

HOWARD'S END

WHY A LEADING JEWISH STUDIES SCHOLAR GAVE UP HIS ACADEMIC CAREER

A FEW DAYS BEFORE HOWARD EILBERG-SCHWARTZ was scheduled to launch the Jewish studies program at San Francisco State University, he was persuaded by the school's director of human resources to attend an all-day seminar for select faculty members, students, and local Jewish leaders. It was to be Eilberg-Schwartz's introduction to the school's Jewish community, and, understandably, he was nervous. As part of the program, participants were asked to respond to a series of provocative questions by moving to a designated area of the room. When the question "How central is Israel to Judaism?" was posed, he self-consciously took a spot among the smallish group that answered "Not terribly." And when attendees were asked if they thought the statement "Zionism is racism" was anti-Semitic, Eilberg-Schwartz—who sees the movement to create a Jewish state within the broad context of European colonialism—shuffled over toward the corner designated "No." This time he stood virtually alone.

"I remember people coming up to me afterwards and saying how disappointed they were that I had been named head of Jewish studies," Eilberg-Schwartz recalls now, more than two years later. "That's when I knew I wasn't in sync with the local Jewish community. From that moment on, I was branded." Indeed, that fateful morning in the summer of 1994 would set the stage for a year of conflict between Eilberg-Schwartz and the local Jewish community, one that would culminate in his precipitous departure from the university—and academia altogether—in the fall of 1995. The forty-one-year-old ex-scholar says that the pressure to defend Israel and blunt his critique of Jewish traditions made him feel more like a Hillel rabbi than a professor. For their part, critics on and off the campus accuse Eilberg-Schwartz of being insensitive to the unusual environment at San Francisco State, a deeply politicized school with a vocal

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