

Do Toronto's Forest Hill Collegiate Institute and the Toronto District School Board have a 'Jewish Problem'? The Optics Are not Good

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I grew up in Forest Hill Village, which was, and is, a posh Toronto neighbourhood. My sisters and I, therefore, spent our formative years in the Forest Hill public school system: first South Prep ("Preparatory"), then West Prep, then South Prep Middle School and ending with five years at Forest Hill Collegiate Institute (FHCI).

I have very fond memories of FHCI, where I felt culturally at home amidst a school population that was at least three-quarters Jewish.

So it came as quite a shock to read a May 23 press release from B'nai Brith Canada, titled "Toronto School Removes Jewish Heritage Month Banner" and discover that the school in question was my alma mater, whose student body today is estimated to be about a third Jewish, still quite a high percentage.

The banner, created in honour of Jewish Heritage Month, celebrated across Canada throughout May, had been hanging without incident for a week in the FHCI main foyer, when it was taken down by Principal Reiko Fuentes without notice or explanation. The Toronto District School Board (TDSB) supported her decision. A day later the school and TDSB reversed their stands and the banner was reinstated. The next day, TDSB's Director of Equity, Jim Spyropoulos attended a Holocaust-themed assembly at FHCI, at which both he and Fuentes apologized to the gathering of students and parents for the error in judgment.

So case closed then, and move along folks, nothing to see here?

'Fraid not. This incident should not have happened. The wrong was only righted after blowback from B'nai Brith and the Centre for Israel and Jewish Affairs (CIJA), who directed very harsh public criticism at the guilty parties, not to mention a quickly organized protest by organizers of Jewish Heritage Month, wearing blue and white to symbolize the Israeli flag, culminating in a demonstration outside the school. The incident, therefore, bears some closer analysis, so similar insults to Jewish students do not happen again.

Picking up at the time of the banner's removal: In response to queries, Principal Reiko Fuentes claimed the banner was "too controversial" to remain up, as it resembles the Israeli flag. A spokesperson from B'nai Brith told me that the principal claimed to have received a complaint from a student who felt the flag-like banner made her uncomfortable. But Ms. Fuentes was not willing to discuss her decision with angry parents.

So the first troubling feature of this story – one we see cropping up again and again – is the reflexive instinct of officials to appease the ruffled feelings of even a single complainant without informing or consulting with stakeholders, deeply insulting in itself.

Equally troubling is the principle involved, which Ms. Fuentes failed to consider. The banner represented Jewish Heritage Month. Yes, it does rather resemble the Israeli flag, and there is a reason for that. Jewish heritage is not only about the Jewish religion. Jews are a nation as well as members of a faith. Israel is not just a country with a lot of Jews in it. It is the homeland of an indigenous people called the Jews, and therefore an existential element of Jewish peoplehood. The story of Israel – both periods of Jewish sovereignty in Israel as well as during the centuries of exile, when Jews prayed for the day when it would once again be their national home – is the story of Jews themselves. This was a theme highlighted by a Holocaust survivor who spoke at the assembly.

Another disquieting feature is the lack of transparency from TDSB who, according to my B'nai Brith source, disingenuously claimed there was a rule against hanging banners in the school's main foyer. But students told B'nai Brith that was nonsense: they said there are all kinds of events and celebrations for which banners are hung in the main foyer, and they had never posed any problem before.

One of this story's ironies is that some FHCI students had only recently returned from the annual March of the Living, a project that takes Jewish teenagers in Grade 11 from all across Canada to Poland to learn about the horrors of the Holocaust in the very sites where so much of it took place. Then they are taken to Israel to experience the miracle of Jewish rebirth in their ancestral homeland. The experience generally has a profound impact on participating students, and one can imagine the "triggering" effect seeing the Israeli flag "disappeared" from its place of honour in their own school might have had on some of them.

Is there a pattern at this school of less than good faith where Jewish students' interests are front and centre? Evidence suggests that could be the case. According to a student source interviewed by B'nai Brith associate Reut Cohen, FHCI has "a history" of alienating Jewish students with regard to their cultural events.

In an article posted at the B'nai Brith website, the student, granted anonymity, whom I'll simply call X, described the process of organizing the annual Holocaust Remembrance Assembly last year. As the date fell during the March of the Living, with many of the desirable speakers on the trip, X said the administration refused to change the assembly date, and even threatened to cancel it. According to X, the administration also forbade discussion of gas chambers and other Holocaust realities. Certain images were prohibited as "too graphic" – for example, images of Jews' heads being shaved. When X protested such evasions of the truth, the administrator allegedly told X to put a "positive twist" on the event and make it a "happy celebration."

These details are dismaying on many levels. How do you tell the Holocaust story without mention of gas chambers? It was at FHCI that I first saw a documentary on the Holocaust. It showed everything. Of course, it was shocking. Of course, it upset me and left an indelible impact. As well it should. It is disgraceful that any school principal should attempt to shield high school students from knowledge of the worst genocide in recorded history. Make it a "happy celebration"? Why? Contemplating evil in all its horrible scope should indeed be an uncomfortable, gut-wrenching experience.

X was also reportedly advised to compare the Holocaust to current events in Syria. This is extremely insulting to Jews. Syria is a terrible situation, and the victims deserve our sympathy. But it is not appropriate to link it to the Holocaust in that way, because, beyond human suffering, the two phenomena are not moral equivalents. There have been many internal struggles in many countries that have produced chaos and death. But the Holocaust was unique. If it were Black History Month, would a school administrator advise organizers of an event teaching the story of slavery in the U.S. to link it to the Residential Schools story? I think not.

Offended, X told B'nai Brith: "If they expect to give no support...then they can't censor me like this. They can't tell me what's right and wrong...because that's not something that would be done to any other ethnic group." X added that although there are many clubs at FHCI celebrating many different cultures, "it just seems like ours is constantly targeted at the school." Is X being over-sensitive? That's not my impression from the vibe that emanates from the sum of the parts of this story.

These are opinions I would have liked to have commented on from Principal Fuentes or the Equity department of the TDSB. I left messages with both institutions, but did not hear back from either.

I hope that neither party to this extremely unpleasant episode considers that their expressions of regret have put an end to discussion of this matter.

A little – perhaps more than a little – self-interrogation regarding unspoken but active systemic bias within these ranks toward Israel, if not Jews themselves, is in order.