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Hiding in Canadian medicine Se cacher dans la médecine canadienne

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As a young child traveling in Europe with my parents, we had to follow three clear rules: (1) never speak our mother tongue in public; (2) never wear any clothes or accessories associated with our home country or religion; and (3) never, under any circumstances, disclose the name of our home country in public. This is the reality of being Israeli.

I first visited Canada in 2006, days after my house in northern Israel was destroyed by a Hezbollah rocket attack. In Canada, I was welcomed without being judged for my identity, my religion, or my country of origin. It was a unique experience that underscored the inclusiveness that had been missing on my earlier travels. I immigrated to Canada in 2012, full of hope of finding an environment where I could pursue my personal and academic goals without having to constantly worry about my physical or mental well-being.

Perhaps, though, I had overestimated that sense of inclusion. When applying to medical school a few years later, I was reminded by friends and family that not everybody would be able to overlook my heritage. When I circulated my CV to physician mentors, their most consistent feedback was “do not mention anything relating to Israel.” This message was shocking – yet I heard it time and time again. Hence, I began the tedious labour of censoring my CV.

My previous work experience with an ambulance service was censored, as it took place in Israel. My leadership opportunity working with Palestinian teenagers was censored as it was an Israeli-Palestinian collaboration. Even information such as the name of my high school had to be erased to minimize the chance of identifying the country in which I went to school. The process was long, and hard, and

with every censored line I felt as if I was tearing off a small piece of myself. This bare-bones record of my professional and academic achievements still earned me a few interviews at medical schools across the country, and I began my medical training at the University of Toronto (UofT) in 2018.

I only began to appreciate how spot-on my mentors’ advice had been after I started medical school. Year after year, I experienced growing antisemitic and anti-Israeli sentiment from fellow students and faculty members. Student groups refused to provide Kosher food,¹ Holocaust denial was expressed in the classroom, and I was even labeled as “the enemy” by a peer who discovered my Israeli nationality. It was no surprise to me when Dr. Ayelet Kuper, who was part of UofT’s Antisemitism Working Group² and then served as the Senior Advisor on Antisemitism for UofT’s Temerty Faculty of Medicine (TFOM), released a damning article³ in 2022 that highlighted how entrenched antisemitism and anti-Israeli hate was in all levels of the Faculty, from students to administration. Nonetheless, no effective action was taken, antisemitic behavior became normalized,⁴ and things continued to get worse around me.

These experiences led me to censoring my identity in interpersonal interactions. I was no longer Gill, the Israeli, Hebrew-speaking medical student. I was now Gill, who had completed his undergraduate degree in New Brunswick, and whose accent sounded somewhat French. I stopped wearing identifiable Jewish accessories in academic settings. I stopped speaking Hebrew in public. I went into hiding. In contradiction to the TFOM’s stated commitment to Equity, Diversity and Inclusion (EDI), I was now unable to be my authentic self.

In the days following the horrific October 7 massacre of Israelis and foreign workers by Hamas, I found comfort in small support groups of other Jews. In these interactions, I learned that many of my peers, be they Jewish or Israeli, had also been hiding their identity—as I had been. The stories that follow have become widely known within the UofT Jewish community or were publicly shared at large gatherings, and I am thus able to share them here. For example, one medical resident related that a program director, who was trying to be helpful and supportive, suggested they remove anything Jewish or Israeli from their CV when they were applying for residency on the grounds that “you never know who is reading.” A visibly Jewish physician raised concerns about how their appearance in interviews may have led to failing to match to a specific specialty. A Jewish physician with an identifiable Jewish name said that in their residency interview, they had been asked about how their expertise would help solve the Israeli-Palestinian conflict—which left them in utter disbelief. Many years after the discontinuation of the official quota⁵ system against Jews applying to medical school in Canada, a new informal barrier has emerged which limits the expression of identity and targets specifically Jews and Israelis.

As I reach the end of my training, I wonder about the fate of young Jews or Israelis who are applying to Canadian medical schools in the post-October 7 era. Will they be interested in seeking medical education within a system in which physicians leaders sign letters invalidating concerns about antisemitism?⁶ Will their self-censored CVs still contain enough achievements to earn medical interviews? When they are asked to write about their personal struggles and experiences using an EDI lens, will they be able to share how their synagogues were shot at,⁷ or how they faced doxing campaigns on social media,⁸ or how people spat at them on their own campus due to their identity? Will they even want to attend schools where student organizations and encampments lead campaigns to demonize Israelis and call for them to be boycotted?

These questions are constantly on my mind, and on the minds of many young Jewish and Israeli Canadians seeking to start their careers in medicine. I have hope and some confidence that the medical and medical education communities will advocate for the safety and acceptance of all Jewish learners and faculty, and reclaim the inclusivity it has lost. But the longer that I wait, the less hope I have.

We cannot wait any longer.

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