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DISCUSSION

Response to “Israeli academia during the genocide: supporting the state through words and silences”

RONIT CALDERON-MARGALIT, A MARK CLARFIELD, HAGIT HOCHNER, MAUREEN MALOWANY, YEHUDA NEUMARK, SHIRA NANAVATI, ORA PALTIEL

Abstract

This is a response to Dr Panchal's opinion piece that accused us, teachers, directors and staff of the programme he participated in, of not discussing or protesting against the situation in Gaza during the academic year of 2023-24. We find this accusation to be utterly wrong and incorrect. Beyond taking care of the safety of our students, the School facilitated discussion in class regarding the situation. Furthermore, some of the authors participated in protests and publicly advocated for the wellbeing and health of the Gazan population starting already in the early days of this war. Finally, we find it unethical that Dr Panchal did not approach us on this issue, either during his stay in Israel or before or after he chose to publish his opinion.

Keywords: Gaza, ethics, discussion, teachers-students relationship

We read with concern Dr Vidit Panchal's opinion piece [1], which reached us only recently via social media. In standard

academic discourse, he or the editor would have sought our comment before publication.

As teachers at the Hebrew University-Hadassah Braun School of Public Health, we take pride in Dr Panchal and our more than 1,100 alumni from over 100 countries who, since 1971, have participated in our International Master of Public Health (IMPH) programme¹ and have gone on to contribute meaningfully to global public health. We therefore feel compelled to respond to this tendentious portrayal of an academic year lived in wartime, and Dr Panchal's mischaracterisation of our institution and its activities — both within and outside the programme.

Dr Panchal's studies coincided with the tragic onset of the war in Gaza following the October 7 Hamas-led massacres. In his account, he writes that “Soon after the events of October 7, Israeli universities actively sought to gather international support for the country during its military operations.” A more accurate depiction would have acknowledged that

immediately after October 7, the programme staff, our School and University worked tirelessly to keep the teaching programme running. Our foremost goal was to ensure that all international students — including a Palestinian student — arrived safely and could complete their studies, even amid ongoing rocket fire from Gaza and Lebanon and a collective state of shock and mourning throughout the country.

Dr Panchal's 2023-24 cohort entered an environment marked by profound loss and fear — a reality experienced first-hand by many of our staff and Israeli students. Rather than expressing empathy for these traumas, Dr Panchal laments his own emotional isolation, claiming that he did not engage in open discussion about Gaza in part because his teachers supposedly stifled debate. In fact, he had ample opportunities — both formal and informal — to discuss these issues. The humanitarian crisis in Gaza was discussed in class, and students participated in an in-depth workshop on conflict resolution in times of war, explicitly designed to encourage safeguarded expression. In this light, it appears that the choice to remain silent was Dr Panchal's, rather than the result of any imposed censorship.

Moreover, Dr Panchal's narrative misrepresents the diversity of opinions among our faculty. He suggests that teachers were too timid to speak publicly about the health crisis in Gaza. In reality, our staff includes individuals who have actively participated in political protests against governmental decisions, some even leading national advocacy efforts — on behalf of hostages and on behalf of Gazans suffering from a badly damaged health system — calling for action by the International Committee of the Red Cross, and for vaccine ceasefires [2].

His reduction of the faculty's concerns to a single issue, such as the risk of polio spreading from Gaza to Israel, ignores the broader, balanced commitment our educators showed toward the lives and well-being of both Israeli and Gazan children [3]. Indeed, an article co-written by several senior Israeli health academics [4] — including his own teachers — urged regional leaders to consider the welfare of children on both sides of the conflict. The Association of Schools of Public Health in the European Region (ASPHER), of which the Braun School is a member, through its Task Force on War and Public Health, issued a statement that unequivocally called attention to the humanitarian catastrophe in Gaza [5]. This document, co-authored by an Israeli public health physician, was shared with our students. Regrettably, these efforts and the nuanced perspective they represent were omitted by Dr Panchal.

We acknowledge that not every Hebrew-language effort to mitigate Gaza's suffering was known to every student. Nonetheless, we cannot excuse Dr Panchal's failure to consult with us nor to fact-check his statements. In an ethical and scientific publication, data are rigorously vetted, not represented by anonymous opinions purporting to speak for an entire academic community.

Labelling us and our curriculum as “useless” and “devoid of

humanitarian values” is misleading and injurious. A year spent studying in Jerusalem, amid such complex and painful realities, should have offered Dr Panchal a more nuanced insight into the intricacies of life and conflict in the Middle East. Rather than disparage an institution with a committed group of public health educators, he might have engaged constructively — leveraging his impressive intellect and firsthand experience to enrich the relevant discourse.

In sum, while Dr Panchal's personal experiences deserve recognition, his public account omits much about the dedication with which Braun School and Hebrew University staff navigated a highly challenging wartime academic year. Our hope is that future reflections will present a more balanced view — one that acknowledges not only the formidable personal hardships faced by our international students, many of whom come from conflict zones, but also the efforts made by faculty to sustain education and foster dialogue under extraordinary circumstances.

Note: International Master of Public Health (IMPH) programme: <https://medicine.ekmd.huji.ac.il/en/publicHealth/IMPH/Pages/default.aspx>

Authors: **Ronit Calderon-Margalit** (corresponding author — Ronit.calderon@mail.huji.ac.il), Director, Braun School of Public Health and Community Medicine, Hadassah Medical Center, Faculty of Medicine, Hebrew University, Jerusalem, ISRAEL; **A Mark Clarfield** (markclar@bgu.ac.il), External teacher, Braun School of Public Health and Community Medicine, Hadassah Medical Center, Faculty of Medicine, Hebrew University, Jerusalem, ISRAEL; Professor Emeritus, Ben-Gurion University of the Negev and adjunct professor, McGill University, Montréal, Québec CANADA; **Hagit Hochner** (hagit.hochner@mail.huji.ac.il), Director, International Master of Public Health (IMPH) program, Braun School of Public Health and Community Medicine, Hadassah Medical Center, Faculty of Medicine, Hebrew University, Jerusalem, ISRAEL; **Maureen Malowany** (maureenm@ekmd.huji.ac.il), IMPH alumni academic coordinator, Braun School of Public Health and Community Medicine, Hadassah Medical Center, Faculty of Medicine, Hebrew University, Jerusalem, ISRAEL; **Yehuda Neumark** (yehuda.neumark@mail.huji.ac.il), Director of the Hebrew University Authority for Research Students in the Experimental Studies, Braun School of Public Health and Community Medicine, Hadassah Medical Center, Faculty of Medicine, Hebrew University, Jerusalem, ISRAEL; **Shira Nanavati** (imph_alumni@savion.huji.ac.il), IMPH Alumni Social Coordinator, Braun School of Public Health and Community Medicine, Hadassah Medical Center, Faculty of Medicine, Hebrew University, Jerusalem, ISRAEL; **Ora Paltiel** (orap@hadassah.org.il, <https://orcid.org/0000-0001-8324-3873>), Former Director of the Braun School, Braun School of Public Health and Community Medicine, Hadassah Medical Center, Faculty of Medicine, Hebrew University, Jerusalem, ISRAEL.

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DISCUSSION

Response to Calderon-Margalit et al: the asymmetry of empathy

VIDIT PANCHAL

Abstract

This response to the critique of my reflection engages with concerns raised by professors at the Braun School of Public Health, HUJI. While acknowledging their disappointment, I reaffirm my central argument that Israeli academia, despite individual gestures, collectively failed to create an institutional culture enabling fearless engagement with Gaza's humanitarian catastrophe. Workshops and academic forums inadequately addressed the crisis, depicting selective empathy and technocratic detachment. Universities bear ethical responsibility during atrocities, their silence, intentional or systemic, risks complicity in injustice.

Keywords: empathy, genocide, ethical discourse, dissent

I read the response [1] to my reflective piece [2] by my professors at the Braun School of Public Health and Community Medicine (HUJI), an institute that indeed has a legacy of creating leaders in public health and maintains, along with strong commitment, a distinct educational environment of which I too have been a beneficiary, amidst difficult times. Acknowledging their disappointment with my reflections, which is evident in their response, I would like to respond within the theme of my reflections, standing by the fact that respect can co-exist with criticism.

The professors emphasise that opportunities existed for open discussion on Gaza, and that I did not mention that some faculty members voiced dissent in Israeli public forums. I would like to state that the central issue raised in my reflections is the collective failure of the entire academic community in Israel that includes those academicians with dissenting opinions, as well as those who openly sided with the hyper-nationalists. Academicians of "all kinds" of opinions could not prevent or reduce the impact of violence on either side; however difficult this was for them. However, in such times one expects them to be fully immersed in the task of meaningfully confronting their ethical responsibility in the face of mass civilian suffering.

Actions such as joint statements by the Association of Schools of Public Health in the European Region (ASPHER) or even

individual action — important though they were — did not translate into an institutional culture where students could openly grapple with the unfolding genocide without fear of isolation. The arguments for vaccine ceasefires published by a few of my professors last year — also quoted in my reflections — were indeed discussed in the light of preventing epidemiological risk "spilling over" into Israel in a national conference. In such a context, I found it impossible to separate HUJI's academic space from the rest of Israel and view these actions as "balancing".

The professors have accused me of ignoring their efforts to "encourage safeguarded expression" [1] by not mentioning the conflict resolution workshop designed for us international students. I should inform the readers that the workshop touched on the violence in Gaza superficially, relegating it to terms like "complicated". Moreover, the workshop remained largely unstructured and soon drifted towards personal behaviours and in-class tensions on non-specific issues; and did not address Gaza or international war-crimes as such. It is not that I expected the workshop to focus on those aspects, but I feel it is necessary to report what happened in it, since the professors mentioned it.

It is also important to state here that workshops and actions like having a Palestinian student in the classroom do not automatically translate to safe spaces. International students, being in a foreign land, perceive safety and vulnerability differently and their belated expression of their thoughts cannot be unfairly labelled as "self-isolation" and "individual's choice to remain silent" as my professors have done. Professors ought not assume the existence of liberty, simply because they say they are striving for it. They must continuously examine the kind of learning space they are building: one where things are deliberately avoided and put on an "oh, it's complicated" list, or one where those with conflicting ideas actually feel safe to express them. Their letter stresses the trauma experienced by Israeli society after October 7. For a year, I have shared their fear and uncertainty about life. But what troubles me is the asymmetry of empathy. Throughout my academic year in Israel, I witnessed