

Editor's Note: The footnotes have been included to explain to our many non-Jewish and/or non-South African users any abbreviations or Jewish terminology they may not understand. Apart from that, this story is a verbatim transcript as submitted by Ms Klazinga and vetted by her attorney, Michael 'Bags' Bagraim. Ant Katz, online editor, [www.sajr.co.za](http://www.sajr.co.za)

# Rhodes University: Not a Home for All

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## A Progressive Zionist's Two-Year Odyssey

This not an easy story to write: it's difficult to pin-point the 'beginning' and the end's a fairly sad one. I suppose the long and the short of it is this: Zionists can't work at Rhodes University<sup>1</sup> and they probably won't much like studying there either.

For those of you who are unfamiliar with Rhodes, allow me to sketch the landscape. The demographic make-up of Rhodes is unlike WITS<sup>2</sup> or UCT<sup>3</sup>. Rhodes has very few Jewish students and even fewer Jewish staff members; factor in the number of those that openly identify as Zionists and you are down to single digits.

Now to introduce myself: while I'm certain we all agree that labels are for boxes not people, for the purposes of this story, permit me to use broad strokes: I'm a Jewish lesbian vegetarian with a bi-racial Xhosa fiancé (nobody panic - she's converting) and hearing impairment. No, I didn't just make that up. As you can imagine, I have come up against my fair share of discrimination but I do not exaggerate when I confess that until I came face-to-face with what can only be described as anti-Zionism I never really understood bigotry.

Time for the bombshell as I emerge from the proverbial leftist closet... I'm a Zionist. Okay, that was a poorly kept secret and not much of a shock to anyone that knows me. I've been a Zionist for as long as I can remember. I didn't ever think that it was a controversial position, in fact, much like being "Proudly South African" it seemed like a no-brainer. I've had discussions with progressive friends who disagreed with me but the vitriol directed at me over the past two years has come as a shock.

I am also an old Rhodian and I used to be a proud one.

After a brief stint in Gauteng working as a professional activist I returned to Rhodes where I worked for more than a decade conceptualising and organising a myriad of transformation initiatives highlighting gender-based violence, xenophobia, racism and other human rights abuses. I became the go-to person for anyone wanting to organise an awareness-raising

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<sup>1</sup> Rhodes University in Grahamstown, Eastern Cape Province, South Africa is one of the country's oldest and most esteemed

<sup>2</sup> University of the Witwatersrand in Johannesburg

<sup>3</sup> University of Cape Town

event and ironically, I also functioned as the university harassment officer, charged with assisting students facing discrimination and harassment and putting in place measures to counter-act the problem.

## Why I walked away from my alma mater

Now that I've set the scene, let me try to describe the events which saw me walk away from my alma mater and my career at the end of November 2013. It all started in early 2012 when a new 'awareness-raising' event reared its head at Rhodes: Israeli Apartheid Week (IAW). It was organised by a group of students and staff members ostensibly under the banner of the Faculty of Humanities, with evening film screenings, 'discussions' and lunchtime seminars hosted in the Politics Department. It was clear that these events were being directed by Boycott Divest Sanctions<sup>4</sup> (BDS).

From the outset two things were evident: first, this event was actively underwritten by the university and second, this was not a debate, this was a diatribe, the organisers would brook no dissent. Within days of the publicity material going out I had two separate incidents of Jewish students arriving at my office in tears after ugly name-calling exchanges with some of the IAW organisers as they attempted to defend Israel.

Both students were very upset by the unbalanced nature of <sup>5</sup>IAW. They asked me to try to help present a more balanced view and proposed parallel events under the banner "Balance the Debate". One of those students, Benjamin Katz contacted SAUJS<sup>6</sup> national and asked for assistance. With their help they printed posters and T-shirts and organised a few events to highlight Jewish history, talk about anti-Semitism and attempt to address some of the misinformation being disseminated by BDS and IAW.

I agreed to help them get the word out about their events and because I realised how much pressure they were under, I agreed attend with them when I could. In an effort to constructively engage Ben and his small contingent of student Zionists committed to attending IAW events in order to allow the IAW organisers an opportunity to state their case and to try to ask the kinds of questions that would open up genuine dialogue. They also suggested to some of the IAW organisers that they host a joint event to encourage debate. These attempts were rebuffed at every turn.

As the week of IAW dawned I felt tremendous sympathy to these courageous Jewish students, a tiny minority at Rhodes who expressed feeling victimised because of their support for Israel but were determined to speak out nonetheless. As one of only a handful of Jewish staff members and the only one who has ever expressed solidarity with Israel

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<sup>4</sup> BDS-SA is part of a worldwide, US-based NGO determined to try and cut global trade and investment ties with Israel

<sup>5</sup> IAW: Israel Apartheid Week

<sup>6</sup> SAUJS: SA Union of Jewish Students

publicly I felt compelled to support them. I believed that it was my duty not only as a staff member tasked with supporting students against harassment but also as a person of conscience and a Jew to stand up for what I believe in and to support others who do the same.

With that in mind and after speaking to the Jewish students, I printed an A4 colour page featuring the Israeli flag and the words "wherever I stand I stand with Israel" and placed it on my office door. I did not anticipate that this would raise an eyebrow since I had done the same thing during the 'Save Zimbabwe Now' campaign three years earlier without any comment. I realised that I couldn't actively arrange events in opposition to what was happening because I did not have the support of my line manager to do so, so I reverted to indirect methods of support such as the poster on my office door. I also decided to wear pro-Israel clothing to work, reasoning that I could go about my daily activities while still supporting the Jewish students who were taking more direct action.

I thought based on previous political positions taken that my actions were not controversial. I could not have been more wrong. I returned the next day to find the page removed and shoved under my door with a note written on the back by Roger Adams, the Deputy Dean of Students asking me to discuss the matter with him immediately.

I arrived at his office wearing an IDF<sup>7</sup> shirt and was instructed to remove it and not wear any 'military or pro-Israel' clothing to work. I was told that using my office to further a political position was inappropriate and I was instructed not to make any public statements in support of Israel.

I asked if that injunction applied to all staff and if it related to activities taking place after hours. I was informed that since I lived and worked on campus, I was never in fact off duty and thus never entitled to voice my opinion on this issue. I asked why other staff members could pin their colours to the mast about Israel but I was silenced and he said they were academic staff, entitled to academic freedom of expression but as admin staff I was not.

I felt threatened and censored and when I asked what made this issue different from any other I was given no clear answer. I was in fact given the very clear message that to dissent on this issue would bring the office into disrepute and would be construed as insubordination. I argued as long as I could bear and then left the office shell-shocked.

Anyone that knows me will confirm that I am a stubborn person, so in order to honour my commitment to Ben and the others I took the next day off work, reasoning that this would ensure that I would not be seen to be acting in an official capacity. I attended a 'discussion' hosted in the Politics department seminar room led by John Rose (BDS activist and visiting lecturer in the Politics Dept.) and Prof Robert van Niekerk. I sat at the back and wore non-partisan clothing. I confess that for fear of being charged with insubordination I did not

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<sup>7</sup> Israeli Defence Force

speak at all during the meeting. Despite my silence, the following morning I received an email from a Rhodes staff member I'd never met questioning my support of Israel.

And so it began.

The atmosphere on Rhodes campus during IAW 2012 was so vitriolic that it left no room to explore common ground. I spent the week being insulted, harassed and variously described as a racist, in favour of ethnic cleansing, a misandrist, an apartheid apologist and my favourite 'the pied piper of misandry on campus', which, while inaccurate and defamatory (and frankly I still fail to see how that relates to Israel), was certainly creative.

## BDS-sanctioned witch-hunt

That initial anti-Israel email began a nine month battle to get Rhodes to take action against what emerged later to be a BDS-sanctioned witch-hunt involving senior academics and extending to the head of BDS National. This larger connection became apparent a few weeks after IAW 2012 when I discovered a series of emails between IAW organisers, BDS National activists and Rhodes staff members encouraging each other to gather "evidence in any medium: written, verbal, video... to collect data and people's personal experiences" against me because I was a danger to their agenda.

I mistakenly believed that this matter would be taken seriously so I had meetings with the Director of HR, the staff Harassment Officer and the Dean of Students, Dr Vivian de Klerk, who was the head of my division. During these meetings I was able to confirm that Rhodes has a strong anti-Harassment policy and no policy on staff political activity, leaving me confident that I had every right to speak out in support of Israel. After months of requests and finally with the help of my Union Representative I was able to secure a conviction against the author of the original anti-Israel email in October 2012. To date no action has been taken to address the BDS witch-hunt.

IAW 2013 was more of the same, with the Dean of Students' Office offering to sponsor IAW events at the invitation of Roger Adams. I was instructed to change the banner (the image at the top of a webpage) of the Rhodes student web portal to an IAW one and a concert organised by the Music department showcasing Israeli pianist Yossi Reshef was picketed.

Realising that it was impossible to attempt a head-to-head confrontation my splendid partner Charlene Donald aided by Christian Zionists put up a series of posters around campus downloaded from a pro-Israel website called 'stand with us'. These posters unleashed allegations of racism and resulted in angry phone calls from the SRC offices to Charlene, official complaints to the Dean of Students' office and an almost gleeful 'investigation' into supposed wrong-doing which ended in a Fairness Forum hearing and a decision that the posters were protected by freedom of speech.

I sought the help of the SAJBD<sup>8</sup> and the Zionist Federation<sup>9</sup> early on and with the support of key people such as Leon Reich and Chuck Volpe I was able to raise enough awareness about the problem at Rhodes that a fact-finding visit was planned to coincide with<sup>10</sup>Yom HaShoah.

Upon hearing about the impending visit from the SAJBD I was warned by Vivian de Klerk that my participation in the meeting was ill-advised.

One can only conclude that these actions, beginning with Roger Adams' official rebuke in March 2012 and ending with the Deputy Vice Chancellor, Dr Mabizela's statement to the Mail and Guardian in relation to the pro-Israel posters, that "the role and purpose of the Fairness Forum will be reviewed in due course and that action over a student [Charlene] who apparently put the posters up [in support of Israel], and the fact that a staff member [me] was also allegedly involved, shall follow due process", were aimed at shutting me up or forcing me out.

For months I was silenced, harassed and threatened with discipline. By June, when none of that was able to wring a resignation out of me, "due process" was followed and I was served with a charge sheet consisting of 18 separate counts, mostly related to Zionism, some referencing my sexual orientation and a number that were simply fabricated. These charges were drafted by the University lawyer after a series of consultations with both Roger Adams and Vivian de Klerk. They cited the authority of the Vice Chancellor for convening a hearing and they were signed by the Director of HR.

I was shocked by the scale of the onslaught and the overt mention of my sexual orientation and Zionism in the charges but I was not unprepared. Thanks to the incredible support I received from Jewish community I did not walk into the hearing unrepresented, as de Klerk and co. had hoped. Enter Michael Bagraim and Adv. Izak Smuts SC. Without going into detail, let's just say that things swung in my favour with remarkable speed after they entered the fray.

So, what has changed in the ensuing months? To be honest, a hell of a lot! The disciplinary hearing was aborted and at the behest of the University I entered into a confidential settlement agreement. I'm happy with the settlement and don't intend to breach it, so that is all I can say about that saga. Yay! A happy ending!

Not so fast.

If you had asked me in 2011 if I would have believed that Zionism would be the issue that defined my career at Rhodes I would have laughed disbelievingly. Even more surprising,

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<sup>8</sup> The South African Jewish Board of Deputies – an organisation tasked with ensuring good relations between SA Jewry and the citizenry and government of the country as a whole

<sup>9</sup> The South African Zionist Federation's brief is to manage the relationship between SA Jewry, the citizenry and government of the country as a whole with Israel

<sup>10</sup> The annual Holocaust Remembrance Day

according to some of my colleagues, this one issue has become the single most contested element of my character. I have been subject to bullying and harassment on a scale I've never experienced before. Throughout I did my best to fight for my rights to freedom of speech, belief, association and religion. I have fought to maintain my health and I have struggled to come to terms with betrayals of loyalty and trust from people I used to admire.

I used to believe that discourse was possible in an academic setting and that once people started talking they'd see that Zionism and the belief in a Palestinian state could co-exist and in fact support each other.

I was wrong. I now know that there can be no dialogue, no understanding, no coexistence when there is fundamental intolerance based on double-standards and anti-Zionism.

I say double-standards and anti-Zionism because these same 'progressive human rights activists' are rabid in their anti-Israel rallying but completely silent about China's occupation of Tibet, accepting Chinese state funding of a language institute without a peep. They have not organised weeks decrying Turkey's security wall, Iran's Islamic state or even marching in support of democracy and an end to human rights abuses in Zimbabwe, our neighbouring country.

They only seem to object to Israel, leading me to conclude that their ethics are universal, the objections limited to the only Jewish state in the world. Full stop.

This realisation was particularly hard for me because I was a true believer. I honestly thought that Rhodes was an institution that created spaces for all kinds of positions to be explored, for people to grow and change and where ideas were valued. It is a difficult thing to admit to being naïve, but I was.

## Colleagues encouraged to spy on one-another

Turns out my alma mater has become a totalitarian institution where colleagues are encouraged to spy on each other, gather evidence and work behind closed doors to get rid of people. It is a university where the Deputy Dean of Students can look me in the eye and tell me that since I'm not an academic I'm not entitled to academic freedom... without flinching or showing any signs that he might be uncomfortable saying it.

I was raised under Apartheid, yet I never really understood what totalitarianism felt like until I was told that I was not allowed to speak, even in private about a political belief. At Rhodes. In 2012.

The REALLY disappointing thing is that despite a settlement which sent me packing and the Vice Chancellor's assurance way back in June that an investigation would be instituted to determine how an unconstitutional charge sheet was drafted on a Rhodes letterhead, as far as I've been able to confirm very little has happened; no-one has been brought to book; no

heads have rolled. Vivian de Klerk remains at the helm in charge of student well-being, though rumour has it she's taking early retirement next June (coincidence?); Roger Adams leaves with an unblemished reputation headed to UCT to carry on his good work and worse still, two courses filled with one-sided anti-Israel propaganda will continue to feature in the Rhodes curriculum.

The sad truth is that on Friday 29 November I handed in my keys and I walked out of my office for the last time. I packed up my home, removed the mezuzah from the door and walked away from a residence I helped found 11 years ago. It felt like giving up. It felt like I let the bigots win... oh no, a really bad ending... that sucks! But wait, there's still more!

This story would be incomplete if I failed to mention that 'Rhodes' isn't monolithic. Yes, there are anti-Israel, anti-Zionist, homophobic fascists in abundance, but there are also some truly amazing people there.

I had the unwavering support of wardening colleagues in Lilian Ngoyi; of senior academics who reminded me never to cave to bullies when I was at my lowest ebb, and of many other staff members who didn't know or didn't care much about Zionism but who offered kind words and encouragement.

I was lucky to have the friendship of the Director of Special Projects in the Vice Chancellor's office who acted consistently with integrity and kindness.

I also had the solidarity of several academics in the Commerce faculty and of Christian Zionists like the Radloff family who as unashamed Zionists swimming against the academically popular tide, offered gentle reassurances and were brave enough to break rank and take a stand for Israel.

I was inspired by the small band of Jewish students who put body and soul on the line to defend Israel, some at great cost. Rhodes really is where leaders learn, and as a community we ignore that at our peril.

Lastly, this story would be sorely lacking if I didn't thank the Jewish community, especially, Leon Reich and Jonathan Silke from the Zionist Federation, Gwynne Robins and David Jacobson from the SAJBD, Michael Bagraim and his splendid colleague Izak who were there when I needed them even though I could never afford them, and finally the indomitable Wendy Jacobson and the infinitely wise and generous Chuck Volpe, without whom I would not have survived these two miserable years.

So, what have I learned?

Freedom always comes at a cost and it takes chutzpah to understand that and pay the price. It also takes good friends and the love of a good woman. I head into 2014 unemployed, homeless and endlessly hopeful, reassured that there are still things worth fighting for and people willing to stand with me, and Israel. Am Yisrael Chai!