifle. Their families don’t like it and there is tension between them, but unlike the play, a tragedy that ends with a double funeral, the song ends with a wedding. The young people prevail and unite their families, not just a comedy but a comedy with a hopeful vision of unity between peoples—possibilities, indeed.

The song is an excellent example of what art can do and the conference was an inspiring example of what universities can do. Please applaud UNC and Duke for enabling civil discourse about a troubled part of the world.

Sincerely,

Judith Ferster, Professor Emerita English Department
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