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From: **Office of the President** <[president@cornell.edu](mailto:president@cornell.edu)>

Date: Thu, Nov 7, 2024 at 6:19 AM

Subject: Re: Letter regarding Cheyfitz course

To: Menachem Rosensaft <[mzrosensaft@gmail.com](mailto:mzrosensaft@gmail.com)>, Michael I. Kotlikoff <[mik7@cornell.edu](mailto:mik7@cornell.edu)>

Dear Menachem,

I greatly appreciate your writing to share your concerns over Professor Cheyfitz and the course he is offering next semester. Please know that I share your concerns and am extremely disappointed with the CALS curriculum committee's decision to offer the course and the course's apparent lack of openness and objectivity. Cornell courses should provoke thought and present multiple viewpoints, rather than transmit pre-formed views of a complex conflict, and I personally find the course description to represent a radical, factually inaccurate, and biased view of the formation of the State of Israel and the ongoing conflict.

That said, Cornell's Bylaws specify that faculty of the colleges, not central administration, are responsible for the curriculum. As you note, the committee's decision to approve the course was rooted in their view that Professor Cheyfitz' academic freedom allows him to choose the subject matter and method of presentation. Such curriculum decisions are firmly in the purview of our faculty.

I also believe that this course is an aberration relative to the totality of course material available to students. It is given by a faculty member who is not an expert on the history of the Middle East and is not a member of our Near Eastern Studies faculty. Moreover, the optional course is not required for any Major at Cornell and is given as part of the American Indian and Indigenous Studies Program. The fact that the course is optional, given in an area that does not focus on the Middle East but rather on the issue of indigenous peoples, and is clear in its point of view, suggests to me that students interested in the history of the Middle East and Zionism will find more substantive and objective offerings.

To that point, this Indigenous Studies course should be viewed within the context of the many thoughtful offerings on these subjects taught by experts in their fields. Including the course that you are teaching, these include: "History of the Israeli-Palestinian Conflict" (Ross Brann); "From the Bible to the Museum: Jewish Memory and Public History" (Mayer Juni); "Introduction to Islam" (Jonny Lawrence); "The Holocaust in History and Memory" (Jan Burzlaff); "Israel: History, Culture, and Society" (Rhona Burns); "The Past and Future of Holocaust Survivor Testimonies" (Jan Burzlaff); and "Aspects of Modern Jewish Nationalism" (Rhona Burns). Jan Burzlaff and Rhona Burns are the two new Jewish Studies Postdocs that we have brought to campus and Dr. Burzlaff is also organizing a conference this spring on "The State and the Holocaust" with Cristina Florea, Asst. Professor of History. We are hoping to bring 10-12 leading scholars to campus to offer lectures on this timely topic (<https://jewishstudies.cornell.edu/news/call-papers-state-and-holocaust-encounters-interactions-social-dynamics>).

We are also working with Professor Brann to offer a new, large one-credit course that would be widely available to students and staff (perhaps taught in the evening), which would be a series of survey lectures on the history of the Middle East, and we are organizing a major seminar effort on Pathways to Peace for the coming semester. This would feature informed dialogue and engage students with experts who have had past experience as conflict negotiators.

I believe that it is important to view the full totality of the academic offerings at Cornell on this and related subjects, in order to understand the context and impact of the unfortunate course offered by Professor Cheyfitz. However, I also want to reassure you that I will speak out forcefully in response to antisemitic words or actions at Cornell, as I would with any behavior that threatens members of the Cornell community.

Thank you again for your concern and guidance in this matter.

Best,

Mike