

IDEAS

Sensationalizing campus antisemitism isn't serving Jewish students like mine

MICHAL RAUCHER MARCH 4, 2024



A Jewish student watches a protest in support of Palestinians and for free speech at New York's Columbia University campus, Nov. 14, 2023. (Spencer Platt/Getty Images)

(JTA) — Last semester I had almost 100 students in my course on the Israeli-Palestinian conflict at Rutgers University. The students represented the diversity of the Rutgers campus, a school with approximately 7,000 Jewish students and 7,000 Muslim and Arab students.

Even as the news streamed out of Israel and Gaza, as the death toll rose and the reports of horrors grew more disturbing, my students made the choice to return to class twice a week. They recommitted to learning about the history, trauma and conflicting narratives of Israelis and Palestinians. Each time they entered the classroom they challenged all those who were mocking the importance of context and

painting college campuses as traumatizing spaces where it was dangerous to learn.

While the outside world was telling them to retreat to their corners, to limit the information they gather and to hold only certain opinions, in my class they did the opposite.

I realize this seems to contradict many of the dark images of Jewish student life painted by some campus activists and professionals. To be sure, since Oct. 7, there have been alarming antisemitic incidents at a number of college campuses. There have also been scary attacks against pro-Palestinian students. These reports worry me as a Jew, as a university professor and as a human being.

Yet there are almost 4,000 colleges and universities in the United States. Those sounding alarms about antisemitism on college campuses are painting specific incidents of antisemitism at a few institutions as endemic to the entire academy. I am concerned by the responses to real and perceived expressions of antisemitism that are spreading fear and isolation among students at a critical time in their education. Jewish students, faculty and staff must approach the university as a place of learning and growth. Perpetuating a narrative that Jews are not welcome on campus means students will be unable to benefit from the diversity and expansiveness of a college education.

I have no doubt that students are experiencing antisemitism in both subtle and overt ways. Antisemitism is part of the cultural history of American universities. And yet I don't think my experience in the classroom since Oct. 7 has been an outlier or should be ignored amid the dire reports painting academia as hostile territory for Jews.

To get remotely close to this kind of picture, one has to classify every student protest and every social media post that is critical of Zionism, Israel or the war as antisemitic. Not every disruption is a threat against Jews on our campus; in fact, the vast majority are not.

We have a responsibility to teach our students how to navigate these experiences without closing themselves off from the broader campus community. We should teach them how to face their fears and

untangle the difference between, say, an actual threat of violence and a political opinion that challenges their core beliefs. We should model how to engage in uncomfortable conversations.

I have been teaching on different college campuses for over a decade, and most of my courses address topics many would consider uncomfortable: gender, religion, reproduction, politics and the Israeli-Palestinian conflict. The university provides an indispensable place for students to engage with ideas that they find challenging, even offensive. Higher education isn't just about transferring information from professors to students. It's about teaching people how to question assumptions, how to be curious about the world around them, and how to construct a different reality.

This kind of education requires a delicate balance between feeling secure and choosing to be vulnerable. Students need to feel secure enough that they are not threatened by new ideas. They will encounter new ideas in every one of their classes, from Statistics to Eastern Philosophy. Students should not run from new ideas or treat new ideas as hostile to their identities. And students need to choose to be vulnerable in their education. Being vulnerable means we are allowing ourselves to be affected by someone else. A student who chooses to be vulnerable enters the classroom with humility and a willingness to consider multiple perspectives. This approach to learning fosters curiosity and critical thinking. Vulnerability is not comfortable, but transformational learning requires it.

Jews are among the most highly educated religious groups in the world. In North America, 75% of Jews have been to college, compared to 40% of non-Jews. Universities were not always welcome places for Jews. In the first half of the 20th century, explicit quotas and selection techniques intentionally limited the number of Jews permitted to enroll at some of this country's elite universities. But by the 1970s, these limitations were no longer in place and Jews made up significant percentages of undergraduate students at these same colleges. Although prejudice persisted on American campuses, the university provided Jews with an unparalleled opportunity for upward class

mobility and social acculturation. This was particularly true for Jewish women.

Sensationalist reports of campus antisemitism harm Jewish students by making it more difficult for them to reap the benefits of a college education. The danger of this kind of inflammatory rhetoric is that Jewish students come to see everyone on campus as a potential threat. Rumors about “left-wing” professors who might grade Jewish students harshly keep Jewish students from taking certain classes. Text messages and emails that warn about protests on campus that might “terrorize” Jewish students discourage them from being curious about their peers. Silencing guest speakers robs students of the opportunity to assess controversial ideas for themselves. This kind of environment leaves students in a heightened state of fear and insecurity. Nobody can do the kind of learning they need to do in this state.

Additionally, these kinds of reports threaten the safety of Arab students and faculty, who are implicitly, or sometimes explicitly, cast as threats to Jewish students. Rhetoric about the danger of those who are advocating for the safety and security of Palestinians demonizes students, discredits faculty, and puts them all in harm’s way.

Those of us on college campuses should view this moment as an opportunity to educate, not just about Israel and Palestine, but about how to engage in civil discourse and how to advocate for one’s cause. Around the country, professors have been helping students process the news and encouraging them to ask questions and learn from each other. Universities and departments have been hosting small group discussions, leading teach-ins, inviting speakers who model respectful dialogue, reading poetry from war zones, and bringing student leaders together to create a different campus environment.

Instead of fearmongering and finger-pointing, faculty and staff on college campuses should be helping students understand, analyze and react maturely to the claims, images and experiences around them. We should be teaching them how to have conversations with people who disagree with them. This is what we are supposed to do as educators,

and it's how we help our students become knowledgeable and secure citizens who are catalysts for positive change.

I have seen students from all sides of the political spectrum take us up on this approach. We just have to keep offering it to them.

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