

Letter from Jewish faculty on academic freedom, attacks on the University, and the weaponization of antisemitism

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April 5, 2024

Dear President Shafik,

We write as Jewish faculty at Columbia and Barnard in anticipation of your appearance before the House Education and Workforce Committee of Congress, where you are expected to answer questions about antisemitism on campus. Based on the Committee's previous hearings, we are gravely concerned about the false narratives that frame these proceedings and that function to entrap witnesses within them, and we wish to offer our support and input.

When a member of Congress with a history of espousing white nationalist politics – Rep. Elise Stefanik – calls university presidents to account for alleged antisemitism on their campuses, we see these proceedings for the disingenuous political theater that they are, and we object to your now being cast as a villain in this political theater of a new McCarthyism.

The real purpose of these hearings has been to rehearse and amplify decades-long bad-faith efforts to undermine universities as sites of learning, critical thinking, and knowledge production. The lawmakers who questioned college presidents in December made such intentions clear from the start. In her introductory remarks, the chairperson, Rep. Virginia Foxx, condemned universities for “assenting to the race-based ideology of the radical left” and charged that “Institutional antisemitism and hate are among the poisoned fruits of your institution's cultures.” South Carolina Representative Joe Wilson brazenly piled on, slamming universities as “illiberal sewers of intolerance and bigotry,” a condition caused, he declared, by diversity and inclusion initiatives; Foxx, absurdly, cited as evidence of

antisemitism the existence of courses at Harvard like one called “Race and Racism in the Making of the United States as a Global Power.”

In other words, the hearings proceed from a spurious premise – that academic study of race (as well as other fields in the crosshairs of culture warriors, like gender and sexuality), have noxiously polluted campuses. From there, they assert that this pestilent culture has caused antisemitism to thrive. Thus they attempt to establish two falsehoods as fact: that critical study of complex historical truths leads to antisemitism and that antisemitism is rampant on campus. This reasoning is a closed loop; one can’t refute it from inside its mendacious logic.

Though antisemitism functions as the Committee’s current engine of outrage, their purpose is not to assure that Jewish students can flourish on campuses. Rather, it is falsely to caricature and demonize universities as supposed hotbeds of “woke indoctrination.” This depiction opens the way to political interference at every level – from the appointment of like-minded cronies to boards of governors to fingering specific books for banning from syllabi – as has been happening in states like North Carolina and Texas. Florida’s university system has endured so much politically-driven intervention – even to the point of taking over a liberal arts college – that the AAUP has concluded, “Meaningful Higher Education in Florida May Not Survive.” While such ruinous meddling has so far taken hold at public universities, the House Education and Workforce Committee has now declared open season on private ones as well.

This campaign to destroy educational institutions has found incendiary fuel from a new ally: a longstanding, well-organized movement to suppress pro-Palestinian speech in America. For decades, proponents of a hegemonic right-wing Zionist narrative have sought to stifle Palestinian expression in American theaters, art exhibitions, reading series, universities, and elsewhere. Over these years, Columbia, especially, has been fallaciously charged with harboring a particular animus toward Jews (despite its large and diverse population of Jewish students, the provision of a wide range of Jewish denominational religious services and kosher dining options, support for a robust Institute for Israel and Jewish Studies, and a beautiful building dedicated to hosting Jewish social, cultural, religious and educational activities). The reason? The presence of discourse around Palestinian history, politics, culture, and experience. From the 1970s on, for example, would-be censors lodged calumnies against Professor Edward Said, whose hiring is still falsely invoked today as an example of antisemitism; in the early 2000s, the David Project tried to trump up hysteria – and firings – over professors who criticized Israeli policies and the ideologies behind them; a few years later, ideological critics incited media attacks and

petition drives against a scholar as she was being considered for tenure because of her scrutiny of Israeli archeological practices.

Today, these longtime crusaders against the airing of Palestinian narratives and analyses on campus have joined forces with the anti-Black, anti-queer, anti-migrant right, whose apostles now grandstand on the House Education and Workforce Committee. The two groups converge on the shared goal of shutting down critical study of historical truths that undermine their simplistic, self-serving accounts of complicated events and ideas – whether by trying to cancel study of The 1619 Project, to prevent discussion of the millennia-long existence of human gender variance, or to silence criticism of Israel and its founding doctrine. Together, they have stirred up a perfect storm that threatens to erode our university’s fundamental values.

Columbia must stand strong against these specious attacks, and we feel especially called to help in this effort because we are Jewish. To assist in defending the mission and values of the University, we offer here our perspective, which has not had as wide a hearing on campus as those we consider hostile to the academic freedom and free speech that are a necessary basis for scholarship and learning.

As diverse Jewish faculty members, we have a range of relationships to Jewish identity, culture, faith, practice, and institutional affiliation, and we have a range of views on and connections to Israel. But we are united in our understanding of – and objection to – the ways charges of antisemitism are being weaponized. And we share alarm at and opposition to policies and practices on our campus that harm and marginalize people who express solidarity with Palestine and Palestinians. These policies and practices also erase the presence of progressive Jews at Columbia – and indeed, throughout Jewish-American history – and exacerbate the very threat of antisemitism they claim to deter.

As Jews, we are acutely aware that antisemitism is alive and well in the United States, and that as the journalist Peter Beinart recently wrote, it is a problem that Israel’s offensive in Gaza has only worsened in recent months. It is a problem we take with deadly seriousness. Like racism, sexism, and homophobia, it exists everywhere, including at Columbia. And when it rears its head, it should be swiftly denounced and its perpetrators held to account. But it is not rampant on our campus. And it is certainly not what motivates the members of the University community who have been protesting our government’s military support for Israel and calling for Palestinian liberation. There is nothing antisemitic about taking a stand against Israel’s ongoing campaign that has killed (so far) more than 30,000 Gazans, forcibly displaced more than 75 percent of Gaza’s 2.3 million inhabitants, demolished all of its universities, and brought half of Gaza to the brink of famine. To argue otherwise is to pervert what antisemitism means.

The scholars of the Holocaust, Jewish Studies, and Middle East Studies who drafted the Jerusalem Declaration on Antisemitism explain that “antisemitism is discrimination, prejudice, hostility or violence against Jews as Jews (or Jewish institutions as Jewish).” It is not, the Declaration specifies: criticizing or opposing Zionism as a form of nationalism, or arguing for a variety of constitutional arrangements for Jews and Palestinians in the area between the Jordan River and the Mediterranean. It is not antisemitic to support arrangements that accord full equality to all inhabitants “between the river and the sea,” whether in two states, a binational state, unitary democratic state, federal state, or in whatever form.

Reputable scholars in these fields agree that Zionism – the movement, born in late 19th-Century Europe, to establish a Jewish homeland in the Biblical Land of Israel (and, after the establishment of the Israeli state in 1948, the ideology to sustain it as a Jewish-majority and Jewish-dominant nation) – is reasonably subject to critique and debate, like any political ideology. To question or denounce Israel’s underlying philosophy or its policies and behavior is as legitimate as analyzing and assessing those of any nation-state. And to critique or even condemn its essential doctrines is not to condemn its inhabitants or to call for their expulsion or eradication. Such critique responds to state actions – not to the Jewish character of the state’s culture and majority population. As our colleague Rashid Khalidi has put it, “If the people stealing Palestinians’ land had been Martians, the reaction would have been no different.”

Waving a Palestinian flag or chanting “from the river to the sea, Palestine will be free,” then, is not inherently antisemitic. For some, it expresses a view that Israelis and Palestinians alike deserve futures of abundance characterized by the broad political rights that define democracies (a view that was advanced as long ago as in late 19th- and early 20-Century debates among Jews about what a Jewish homeland in historic Palestine could mean, by the likes of Judah Magnes, a prime founder and the first president of Hebrew University in Jerusalem, and the philosopher Martin Buber). For others it is a rejection of colonial power and oppression that necessitates wholly new political imaginaries. These are legitimate views that are based on evidence and scholarly rigor and warrant political passion.

Such political passion – and some of the slogans that express it – may unsettle students, faculty, and staff with opposing views. But feeling dismay is not the same thing as being threatened. Along with the free expression that is fundamental to academic inquiry and democratic society, comes the discomfort of being exposed to views that may be upsetting. We can support pro-Israel students through their real and valid discomfort with the protests advocating Palestinian liberation, while also stating clearly and firmly that this discomfort is not an issue of safety.

Pro-Palestinian expression is not anti-Jewish hate speech. To label it as such requires a dangerous and false conflation: a move that equates Zionism with Jewishness, political ideology with identity.

This linking betrays a painful, crude, and woefully inaccurate understanding – or cynical misrepresentation – of Jewish history, identity and politics. This conflation of Zionism with Jewishness not only erases Jewish history, it erases post-, non-, and anti-Zionist Jews themselves, including many who live, study, and work on our campus – an erasure that is itself antisemitic.

Jewish Americans have long expressed myriad views about Zionism, many dissenting from what has become, only in recent decades, a lockstep institutional commitment to Israel that brooks no criticism. These dissenters have done so on multiple grounds, including those that believe Zionism further marginalizes Jews in the Diaspora, those who argue that the creation of a Jewish nation-state took the brutal form of imperialism, and even a sect of anti-Zionist Hasidim professing that a Jewish return to Zion should not take place until the Messiah comes and brings it about.

We see this range in the positions of both celebrated and lesser known Jewish thinkers: political theorist Hannah Arendt, novelist Mike Gold, poets Marilyn Lowen Fletcher and Adrienne Rich, philosopher Morris Cohen, to name a few. The pages of the landmark Jewish feminist journal, *Bridges*, published between 1990 and 2011, were regularly filled with vehement debates about Zionism. For much of the 20th century, criticism of Zionism was the majority opinion among working-class Jews. It had been central to Judaism's Reform movement: Among Jews today, Zionism remains a highly contested politics, and specific Israeli policies even more so. A 2020 national survey of American Jews conducted by J Street, for example, found that 80 percent of respondents favored conditioning US aid to Israel on its ending settlement expansion in the West Bank. A more recent poll of American Jews, by the Jewish Electorate Institute, found that one-quarter of respondents regarded Israel as an apartheid state and 22 percent agreed that it is committing genocide. That poll was conducted in 2021 – two years before the current decimation of Gaza. There has never been and is not now any consensus on Israel and Palestine among American Jews, nor has there been or is there any now on our campus.

Yet, in what are undoubtedly difficult times to be operating, the University has in recent months failed to resist the false equation of Jewish identity with Zionism and Israel, with serious consequences for our community and our reputation. This began with the suspension of student groups in November, on the basis of unsubstantiated accusations of threat and intimidation that rest on the deeply ideological assertion that criticisms of the state of Israel are dangerous to Jews. New rules from Columbia and Barnard that quash

student political expression – from public protest to dorm decorations – in the name of protecting Jewish students amount to the University singling out for its special care only those Jews who claim to feel threatened by certain political speech about Palestine or Israel; Jews who do not espouse approved political opinions are not welcome under the University’s comforting wing. All Jewish students are less safe when the punitive might of the university’s purported anti-discrimination effort is so explicitly turned away from attention to white supremacist violence (the demonstrable source of most antisemitic threat in this country today) and toward progressive political activism.

Whether the administration is making an ill-informed category error, favoring leaders’ own political views, scrambling in fear of a wave of bad-faith Title VI suits, caving to pressure from governmental officials, allowing a few wealthy and powerful donors to dictate campus policies and pedagogy (an assent that, if those donors are Jewish, would reinforce one of antisemitism’s most sinister tropes), or has some other reason for making the idea that Zionism is the same thing as Jewishness into university policy, we don’t presume to say. But no matter the motivation, the consequences are ruinous to the people and the principles of Columbia. Where once the University properly stood up against smear campaigns condemning Columbia for allowing Palestinian discourse, from Professor Said on, now it has itself voluntarily accepted the job of censoring that discourse.

Such suppression, historically, has never been good for Jews or for other marginalized peoples, and we recognize its stench – not least because political persecution and Red-baiting have been core components of antisemitism in America. In the McCarthy era, accusations of communism were effectively leveled against the political opponents of white power, targeting people involved in labor organizing and civil rights organizing and causing the most harm to Americans who were Jewish, Black, gay, and poor. Just as that campaign was never truly about communism, today’s attacks on the university are not truly about antisemitism.

In violation of its own professed commitment to academic freedom and the robust and open debate of ideas, Columbia has, in addition to suspending pro-Palestine student groups, canceled student events with content critical of Israel, harshly disciplined students for protest actions that receive far lighter (or no) punishment when conducted on behalf of any issue other than Palestine, and designated “free speech zones” for protests (which actually hide and overregulate what should be free and open), to mention just some of the draconian ways it is cracking down on political expression. The Mailman School of Public Health issued a letter of non-renewal to an assistant professor after recordings of his lectures were sent to journalists and he was attacked for, teaching from his own expertise, using the decades-old and well-established critical framework of settler colonialism – an

action which was both a grave violation of the faculty's academic freedom to teach according to their expertise, and a chilling capitulation to public smear campaigns against faculty. We feel ourselves on the precipice of even worse measures, including scrutiny of syllabi and research, and the imposition of ideological tests in faculty hiring, all in the name of shielding Jewish students who feel uneasy when they hear or see anti-Zionist or pro-Palestinian expression.

Meanwhile the University has done little to support and protect students who have actually been targeted or attacked. When students were doxxed for advocating Palestinian rights and smeared as "pro-Hamas" on trucks that circled campus, it was other students who had to block and disrupt the trucks, while the University did nothing. When students are targeted for vicious harassment on social media, including by members of the University community, the University has remained silent, even as the University Senate recently affirmed that the rights of academic freedom do not include the right to harass or threaten. When student protestors were attacked on-campus with noxious chemicals by fellow students objecting to their demonstration on behalf of Palestine, the University's reluctance to acknowledge the attack and ongoing silence about it has spoken loudly of its lack of concern for the safety of students on this side of the issue. The failure to adequately protect and reach out to Muslim students, despite a rise in violence against them nationally, has led to such a loss of trust in the University that the victims of such incidents are reluctant to report them. And when the University's restrictive policies force students who want to protest off campus, it subjects them to violence and arrest at the hands of NYPD — who have been increasingly present on-campus as well in recent months.

Moreover, the University established a Task Force on Antisemitism, with unclear limits on its powers and considerable resources at its disposal. The University ignored calls to expand this task force's focus beyond antisemitism to include anti-Muslim, anti-Arab, and anti-Palestinian hate and discrimination. The Task Force's first report brazenly weighs in on broad issues of protest and discipline, seemingly reaching around the University Senate's existing committees and processes for considering new rules. The provision of material and administrative resources in the name of fighting antisemitism – to circumvent institutional procedure in the service of right-wing politics – will only show students that the University is willing to make policy in the name of some and not others.

These highly disparate responses to different student populations enact material as well as intellectual viewpoint discrimination and have a profound chilling effect. All but the most committed students will decide it's not worth the hassle to jump through scads of regulatory hurdles to, say, organize a film screening; professors will think twice about teaching real scholarship, including the writing of our own Prof. Said whose work gave us

the tools to confront so many pervasive forms of prejudice and oppression in the world today.

Less visibly, perhaps, but catastrophically, the draconian punishments, NYPD presence, heightened surveillance, and blatant preferential treatment of students with one political view, have begun to undo decades of work to make Columbia more accommodating to first-generation, low-income and marginalized students. At Barnard, where these measures have been arguably most severe, students have expressed private concerns about whether the College is a welcoming place for them.

And we, sad to say, are beginning to question whether Columbia can, under these circumstances, remain a place for the secularly sacred practice of honest, rigorous, challenging, inspiring, marvelously messy, and vital enterprise of teaching and learning.

If we were to testify at this hearing, we would:

Refuse to entertain the bad-faith weaponization of antisemitism. The Committee's members who are invested in attacking higher education have demonstrated their willingness to pose mendacious questions in the hopes of "gotcha" moments that will allow their allies to continue attacking the University after the hearings have ended. We would respond with an affirmation of our values that refuses to concede the premise of these traps.

When asked to state whether certain chants or phrases "are antisemitic," we would remind the Representatives that phrases like "from the river to the sea" have historically meant different things to different people, and that the job of an institution of higher learning is to hold open a space where we can learn from each other about the different ways such language is understood.

When asked to condemn specific words in Arabic, like "intifada," as inherently antisemitic, we would affirm that words have histories to their meanings, and that universities are places where we study and learn about those histories, even when they are uncomfortable.

When pressed on narrow definitions of antisemitism, we would point out that Jews across the political spectrum disagree on how best to define the term beyond the consensus baseline that it is prejudice against Jews for being Jewish. Leading scholars are careful to distinguish between antisemitism and anti-Zionism or criticism of Israel.

When challenged about criticism of Israel or Zionism generally, we would remind our audience that these perspectives have always been with us on our campus, and that they have always troubled some Jewish students and been espoused by other Jewish students. We would affirm that this diversity of expression and rigor of debate is what makes our

community strong and empowers us in what former University President Lee Bollinger called our “fourth purpose” – “to leverage scholarly knowledge to create societal and global impact.”

When asked (as other Presidents were in December) whether it is acceptable to “call for the extermination of Jews,” we would acknowledge that this is a reprehensible statement that you would find deeply disturbing and alarming to hear from any member of the university community although, to be clear, you have heard no such thing from Columbia or Barnard students, faculty, or staff. We would remind the committee that the United States already has civil rights laws that require the university to ensure students are not learning in a severe and pervasive hostile environment. Title VI prohibits “unwelcome conduct based on shared ancestry or ethnic characteristics that, based on the totality of circumstances, is subjectively and objectively offensive and is so severe or pervasive that it limits or denies a person’s ability to participate in or benefit from the recipient’s education program or activity.” An isolated instance of hateful speech does not rise to the level of creating a severe and pervasive hostile environment. This standard also covers any student who, in the course of passionate political advocacy, may make an isolated hateful statement relating to Palestinians, Muslims, or Arabs. Emphasize to the committee that Columbia is committed to upholding the law, investigating all complaints, and helping students learn how to pursue their political goals while also remaining respectful of one another.

Challenge the implication that swift, repressive punishment is the best way to address hateful behavior on campus when it does occur. When their institution punishes students harshly rather than offering them opportunities to learn and make amends when they do cause harm, the university loses an important opportunity for teaching and learning. Such rash punitiveness does not create a campus -- and a society -- with less antisemitism and more shared understanding.

Assert the University’s commitment to protecting all our Jewish students, and all members of the University community. Our enemies on the national political stage will try to use this opportunity to erase the rich heterogeneity of Jewish life on Columbia’s and Barnard’s campuses in service of their goals, and to falsely suggest that the safety of Jewish students comes at the expense of other groups. Both projects must be strenuously rejected.

When confronted with simplistic accounts of how Jewish students feel or what they are experiencing, we would resist the erasure of our Jewish students who are uncertain about the war, who find themselves in solidarity with the Palestinian cause, or who oppose the project of Zionism. We would insist that all Jewish students are entitled to inclusion and respect in discussions of Jewishness and the question of Palestine, and in university life.

When pressured to commit resources to the prevention and punishment of antisemitism, we would assert that to effectively confront antisemitism, the university should remain committed to combating all forms of bias and discrimination. It must not single out antisemitism for special attention, nor should it conflate antisemitism with criticism of Israel.

We would agree that real harassment and physical intimidation and violence on campus must be confronted seriously and its perpetrators held accountable. At the same time, the University should refrain whenever possible from using discipline as means of addressing less serious harms, and should never use punitive measures to address conflict over ideas and feelings of discomfort that result. In fact, the University is steadfastly committed to creating an environment where community members learn to expect and to engage in conflicts of ideas in and outside of the classroom.

Reject the basic premises of the right-wing attacks on higher education. The previous hearing provided ample opportunity for the airing of fictions and grievances about the purported “woke” menace afflicting learning in this country. We share a commitment to a higher purpose: the pursuit of knowledge through rigorous inquiry and the formation of well-rounded citizens and professionals through a thriving climate of academic freedom and expertise.

We would affirm that the University has no obligation to protect anyone from the discomfort of hearing their politics disagreed with or criticized. Discussions and debates that can be uncomfortable or provocative are part of the pursuit of knowledge. We commit to keeping every student safe from real harm and discrimination, and we also commit to helping them learn to experience discomfort and even confrontation as part of learning how to disagree productively as members of a society. No one has the right to demand the University protect them from having to hear criticism of any government, not a foreign government and not our own. We live in a democracy.

We would advocate for faculty by reminding the audience that the University’s commitment to free inquiry and robust disagreement is what enables Columbia to be a world-class institution. We did not get here by politicizing learning or silencing dissent, and we will not sacrifice our core competencies and world-class reputation for learning at the behest of political attacks.

We would affirm that attacks on the university and calls to repress speech and inquiry are attacks on knowledge itself. Limits on academic freedom about questions of Israel and Palestine will open doors to limits on scientific inquiry that corporations find displeasing or that it is politically fashionable to attack. Whether it is climate change or the safety of

pharmaceuticals or the history of race, the knowledge created at universities and colleges is dependable and of value to society because it is created in environments that can be trusted to be free of political influence.

We would affirm the University's commitment to shared governance, and in particular to the importance of institutions that provide for faculty involvement in the creation of university rules. We would express concern that the recent pressure from politicians and others has treated the administration as solely responsible for University policy when, in fact, Columbia University and other colleges around the country need to protect faculty power. Shared governance by faculty is essential to ensuring that our higher education institutions remain true to their academic mission.

Assert our commitment to the vigorous protection of free expression on campus. Federal- and state-level pressure to discipline pro-Palestinian speech has put the university in an untenable position where, to comply, it must suppress the very kinds of expression that are crucial to student development, to their learning outside of the classroom, and to American democracy.

We would implore the Committee to recognize that precisely because university students are learning uncomfortable truths, engaging with world issues, crafting their identities, and often living in the very place where this is all happening, they desperately need to be able to express themselves in the process. They need to express themselves in different ways to affirm their humanity – whether it is through poetry, paint, posting signs, wearing insignia, or attending protests – and whether it is about their LGBTQ or racial identity or their feelings about Israel or Palestine. They also need to have the freedom to make mistakes, offend without intending to, and learn from and repair whatever harm they may have done. The university must support students' learning and humanity by promoting free expression in almost every campus space outside of the classroom.

We would share our pride in representing Columbia University for its tradition of protest. As our colleague Professor Rashid Khalidi recently put it, "Were it not for student protests, the struggles for civil rights and against apartheid in South Africa and the American wars in Vietnam and Iraq, and for abortion rights, gay rights, and many other freedoms (all of which had important echoes on the Columbia campus) would have been hobbled or extinguished." He added that, in contrast to a legacy blemished by institutional links to slavery, the opium trade, racial discrimination, and antisemitism, Columbia's tradition of protest is one of the greatest distinguishing marks in the [University's] history."

As faculty of Columbia and Barnard, as committed teachers of our students, and as invested stewards of the institution who care deeply for its present and its future, we stand

with you against these attacks against not just our University but all universities and colleges, and we stand ready to support you in this work however we can.

Sincerely,

Debbie Becher, Barnard College

Helen Benedict, Columbia Journalism School

Susan Bernofsky, School of the Arts

Elizabeth Bernstein, Barnard College

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