

April 15, 2024

The Honorable Virginia Foxx and the Honorable Robert C. “Bobby” Scott
Committee on Education & the Workforce
United States House of Representatives
2176 Rayburn House Office Building
Washington, DC 20515

Dear Chairwoman Foxx and Ranking Member Scott:

My name is Ross A. Frommer, and I am the Vice President of Government Affairs at Columbia University Irving Medical Center (CUIMC). I also serve as the Executive Sponsor of the Jewish Cultural Employee Resource Group (JERG) at CUIMC. I should note that I am a registered lobbyist and that prior to coming to Columbia, I served as a staff person for both the House of Representatives and the Senate. As such, I do feel that I understand and appreciate the important oversight role that Congress can play. I hope this committee will use this hearing to address the important and ongoing issue of antisemitism on college campuses and do so in a thoughtful and deliberate manner. Finally, I write on my own behalf. My views are my own and do not necessarily represent the feelings of the University, its leaders, or other members of the JERG.

I have worked at Columbia for almost 23 years and seven of my close relatives have attended Columbia, earning a total of eight, soon to be nine, degrees. This includes my father, the first in his family to go to college, who graduated from Columbia College in 1954 and the College of Dental Medicine, then called the School of Dental and Oral Surgery, in 1957. He arrived on campus at the tail end of the Jewish quota era, and he used to say how he and my uncles were some of the lucky ones who were able to attend Columbia. I have also been a student, a teacher, and a patient. I say this to highlight my strong ties to the University and my respect and appreciation for what the institution has done for my family and me.

I am a proud, although not necessarily all that observant, Jew and a strong Zionist and supporter of Israel. There is no doubt that the past six plus months have been a tough time to be Jewish on a college campus. I suppose this was always true, but we never realized it until after October 7. I imagine this has not been an easy time to be a Palestinian on a college campus either.

This committee will no doubt hear of multiple instances of antisemitism, antizionism, anti-Israel hatred, and plain flat-out Jew hatred, which have occurred at Columbia. I want to be clear that I do not doubt that this is occurring. The problem is real, it is serious, and it is ongoing. You will also hear criticism of President Shafik about how she has managed this crisis. She and other University leaders have been put in an extremely difficult situation, but while I may not agree with everything that has been said, some of these criticisms are not without merit.

I do want to point out and emphasize that even in these challenging times, Jewish life, Jewish pride, Jewish spirit, Zionism, and support for Israel, are alive and well and strong at CUIMC, perhaps now more than ever. I see it with our faculty. I see it with our staff. I see it with our patients. and perhaps most of all, I see it with our students. Although I am not as close to it downtown, I believe the same thing can be said for the Morningside campus.

The JERG was formed roughly seven years ago and was one of the original ten ERGs at Columbia (there are now 11). Although it is led by my co-chair and me, it is managed by the CUIMC Office of Diversity, Equity, Inclusion, and Belonging (DEIB) and managed very well I might add. I have never felt as though DEIB staff has treated us differently than any of the other ERGs.

Throughout the first four or five years of our existence, we gave out honey for Rosh Hashanah, Hamantaschen for Purim, and lit Hanukah candles on Haven Plaza, the large outdoor space on the CUIMC campus. We also sang and danced for Jewish American Heritage Month. Many of these events were done in partnerships with local synagogues. We had a lot of fun, but we did not tackle many serious issues. Looking back, I wish we had.

In 2021, we did begin to have a more substantive agenda. During the pandemic, we held a forum on Jewish teachings on vaccines. In January of 2022 we marked International Holocaust Remembrance Day (IHRD) by hosting an online seminar with Dr. Guy Stern, a member of the Ritchie Boys who discussed how he and other German speaking Jews who had fled the Nazis played a pivotal role in gathering intelligence for the Allies during World War II. The JERG has made IHRD observance an annual event, and this past January we hosted an online seminar on the role that doctors, and other health care providers played in committing atrocities. Over 200 people attended virtually.

In 2023, the JERG and the Asian and Pacific Islander ERG cohosted a combined Passover/Ramadan lunch. Over Kasher for Passover and Halal food a group of about 50 gathered and talked about the history and traditions of the two holidays. I was very proud that we were able to make this event happen.

Over the summer of 2023, we began plans to host a session on antisemitism on college campuses, which would be one of the featured sessions at the annual DEIB summit scheduled for that fall. By mid-September we had our speakers all set and were ready to go for the scheduled November 2 date. After the October 7 attack, and some of the ensuing activities, there was some discussion about whether we should postpone or even cancel the summit. I and many others felt very strongly that we needed to go ahead, and we did. I moderated this summit and felt it was a very engaging, and important discussion. I know that a lot of Jewish students on campus have talked about feeling unsafe on campus. I do not doubt that is true, but I want to note that after this event, my name was out there publicly, and I have never felt any negative repercussions from it. In fact, the opposite is true. I received compliments and congratulations from several colleagues, both Jewish and non-Jewish alike.

On October 16 there was a vigil on Haven Plaza where we all came together to mourn the victims of October 7. I was personally honored to have been asked to read one of the prayers at this event. More recently, several of us had the privilege of meeting with an October 7 delegation of survivors and family members of hostages arranged by the Israeli American Council that took place near the medical center campus.

Since October 7 the Jewish/Israeli community has been in crisis, and our community has responded. JERG membership has doubled, and we now meet twice as often. We have hosted a session with COPE Columbia, the campus wellness initiative, and we have had numerous guests join us for our virtual meetings. We are also coordinating more closely with our colleagues on the Morningside campus and at Teacher's College. While the JERG is focused primarily on staff and faculty, there are several student groups with whom we coordinate.

I want to be clear that while I may have painted a somewhat positive picture of Jewish and Israeli life at Columbia, Jew hatred in its myriad of forms does exist. For several reasons, I do believe the problem may not be as severe at the medical center as it is at the Morningside campus, but we are certainly not immune from it.

Before closing, I want to make one last comment. On April 4, President Shafik issued a very strongly worded statement condemning the Resistance 101 event. In that statement, she used the phrase, "horrific Hamas terrorist attack in Israel." I commend her for doing so. I know that some have criticized her for not using that or similar language previously. I do not disagree with that criticism; however, I prefer to focus more on the positive actions the University has taken and less on when they were taken.

I am hopeful that going forward the University will continue to take steps to combat antisemitism and anti-Zionism and will make sure that all students, be they Jew or non-Jew, Israeli or non-Israeli, feel safe and welcome on campus.

Thank you for considering my comments on this issue. We are CUIMC. Roar Lion Roar. Am Yisrael Chai.

Very Truly Yours,



Ross A. Frommer

CC: Minouche Shafik, PhD