

**A Bumpy Definition Of Academic Freedom: On Lamont Hill's U.N. Speech
A Conversation with Temple University Jewish Studies Director Mark Leuchter**
By Alanna E. Cooper | December 12, 2018

Marc Lamont Hill, Professor of Media and Communication at Temple University, spoke at the United Nations on November 28 on the occasion of International Day of Solidarity with the Palestinian People. Hill's 20-minute speech (which readers can watch [here](#)) focused on the "plight of the Palestinian people," as well as the "ethical, moral, and political implications of their struggle for freedom, justice and equality."

His remarks, and his subsequent firing from CNN as a commentator, have generated much media attention. I've been particularly interested in discussions about (1) the relationship between academia and political activism and (2) the relationship between critique of Israel and antisemitism.

I've asked Mark Leuchter, professor of religious studies, to weigh in. Leuchter serves as Temple University's Director of Jewish Studies, and we have been privileged to have him lecture at CWRU-Siegal on a number of occasions.



AC: How do you see the relationship between scholarship and activism? What sorts of challenges might be presented by navigating these two sorts of activities and what sort of positive potential is there for academics to engage in the public sphere?

ML: Scholars' research should be rooted in critical methodology, fact-gathering and evidence irrespective of where that leads. It should not be guided by activism - because having a political or social agenda creates biases and can lead to flawed outcomes. That said - what we learn from scholarly investigations often sheds light on contemporary social, cultural, political and religious issues. So, a scholar's area of research can presumably lead to him or her to take an activist stance.

AC: In Hill's case - how might you characterize the relationship between his scholarship and his recent remarks?

ML: Scholars can sometimes make the horrible mistake of thinking that because they're academically accomplished in Field X, they can express authoritative opinions on issues related to Field Y or Z - especially if they are passionate about those subject areas. But expertise in one area doesn't equal authority to speak about another.

That's the case with Hill. I think he misjudged the range, depth and scope of what he knows about the Israeli/Palestinian conflict, Israel, Jewishness and Judaism. That said, I do not think that he is an antisemite.

AC: This issue - about whether his comments were antisemitic - has been at the heart of the storm in the Jewish media. Hill seemed to be calling for Palestinian use of armed force by saying, “We cannot endorse a narrow politics of respectability that shames Palestinians for resisting, for refusing to do nothing in the face of violence and ethnic cleansing.” How do you understand this statement?

ML: I think the question is whether Hill’s use of the term “resisting” insinuates “resistance to Israel’s very existence.” Is he adopting the argument forwarded by Hamas, Fatah and others, that Israel is an illegal entity that has wrongfully claimed Palestinian land, that all Israelis are complicit in this, and thus violence against all Israelis is warranted?

I don’t believe so - based on his public statements and comments on social media over the past few years. In fact, in a CNN debate with Alan Dershowitz, Hill made a similar statement about Palestinians’ right to defend themselves. But in that case, he explained further, saying that he was in no way arguing that Israel does not have a right to exist or defend itself against terrorist attacks -- only that Palestinian civilians have a right to defend their homes and families against Israeli threats, be they military or settler oriented.

This statement, and other similar ones, demonstrate that Hill is not calling for terrorist violence against Israelis. If there’s one thing I’ve learned from studying ancient biblical texts -- intent and context matter in determining the range of a statement’s meaning.

AC: How about the call for a “free Palestine from the River to the Sea,” which Hill made at the very end of his recent UN speech?

ML: I listened to the speech, and I have read his [public statement of apology](#). I have also participated in conversations he has had on social media where it became ABUNDANTLY clear to me that he is very, very ill-informed about the issues. This leads me to believe that he actually did NOT understand that the “river to sea” locution has genocidal overtones and is profoundly hurtful to Jews.



I thoroughly disagree with his use of the slogan, which is charged with such loathsome and violent overtones. But, I also believe he didn’t realize exactly what it meant to so many of us who heard it.

AC: Can you give a counter-example, where an academic who criticized Israel did, in fact, cross the line into antisemitism:

ML: Yes. Recently Tim Anderson, a professor at the University of Sydney in Australia, who has a history of antisemitic conduct, showed an image of the Israeli flag with a swastika on it in class. When confronted, Anderson refused to apologize, and went on to spout even more hatred about Israel and Jews. Despite holding the Australian equivalent of tenure, he was fired from the University, and he deserved to be.

Hill has done pretty much the exact **opposite** of this Australian scholar: he has apologized, he has expressed a desire to learn and grow, he has stated he wants to reach out and listen to his Jewish brothers and sisters -- all things that a contrite and sincere person should say, and I believe he means it. When you compare Hill’s conduct with that of Tim Anderson, it is clear that one of them is a Jew hater and the other is not.

AC: I understand your distinction, but am still perplexed by the fact that Hill is a Professor of Media and Communications. How can it be that he did not know the implications of his statement?

ML: That question gets to an important point. The REAL issue we should be thinking about is this: How is it be that someone who is not an antisemite comes to use that phrase? How have the Jews' true enemies been so successful in getting their language and ideas to be adopted and normalized by reasonable people? What are these groups doing to win the hearts and minds of broader audiences, that Israel and Israeli advocates are failing at?

We should be thinking of Hill's comment as a symptom of a big problem rather than as an isolated problem that we can fix with enough righteous anger.

AC: Practically speaking, how should Temple University respond (or not) to Hill's statements? What do you think about the statement of Board Chair Patrick O'Connor, who characterized Hill's remarks as "hate speech," and went on to insinuate censure, even the possibility of firing?

ML: If you don't like what Hill said, flexing your political muscle to get him fired doesn't demonstrate that your position is credible. The only way you do that is by arguing the merits, critiquing the language, and making a moral case based on facts and evidence. And THAT'S a conversation that Hill should be part of.

Canning him would just bring an angry, non-intellectual, and legally-questionable sledgehammer down on the issue. And if you imagine that there would not be damaging fallout from that for Jews across this country (and certainly on my campus), then you're living in Fantasy Land.

AC: So, how far do we extend the principles of academic free expression? Are there red lines that cannot be crossed?

ML: I guess we'll find out, won't we? In my opinion - based on my experience of being a university professor for 20 years - academic freedom is bumpy, ugly, frustrating, and anger-inducing very, very often. But it's essential. If we say "screw it, Hill's an antisemite, fire him!", then we eradicate something very valuable, something that we have fought long and hard for in this country (and indeed in democratic societies the world over), and something that provides tremendous power for good.

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