

Our first Amendment. Our. *Our*. So why does it not apply to me?

For Eighteen years, I have called my ethnic background so many different titles for the same place. It's not the Oriental, it's not the Middle East, it's not a holy land. It is *Palestine*. In first grade, I told my teacher I was from the West Bank, as instructed by my father. He said we were not allowed to call it Palestine, even here, in America. I was not allowed to say it, it would make people upset, he said. The teacher nodded and looked a little..sad. There was no need for more words to be said for me to understand that this conversation made her upset. In the third, a different teacher asked about my background. I was over my lisp, and I proudly said- "Palestine". She asked if I meant Israel. I said no, I mean Palestine, and so she took a breath, as if it were her duty to correct me, and said "No, Honey".

In middle school, during 9/11, I took it upon myself to do a little dialogue. As the only Arab in that class- a hooked nose, dark curly haired, tan girl, I was very much descended from the region where my father wrote his stories about how affected the area in war became after 9/11. A teacher, once more in my life, asked me to stop talking. After class she explained it was so this way the class could start talking about something more important that reigned higher than the emotional thoughts I felt. That was around the time when asked the big question, I would say "Jerusalem", where some knew and for those who didn't, I would tell them, "Oh, think Jesus Christ".

When 2020 came around, Palestine hit social media as a trend. Baby Gen Z's first genocide. I was astounded. It did not last long, as social activism can only bend its ear so much, but for the first time in fifteen years, I heard Palestine written out LOUD, **bold** and **CLEAR** by non-Palestinians. I started to use the word plainly after that. No more fancy references or "technically" names. Just- Palestine.

I was born in the land of the free, but always expressed myself differently, and got berated for it.

When I spoke about the land my father will always deem home on social media- my post got reported and banned. No gore, no violence, just a 16 year old girl writing her emotions about apartheid and then thrown in silence. I was devastated. Once again, it felt like a teacher told me to be quiet. In the grand scheme of things, would that post have mattered? Probably not. But it was not just me. Thousands of stories got shut down. Narratives put to rest. Feelings that were attempted to be forced into isolation. Happening all right in front of me and the rest of the free world to watch. In January 2024, tens of thousands of Palestinians rallied in Washington, D.C. as a demonstration for a land they, like me, for so long were not allowed to mention by name. Even now, when google searched, a seemingly simple gesture, almost no buzz was created as if physical evidence at the lack of support of self expression.

The invalidation of any identity in the United States is a siege on human rights and the freedom of individuality. Social expression pertaining to one's identity should not be forsaken for the comfort of those surrounding at the expense of one's own voice. The erasure of any identity, of distinctiveness in America in the 21st century is a sin. There should and will always be a space for the existence of all peoples, under this society, as our culture changes, learns and grows.

Self expression has helped the world change. The more honest that marginalized and disenfranchised groups of people become, the more transparent and confident in their own practices and cultures, the more education and willingness to learn and grow other people will

exhibit. The improvement of society is based on the furthering of education of the people, as well as the acceptance of others to unify as a nation, and that starts by being open-minded and caring for others. The ignorance and miseducation of peoples in the present era has no excuse. The resources and stories globally available at the touch of a finger makes one question why such unfamiliarity with different people is so wide-spread. It is human nature to not be all knowing, but it is not human nature to stay uninformed at the expense of others. As we humans express our uniqueness, there will always be reasons to turn away from being authentic. For my father, it was the fear he had for over 30 years of an oppressed world in a war-torn country, where he could not legally say the word Palestinian territories, without fear of being arrested or hurt. This fear, he also held for me. While in good efforts, it is **now** up to every single person ever silenced at the expense of others, to stand up and be proud and educate others about who they are.