



DEPARTMENT OF ENGLISH
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Chancellor Phyllis Wise
Swanlund Hall
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Urbana, IL 61801

Dear Chancellor Wise,

I am sorry that I cannot join my colleagues in their meeting with you on August 18. I truly appreciate your making yourself available for dialogue with faculty members concerned about the university's handling of the Steven Salaita case. Dialogue between the administration and the faculty is precisely what has been missing thus far.

I already wrote to you over a week ago to express my misgivings about the way shared governance and faculty autonomy were overridden in the decision to rescind a good faith offer of a tenured position to Professor Salaita. Here I want to emphasize my surprise that faculty members with expertise in areas relevant to your decision were apparently never consulted. The colleagues with whom you are meeting possess much of this relevant expertise, but I would have wanted to speak to you as a scholar working in Holocaust studies and Jewish studies as well as literary studies. Having published work relevant to this case on antisemitism, racism, and the Israeli/Palestinian issue, I feel I might have offered some insight into the nature of Steven Salaita's tweets, which apparently lie at the core of this case.

While I continue to believe that political speech—no matter how controversial or extreme it might be considered—is protected by the First Amendment and the core values of Academic Freedom, I have also observed many interpretations of Professor Salaita's protected speech about the Israeli bombing of Gaza that I consider misguided and that deserve to be refuted. I strongly believe that neither Professor Salaita himself nor the tweets that are at issue are antisemitic. I say this as someone personally and professionally sensitive to expressions of antisemitism. Indeed, Professor Salaita has stated repeatedly in numerous tweets and writings that have not been cited by his detractors that he opposes antisemitism and racism of all kinds. I find these writings to be sincere and observe that nobody has brought a single piece of evidence to bear that would contradict Professor Salaita's explicit personal opposition to antisemitism. The tweets that have been reproduced again and again in reports on this case are not *expressions* of antisemitism but criticism of how *charges* of antisemitism are used to excuse otherwise inexcusable actions.

Nor do I believe that the tweets are—as some have claimed—incitements to violence. Such interpretations derive from poor readings of the record and also carry the additional irony of ignoring (or denying) that his tweets were written at a moment when the Israeli army—the IDF—was inflicting considerable violence on civilians and civilian infrastructure in Gaza. I would not deny that Professor Salaita's tweets are frequently expressed in strong language, and I share what

I imagine is your preference for a civil tone in public discourse. But there are moments—like the recent bombing campaign—when we may need to expand our notion of what constitutes an acceptable tone so that it is commensurate with the events at stake. When we witness outrages, it may be more honest to express that outrage in our language than to pretend that we can maintain a calm and composed style.

Let me pose the question this way: Should Professor Salaita's outrage at the siege of Gaza really be the center of our concern? Or should it rather be those who—much more frequently and from positions of considerable power—excuse or minimize that state-sponsored violence? Isn't such minimization of violence much more dangerous to the goals of peace, civility, and reconciliation than anger over its perpetration?

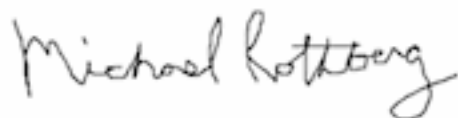
I cannot know for sure why you made the decision you did—since you have not expressed yourself publicly on the subject, to my knowledge—but I suspect that concern over some of the issues I have addressed here played a role. I hope these very brief remarks might at least give you pause about the way that Professor Salaita's remarks have been characterized by those hostile to his political convictions.

I feel I need to say one more thing that I am sure my colleagues will communicate to you powerfully: you should not underestimate the damage to the reputation of the university that has been done by the rescinding of Professor Salaita's job. Over 1,500 of our most valued colleagues have already declared themselves unwilling to have dealings with our university. Some of the signers are our own former colleagues and many are distinguished past visitors to our university. Whether this boycott will include turning down our invitations to visit or refusal to do necessary professional service for us, or will take other forms, only time will tell. I have in fact already experienced all of these responses in my role as Head of the Department of English. I am concerned about what will happen in the future, especially to my junior colleagues.

Not only our reputation in the world has been damaged, however. This decision has had an immediate and dire impact on the morale of faculty in the humanities and social sciences. Speaking personally, I can say that I have spent the last decade in administrative positions and in the creation of scholarly programs and opportunities for our faculty and students. A vital intellectual community is what has made being in Champaign-Urbana so rewarding. I now fear that the effort it took to create that community has been wasted. Like many colleagues I have heard from, I find myself forced to ask whether my professional future should remain tied to this campus where I have happily spent the last thirteen years.

I sincerely hope that you will listen to the pleas of your colleagues on the faculty and reverse your decision. The scheduled meeting on August 18 could be a first step toward such reconsideration and reconciliation.

Sincerely yours,

A handwritten signature in cursive script that reads "Michael Rothberg". The ink is dark and the handwriting is fluid and personal.

Michael Rothberg
Professor and Head of the Department of English
Director of the Initiative in Holocaust, Genocide, and Memory Studies