

**TESTIMONY OF RABBI ESTHER REED
EXECUTIVE DIRECTOR OF RUTGERS HILLEL
HOUSE OF REPRESENTATIVES
COMMITTEE ON HOMELAND SECURITY
FIELD HEARING ON COUNTERING VIOLENT EXTREMISM, TERRORISM, AND ANTISEMITIC
THREATS IN NEW JERSEY
October 3, 2022**

My name is Rabbi Esther Reed, and I am the Executive Director of Rutgers Hillel, a Hillel serving one of the largest Jewish undergraduate populations on any campus in North America. Hillel International is the world's largest Jewish student organization, with a presence on more than 850 campuses.

On behalf of the global Hillel movement and of Rutgers Hillel here in New Jersey, thank you for the opportunity to submit testimony to the Committee and for your commitment to countering antisemitism.

Hillel was founded 99 years ago and now, for the first time in recent memory, Jewish students feel unsafe and unwelcome at their own schools.

I am here today to share with you what is happening on campus and to make two requests: we urge continued security funding for religious institutions; and enhanced enforcement of the Department of Education's responsibility to protect the rights of Jewish students.

Antisemitism on campus has risen to unprecedented levels. Hillel tracked 561 incidents of hate against Jewish students last year, a 15% increase from the previous year, and more than triple the number of incidents four years ago.

This hatred comes in the form of graffiti, physical assault, social media rhetoric, and the social exclusion of Jewish students.

At Rutgers-New Brunswick alone:

- AEPI, a Jewish fraternity, was egged two years in a row while students were participating in the solemn, 24-hour memorial practice of reading aloud names of Holocaust victims on Holocaust Memorial Day, as well as on the major Jewish holiday, Rosh Hashana, one week ago today.
- The tires of Jewish students' cars were slashed.
- White supremacist groups posted antisemitic recruitment flyers.
- My student, Ben, who wears a *kippah*, or yarmulke, on his head, was afraid to go to his internship in Jersey City the day a Kosher grocery store there was shot up.

Eggs thrown at a fraternity house don't make international headlines. Slashed tires don't make the evening news. A college student staying home from his internship isn't usually on the agenda of a Congressional hearing.

But nobody wants Rutgers to be the next headline. Nobody wants Rutgers to be home to the next tragedy like the ones our community faced at the Tree of Life massacre in Pittsburgh, the shooting in Poway, or the hostage taking in the Colleyville synagogue in Texas.

We need your help to keep us out of the headlines.

First, I wish to thank you, as members of Congress, for appropriating funds for the security needs of religious institutions. This year, Hillels received grants totaling \$1.9 million for physical security enhancements.

These Nonprofit Security Grant Program funds make a concrete difference in the safety of my students. Rutgers Hillel installed bollards in front of our building to prevent a car from ramming through and harming Jewish students. And we installed new fencing at the back of our facility to prevent intruders entering.

We don't want our institutions and facilities to be ringed with security devices, but sadly, they have to be.

A Rabbi friend recently went to a clergy meeting in his town in NJ. His Christian colleagues were having a lively debate about whether to lock the front doors of their churches. They were weighing their desire for privacy against the value of being a welcoming sanctuary. And my Rabbi friend thought about the active shooter drills his synagogue's pre-school needs to run to keep 2-, 3-, and 4-year-old children safe from harm. He was devastated that the current landscape of antisemitism precludes him from leaving his door unlocked anymore.

And to be clear, locking the door is not enough.

The Jewish community needs more funding to keep us safe, and we urge the Committee to be vigilant in assuring that the Department of Education's Office of Civil Rights will address, investigate, and enforce violations of the federal civil rights of Jewish students.

There are dozens of pending cases involving allegations of antisemitism under Title VI of the Civil Rights Act of 1964, including an action filed against Rutgers University in 2011. Many of the other pending complaints are also over a year old and have yet to be investigated

Every week that goes by is another example of Jewish student rights to an equal educational opportunity not being protected.

On behalf of my students, I appreciate the Committee's vigilance in ensuring the Department of Education carries out its responsibilities under Title VI.

I will leave you with the words of Adina, a student at Rutgers-Newark. Jewish students there tell me that they keep their heads down and hide their Jewish identities so they can avoid trouble.

Adina says:

Every day I am stressed about going to school. When it was announced that we were returning to in person classes, I was not excited because it is so unpleasant being a Jew on the Rutgers-Newark campus. Every single morning, I need to think about things when getting ready for school.

- *Am I dressed too Jewish?*
- *Do I look too Jewish?*
- *Does my shirt have Hebrew on it?*
- *I can't wear something if it says the word, Israel.*
- *It has become a habit that as I leave the parking deck, I check to make sure my necklace is in my shirt.*

[pause]

Jewish students like Adina should not have to tuck in their Jewish star when they are headed to class.

No student should be afraid to express their Jewish identity in New Jersey in 2022.

Again, I thank you for this opportunity, for keeping my students safe, and for your leadership on this vital issue.