



**Middle  
East  
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August 25, 2014

Rabbi Professor Daniel Hershkowitz  
President  
Bar-Ilan University  
+972-3-535-3523  
via fax *president.office@mail.biu.ac.il*

Dear President Hershkowitz,

I write on behalf of the Committee on Academic Freedom of the Middle East Studies Association of North America (MESA) to express our dismay at the recent statements made by your administration at Bar-Ilan University and its Law School to censure, intimidate and humiliate Professor Hanoch Sheinman. MESA calls upon Bar-Ilan to rescind its chilling message, apologize publicly to Professor Sheinman, and rigorously adhere to the norms of academic freedom and freedom of expression on its campus.

MESA was founded in 1966 to promote scholarship and teaching on the Middle East and North Africa. It is the preeminent organization in the field. The Association publishes the *International Journal of Middle East Studies* and has nearly 3,000 members worldwide. MESA is committed to ensuring academic freedom and freedom of expression, both within the region and in connection with the study of the region in North America and elsewhere.

As the conflict in Gaza intensified in mid-July, and disruptions to academic and everyday life increased in Israel, Professor Sheinman sent an email to his students confirming that the final exam date would be scheduled in due course. He concluded the message to his students with the hopes that it “finds you in a safe place and that you, your families and those dear to you are not among the hundreds of people that were killed, the thousands wounded, or the tens of thousands whose homes were destroyed.”

Due to a perceived lack of discrimination between Israeli and Palestinian victims of the conflict, an undisclosed number of anonymous students complained to the administration, which led Dean of the Faculty of Law, Professor Shahar Lifshitz, to issue a public statement declaring how “shocked” he was at the “hurtful” letter Sheinman had sent. At this point the university released its own judgment that Sheinman’s e-mail amounted to “an inappropriate use of the power given to a lecturer to exploit the platform given to him as a law teacher.”

The expression of sympathy to casualties of war – regardless of their nationality or religion – is hardly an abuse of faculty power, and certainly cannot be said to contravene the code of universal morality guiding a Jewish institution such as Bar-Ilan. Moreover, even the possibility that students and their families would be “offended” by the tenor and spirit of such an e-mail would not constitute just grounds for publicly reprimanding Sheinman and intimidating in turn any other faculty or students who hold such opinions.

Such reactions from Dean Lifshitz and the Bar-Ilan administration are even more egregious in light of the fact that less than a month beforehand another faculty member at Bar-Ilan, Professor Mordechai Kedar, stated in an interview on Israeli radio, “The only thing that can deter terrorists, like those who kidnapped the [three Israeli hikers] and killed them, is the knowledge that their sister or their mother will be raped.” In response, the administration of Bar-Ilan took no disciplinary action against Professor Kedar, deciding instead to issue an official statement, cynically defending Kedar, who was it was

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claimed “using hyperbole” in order to make an argument about the appropriate Israeli response to the kidnapping and murder of those three Israeli teenagers, and merely “gave the rape of women as an example.”

The boundaries of academic freedom and freedom of expression are never more forcefully tested than under such frightening conditions of insecurity, conflict, and violence. We call upon Bar-Ilan and all other institutions of higher learning in Israel to protect and nourish the spaces within which faculty and students alike are not only allowed but encouraged to articulate and debate their political and personal opinions. MESA therefore calls upon Bar-Ilan to issue a public apology to Professor Sheinman, to re-affirm its commitment to academic freedom and finally, to reject the culture of silencing and intimidation.

Sincerely,

A handwritten signature in black ink, appearing to read 'Nathan Brown', written in a cursive style.

Nathan Brown  
MESA President

cc:

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State of Israel  
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