

## The Herd of Independent Minds

What does it mean to be “pro-Israel” on campus today? A new novel tells the tale.



*A graduation procession at the University of Toronto. © Sampete | Dreamstime.com.*

### OBSERVATION

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#### About Ruth

Ruth R. Wisse is a research professor at Harvard and a distinguished senior fellow at the Tikvah Fund. Her most recent book is *No Joke: Making Jewish Humor* (2013, paperback 2015).

**A**t a Jewish literary retreat I attended this past summer, at the height of the Gaza war, fault lines opened between those anxiously following news from Israel and others apparently indifferent or professing concern for the “suffering on both sides.” Asked to report on our current writing projects, one of the Israelis in the group admitted to being distracted by worry; he had not been able to write since the crisis began. But others balked at the intrusion of political concerns into a discussion about literature. Were writers obliged to shoulder public responsibilities, or did they serve society best by resisting political engagement?

Arguments over the proper relation of politics to literature will never be resolved through consensus, and those who practice the craft of writing have notably traveled in different directions. Take the plot device of a woman who is cramped by the expectations of bourgeois marriage. Gustave Flaubert used it in *Madame Bovary* (1856), a novel often upheld as the archetype of morally and politically disinterested fiction. Take, by contrast, Nikolai Chernyshevsky’s *Chto Delat?* (“What Is to Be Done?”) (1863), built on a similar premise but providing an archetype of a diametrically opposite sort. The book’s heroine, Vera Pavlovna, escaping family constrictions and an arranged marriage, sets out to construct for herself a personally satisfying and socially useful life. In the answer it gives to the large question asked in its title, this novel changed the course of Russian history by helping to galvanize reformist sentiments that Lenin would later harness for the Bolshevik Revolution.

And now take a new novel by the Canadian writer Nora Gold, who uses a variant of the same plot device to address tensions of the kind that surfaced at our Jewish literary retreat this past summer. The heroine of *Fields of Exile*, Judith Gallanter, has returned from Israel, where she had been working in programs to foster mutual understanding between Jewish and Arab teenagers, in order to tend to her widowed father in his final illness. He extracts from her a promise that she will complete her education in Canada; and that deathbed promise, plus the presence in Toronto of a steady and steady boyfriend, persuade her to register locally for an advanced degree in social work before resuming her determination to settle and make a life for herself in the Zionist homeland. The conflict of loyalties that this decision generates—what is home? And what is exile?—grows more acute when she comes up against anti-Israel hostility and must choose whether and how to engage it.

Registering at suburban Toronto’s (fictional) Dunhill University for a master’s degree in social work, Judith finds returning to school almost as hard as returning to Canada. Her mind wanders from classroom lectures by imperfect teachers to the lessons in Hebrew and sex taught her by the

lover she has left behind in Israel. Yet she perseveres. Something of a leftist herself, a member of Friends of Peace, Judith at first fits in with the school's ethos and expectations: at an orientation session, she receives approving nods when she announces her professional goal as working to "bridge differences." She makes friends among the students, forms a special relationship with a professor who offers her a teaching fellowship, and seems well launched toward her academic goal.

But politics intervene. A coalition of self-defined "progressives" within Dunhill's Social Work Anti-Oppression Committee (SWAC) concentrates its activism in mounting campus-wide demonstrations against the Jewish state, confronting Judith with anti-Semitism in its new and improved anti-Zionist configuration. Though, when it comes to particular aspects of Israeli policy, she herself is riddled with qualms and hesitations of the kind that routinely afflict intelligent Jews, the status of Israel is never in question for her. She never falters in her attachment to the Jewish state or doubts its right to flourish in the Middle East. A practicing, knowledgeable, and morally confident Jew, she knows why Israel cannot be held responsible for the suffering that Palestinians bring on themselves or for the political pathologies of their fellow Arabs—and she steadfastly maintains not only the apartment she has purchased in the country but her intention of returning to live there permanently.

Yet, in a contest that anyone who has spent time on a campus will instantly recognize, Judith's reasoned arguments are no match for the demagogic slogans of SWAC's anti-Israel ideologues. As she grows ever more embattled, she finds herself abandoned and shunned by her fellow students, and is literally sickened—made ill—by the betrayal of the professor she mistook for an ally. In a climactic moment during a mass anti-Israel rally on campus, she becomes the physical casualty of a hatemonger she confronts in an effort to "nail" his lies once and for all, and lands in the hospital.

**There is no denying** the trickiness of the subject tackled by Nora Gold in *Fields of Exile*, or the complexities entailed by the choices it imposes on her heroine. When Judith begins to appreciate the scale of hostility that she faces, she Googles "anti-Semitism and anti-Zionism," hoping to learn something more about its spread in the land of her birth. Impressed by what Jewish community organizations have been doing to expose the scourge, she is nonetheless loath to join or appeal to them. "She has always felt, even in high school, alienated from the mainstream Jewish community. It was too straight for her. Too conservative and conventional, too bourgeois and right-wing." Her idea of independence thus keeps her from enlisting in groups that alone might help her mount an effective resistance and gain her the solidarity of like-minded peers, even as her continued determination to defend Israel unequipped and on her own ensures her further isolation and ostracism. In this she typifies many in the "herd of independent minds" that makes up today's Jewish student body.

Nor is there a way out of her conundrum. Students and faculty who find themselves asking “What Is To Be Done?” might want to read this novel to its troubling conclusion. Unlike Chernyshevky, Gold offers no solution to her heroine’s plight. In the future, Judith will undoubtedly be less surprised by the sheer, anti-Semitic ferocity of anti-Zionism or by the treachery of those who allow it to flourish and sometimes join its ranks. But neither has she found a means of undoing it. Maimed in her struggle, Judith at the end takes deeper pleasure than before in the bourgeois Jewish life she once spurned, and it is disturbingly unclear whether, as one living in the West with her heart in the East, she will continue to soldier for Israel from abroad.

As it happens, Judith Gallanter’s biographical time line in this novel pretty much coincides with that of the author. A social worker before she turned professional writer, Nora Gold remains an associate of the University of Toronto’s Center for Women’s Studies in Education even as she edits the web magazine *Jewish Fiction*. Like her protagonist, Gold settled in Israel before returning to Canada where she married and raised a son without forgoing her attachment to the Jewish state. As it also happens, she was an undergraduate student of mine at McGill University. While this is not an autobiographical novel, it is minutely informed by Gold’s own personal experience, as well as by her wit and grit, and ablaze with a heightened Jewish consciousness that would have put off half the participants at that literary parley I attended this past summer. Depending on their political and literary inclinations, some may find this novel too tendentious, others not programmatic enough. I am grateful for a work of fiction that honestly animates what is all too actual and true. Indeed, so far as I know, *Fields of Exile* is the first fictional portrayal of a situation that faces Jews everywhere in North America. Although, as Judith discovers, some organizations have fielded programs to counteract anti-Semitism on university campuses, Jewish *writers* have so far averted their eyes, preferring to focus on safer subjects like the Holocaust or life in imaginary Polish shtetls—fictional venues in which the good guys and the bad guys have long since been determined and are in any case dead. Nowadays, when political correctness requires that Jews and Israel be blamed for the aggression leveled against them, it seems that writers are as docile as college professors in obeying its dictates.