

December 2, 2023

To: The Committee on Education and the Workforce

From: MIT Jews for Ceasefire, Harvard Jews for Palestine, and University of Pennsylvania Chavurah

Subject: Letter for the Record re: Hearing on “Holding Campus Leaders Accountable and Confronting Antisemitism”

Dear Chairwoman Foxx, Ranking Member Scott, and Members of the Committee:

We, Jewish and Israeli students of Harvard, MIT, and the University of Pennsylvania, who call for a ceasefire and an end to the war in Gaza, are writing today to share with you our experiences on our campuses. Below, we have compiled testimonials from Jewish students across our three universities, anonymized for safety, to share the pain, grief, and resolve we feel as a Jewish, anti-war coalition.

Although our circumstances differ, together we have faced antisemitism, harassment, threats, and silencing from our administrations, faculty, student bodies, and the larger media narrative that has brought about this hearing. Some of us have faced suspensions and the loss of jobs and professional opportunities. Some of us have been doxxed for being public about our beliefs. As a result, we have become fearful for our and our anti-war friends’ safety.

We are writing to clear the record on the term antisemitism: **Criticism of the Israeli government is not antisemitism.** To call being critical of a government “antisemitic” is to shut down free speech. Our Jewish values tell us that life is sacred; they necessitate that we speak out about injustice. And so we repeat this point: **Criticism of the Israeli government is not antisemitism.**

It is unacceptable to punish students and make threats against their lives, livelihoods, and safety in response to their opposition to a government’s actions. It is unacceptable for school administration and politicians, some of whom are in the room today, to co-opt our shared identity to silence Palestinian, Muslim, Arab, and Jewish students. These actions only serve to obfuscate real cases of antisemitism and **put Jewish students at even greater risk.**

For too long supporters of Israel have gotten away with silencing us for calling out Israel’s harmful actions against Palestinians. We are Jewish students advocating for peace for Palestinians and Israelis. We know that our safety as Jews will never come at the expense of Palestinian safety. We need a permanent ceasefire and an end to the Israeli occupation. We stand in solidarity with Palestinians.

Signed,

MIT Jews for Ceasefire, Harvard Jews for Palestine, and the University of Pennsylvania Chavurah

Testimonies from Jewish students at the Massachusetts Institute of Technology:

“I am a Jewish anti-war protestor who is critical of Israel. Jewish supporters of Israel at MIT have called me an antisemite, Hamas, a self-hating Jew, and have told me that I am ‘not a real Jew’ and that ‘G_d made a mistake by having you born a Jew’ — the last statement was made directly to my face. All of these labels and comments are antisemitic under any definition of the word, and do not make me feel safe or welcome in Jewish spaces on campus.”

“As a Jewish student and anti-war protestor, I feel completely alienated by the conflation of criticism of Israel with antisemitism on MIT’s campus. At the core of my Jewish identity is a commitment to stop what happened to European Jews, including many members of my own family, from ever happening again to anyone. I fight for the Palestinian people because I believe that Jewish liberation is connected to the liberation of all people and that the world we should strive for is one in which all people live with freedom and dignity. I never feel more Jewish than when I am fighting for Palestinians, specifically because it requires a real commitment to that belief. It erases my Jewish identity to assert that protests at MIT calling for Palestinians to have full rights between the river and the sea are antisemitic and endangering Jewish students.”

“As a Jewish MIT student, I feel silenced, unsafe, and unwelcome as a direct result of MIT’s lack of acknowledgement for anything other than pro-Israel Jewish sentiment.”

“I have been called a self-hating Jew, an antisemite, I’ve been told ‘you want us all to die,’ ‘you’re going to get raped.’ I feel alienated from institutional Jewish spaces and need to seek support elsewhere.”

“I believe that various factions on MIT campus are co-opting our Jewish identity and causing harm to us and others, all in the name of ‘Jewish safety.’ It should be possible to speak out against this publicly, but I and other members of my Jewish community do not feel safe or supported to do so by the MIT administration.”

“As a Jewish student at MIT I have faced real antisemitism on campus, but I have felt nothing but empowered by the anti-war coalition of students on campus calling for a ceasefire and an end to the Israeli occupation of Palestine. We should be able to condemn the Israeli government’s actions towards the Palestinian people without facing accusations of antisemitism. Weaponizing false claims of antisemitism seriously endangers our rights to free speech and creates a hostile environment where we do not focus our attention on real cases of antisemitism.”

Testimonies from Jewish students at Harvard University:

“The story of how the horrors overseas have reverberated throughout Harvard’s campus is, much like the nature of the violence itself, a story of an extreme power imbalance.

Those who hold administrative power — namely, University President Claudine Gay — have been shamefully silent. Their silence is complicity; they fold in the face of pressure from tweets and mega donors, who hold immense power in their own right.

Those who are, from an institutional standpoint, virtually powerless — students and workers — have been callously punished for using their voices, the one thing no power can strip from them, to protest Israeli apartheid and the unfolding genocide in Gaza.

At Harvard, dozens of infinitely courageous and fiercely intelligent pro-Palestinian voices — many of them some of my closest friends and almost all of them students of color — have been targeted, their names and faces blasted across the internet and displayed on a “doxxing truck” in Harvard Square. Worst of all — if such a calculation can even be made — all of this was done under the guise of combating antisemitism.

Discussions around antisemitism and how to fight it are made futile when they do not give consideration to what truly constitutes antisemitic rhetoric and actions. Protecting student identities by blocking prying cameras at a peaceful demonstration is not antisemitic. Chanting “from the river to the sea,” a rolling cry for Palestinian liberation — not synonymous with the expulsion of Jews from the region — is not antisemitic. Deeming “the Israeli regime entirely responsible for all unfolding violence” is not antisemitic.

Conflating criticism of Israel with antisemitism is not just blatantly wrong, it is dangerous. The conflation distracts from instances of true antisemitism, making these harder to find and address. The conflation excludes anti-Zionist, non-Zionist, and Zionist-questioning Jewish perspectives from the narrative entirely.

This country and its college campuses are not safe for all Jews.

Antisemitism is an unequivocal evil. In a strange and ugly way, I likely would not be here if not for it: At the turn of the 20th century, my paternal ancestors fled the Russian pogroms and sought refuge in America. If only my ancestors knew that the very hate which expelled them from their homes has been redefined, twisted, and weaponized to justify the hate of another people. The same country my family deemed safe over a century ago has become a land which cowardly shrinks from its founding commitment to liberty and justice for all. Moreover, the elite institutions of higher education in this land — prides of our nation and supposed bastions of free speech — have utterly failed to protect their students and workers.

This country and its college campuses are not safe for Palestinians, Black, or Brown people.

I have heard my friends on the Harvard Undergraduate Palestine Solidarity Committee refer to their lives as a bifurcation: “pre-statement” and “post-statement.”

I want to share a story — a moment removed from an endless string of moments since the PSC released their now infamous statement from October 11, 2023 — that I feel encapsulates the lived reality of pro-Palestinian organizers on Harvard’s campus.

Like at most colleges, on every door in my dorm building, there are placards with the names of the students who live behind each of them.

Last month, I walked my friend, a Brown PSC organizer, back to her room in our building. My friend lives in a double. On her door, where there were supposed to be two names, there was just one. Anyone passing by would have no idea there were ever two; the one placard remaining had been moved to the center of the door. My friend’s name was gone, like it had never been there.

She had, in essence, been erased from Harvard’s campus, her dorm, and her home.

When we got to my friend’s dorm and I saw the door, my visceral reaction was to exclaim ‘what happened?’ She hadn’t even opened her mouth to answer before I realized. She had been doxxed — on X, on Canary Mission, on the truck — earlier this month and she did not feel safe leaving her name up on her door for the world to see.

If we are not safe in our own homes, are we safe anywhere?

In the weeks since October 7, 2023, I have never felt more Jewish — and I have never been more proud to be a Jew. Simultaneously, I have never been more ashamed to be a Jew. I am proudest when I stand in solidarity with a people and a movement on the right side of history. I am most

ashamed when my identity is exploited to justify the doxxing, silencing, and violence against pro-Palestinian voices — my pro-Palestinian friends.”

“The doxing truck was outside my house. My jaw dropped with my stomach. I don’t know what shocked me more — the brazenness of the truck, my fear for my friends, the bizarre, disturbing familiarity of its presence. Can you imagine how it feels for a massive truck displaying the photos and personal information of your friends to have been circling campus for over a month and a half? For the site of such public, aggressive slander, and weaponization of antisemitism to become commonplace? Half my house mates wear keffiyeh everyday. What else are we supposed to do to show that we grieve the hundreds of Palestinian lives lost everyday? Thousands lost in mere weeks? The truck isn’t displaying faces at this exact moment that I see it in front of my home. It’s taken an interlude from student names and faces to show a video. It takes me a second to register. So many of my friends were at the die-in at Harvard Business School. I was there. I listened as my friends spoke over the microphone about how we organize because we love life. We mourn this loss of life. I first noticed the Zionist agitator as it seemed like he was going to step on protesters lying peacefully prone on the grass. My gut fell through my knees, I was scared. I didn’t know what was going on so I sat up to see. He had his phone out, inches from demonstrators faces. I was impressed with the marshall's graceful deflection: they held their scarves up to block his ability to film vulnerable faces. I thought it had de-escalated rather quickly.

And then what? Days later, our Jewish chaplain, Rabbi Hirschy Zarchi, the founder of Harvard’s Chabad, someone I have confided in in the past, sends an email that contains the following line: ‘Let’s increase in mitzvot and live more Jewishly.’ In the same breath, he characterized the interaction as a ‘gang assault.’ This is a blatant lie. It’s a racist lie. I think a gang assault would’ve been.... quite different. Mitzvot are ethical obligations. It was so confusing and devastating to see these two sentences put together in the same email. Sent by a hugely influential Jewish leader to the entire Chabad mailing list. With a blatant lie that hastened the removal of a graduate student from his housing without warning. So coming home to this was devastating. I am afraid to be a Jew on campus who has a complicated relationship to Israel. I feel so alone. I thought when we say ‘never again,’ we will never again tolerate this treatment of a people, this loss of life ever again. How can we let this continue? The way our University speaks of antisemitism makes it seem like Jews are a monolith, that we all feel the same way. What is more discriminatory than assuming a whole group of people is homogenous based on their ethnicity or religion? My administration’s assumption that it speaks for my Jewish voice is more antisemitic than anything my friends have done to cause them to appear on that truck. I don’t understand why my university can’t acknowledge there’s more than one way to be Jewish.

And our administration tells us there's nothing they can do to make it go away, to make us feel safer in our homes.

Anti-semitism is a terrifying and real problem. I love being Jewish. But it's antisemitic to assume that all Jews feel the same way about Israel, which is what the University's communications have conveyed. Islamophobia and racism on our campus are just as big of problems as antisemitism. Why don't they get hearings too? President Gay, does it really feel appropriate, in your heart of hearts, to have a committee on antisemitism and not Islamophobia? Does the price pro-Palestine voices have to pay for their organizing not feel grossly out of proportion and targeted? A first-year proctor and advocate for Palestinian liberation lost his job, our friends are doxxed, people were threatened with blacklisting by billionaires on X. The founder of Accuracy in Media, the company funding the doxxing truck, posted a video of himself at a shooting range hours before the Harvard-Yale tailgate.

I don't know why it's such a radical ask for all students to be equally protected at this campus. We are in an environment where we are supposed to be able to learn, not worry about our imminent physical safety as we try to rally our communities towards peace. This is not my Harvard. This is not a place I'm proud to be a student.”

Testimonies from Jewish students at the University of Pennsylvania:

“It feels like there is so much tension in the air on campus, and it seems like if I speak up about my anti-Zionist beliefs, my voice will be silenced or shot down as “antisemitic” even though I am Jewish. The University of Pennsylvania's administration has essentially refused to acknowledge the havoc that Israel has perpetrated in Gaza, and their recent cancellation of the film *Israelism*, hosted by a progressive Jewish organization, demonstrates a lack of commitment to open dialogue and free speech surrounding Israel and Zionism. I am incredibly angered by the university's actions and I feel as if Penn has recently taken a turn towards censorship, leaving behind diversity of opinion and open dialogue, both of which should be the key tenets of an academic institution.”

“Because of my position on Israel and my involvement in Chavurah, I have had multiple friends cut me off. I have been told by someone I used to attend Shabbat services with that I'm denying my Jewishness and being ‘pointlessly cruel’ towards my own community. My concerns about the safety of my Palestinian peers, Gaza, the future of the Jewish people and the future of Judaism beyond Zionism, have made me a villain to people who had once been my friends. And the university's censoring of progressive Jewish voices and condemnation of calls for a free Palestine as antisemitism has helped validate my peers' attitudes towards me. The future of the

Jewish community at Penn is at a crossroads and the way to protect it is not to silence some Jewish voices and value the other — that will only cause further division and jeopardize the safety of a significant number of Jewish students. The only way forward is to create a space where all Jews can feel heard by one another and by the broader Penn community. By censoring progressive Jews, Penn admin is actively contributing to the dissolution of the Penn Jewish community.”

“When I first became involved in pro-Palestinian activism, I had to come to terms with the very real impacts to my relationships with my friends and family as well as my future career opportunities. My criticism of Israel and its policies is not disconnected from Judaism; rather, it’s inherent in my Jewish beliefs that I question, learn, and engage in critical dialogue in all aspects of my life. My friends and I have been called self-hating Jews, traitors, nazi sympathizers, and worse for expressing dissent with a state that doesn’t represent us, but uses our cultural and religious identity as a justification for genocide. I regard the censorship on campus as a violation of my freedom of speech as well as my freedom of religion, and I condemn Penn for not only failing to provide education about the conflict, but actively suppressing the educational events that student organizations have been forced to host for lack of open dialogue.”

“I had my face posted on a prominent and vitriolic instagram targeting Jewish pro-Palestinian activists on Penn campus. The post was overlaid with a call for administration to leverage a stronger police presence to effectively quash freedom of speech on campus. It’s increasingly unsafe to freely express dissenting opinions on campus, and the administration is promoting censorship instead of education in its students’ moment of need.”