

Who looks spineless now?

Gabriel Webber

As someone who's just become President of a JSoc, I read the *Jewish Chronicle* 'campus' section with rather more disgust than usual this week.

"For sheer craven stupidity it would be difficult to beat Leeds JSoc," raged the *JC*. And the Zionist Federation's Jonathan Hoffman went further, describing them as "spineless Jewish students."

I kind of think that Jews on university campuses, particularly those who volunteer to run JSocs, have enough troubles without being publicly lambasted by their own side, but let's be fair and take a look at what these spineless, craven Leeds students actually did before not condemning them.

They decided to cancel a planned speech by Brooke Goldstein, an American lawyer who specialises in defending people accused of inciting hatred against Muslims. One of her clients is Geert Wilders, a Dutch politician who has compared the Koran to *Mein Kampf* and proposed a tax on Muslim women's headscarves.

"It is reprehensible," wrote the *JC*. "Ms Goldstein devotes her professional life to fighting Islamists and Israel's enemies." Really? She does? When she defended Mr Wilders in court, it was because he'd been charged with hate speech by the Dutch government, who aren't renowned for being Islamic extremists – indeed, they've just banned Halal slaughter, which if anything sounds extremist in the opposite direction.

Most of the people Ms Goldstein's clients anger and offend seem to be ordinary Muslims who would like to practice their religion peacefully – no enemies of mine – not to mention the handful of Jews who were not altogether charmed by the tasteless Koran-Hitler comparison.

Think what the consequences might have been if Ms Goldstein's speech had gone ahead. The Muslim community of Leeds could quite legitimately have complained that the Jewish Society invited a speaker who, at the very least, condones anti-Islamic hate speech. This would not do much for peace and racial/religious harmony on any campus.

The *JC* and the Zionist Federation would be the first to complain if the mirror image of this situation were happening, if an Islamic or Palestinian Society invited a controversial lawyer with anti-Israel clients.

Indeed, that's exactly what happened in February this year: "Nazi defender to visit campus," the newspaper seethed. "A lawyer who has defended Nazi war criminals, Holocaust deniers and Palestinian terrorists will speak at the School of Oriental and African Studies" ...now wait for it... "shortly after Holocaust Memorial Day."

So according to the *JC*, a lawyer who's defended a Holocaust denier must be banned from making speeches – especially for a fortnight either side of Holocaust Memorial Day – whereas a lawyer who's defended an anti-Islamic politician must be *allowed* to make speeches any time and any place they choose.

That is the conclusion one must draw from those two *Jewish Chronicle* pieces. I think the phrase 'sheer craven stupidity' springs to mind, and not in relation to the Leeds JSoc.