

The Impact of Antisemitism on Emerging Adults' Jewish Identity

Part 1: Defining the Problem

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Abstract

Psychologists have long recognized that late adolescence and young adulthood—the period encompassed by the college years—is crucial for identity formation. Yet only more recently have we accepted that commitments to Israel are not simply a political phenomenon among Jewish students. The commitment to Israel is a central feature of Jewish young adult identity and peoplehood. Antisemitism on college campuses thus mounts an assault not only on religious beliefs but on Jewish student identity. That pattern has increased since the October 7, 2023, Hamas murder spree in Israel. Indeed, it is an assault on Jewish identity worldwide. This essay draws together existing research to offer new conclusions about what is at stake.

Keywords: antisemitism, antizionism, education, identity

INTRODUCTION: JEWISH IDENTITY ON CAMPUS

With Jewish student identity under increasing assault, it is critical that all concerned understand both its role in development and the evolving challenges it faces.

Our identity is how we define ourselves, encompassing our self-concept or personal identity (which can be conceived of as the story that we tell ourselves to understand and give continuity to our lives to this moment) and our social identity (our sense of belonging and being connected to groups with whom we share values and history peoplehood, nationality, religion,

and other factors). Identification, on the other hand, is the way that others define us according to their own notions of ethnicity, race, culture, and so forth. The identification attributed to or imposed upon us by others—which we may accept or reject, in part or in whole—impacts our identity formation in diverse ways and may dramatically shape our sense of who we are and why we are who we are, greatly influencing the directions of our lives.

Psychologists have long recognized that late adolescence and young adulthood—the period encompassed by the college years—is crucial for identity formation. Erik Erikson recognized the

centrality of identity when he observed a psychological crisis in some World War II veterans: "What impressed me most was the loss in these men of a sense of identity."¹ He articulated a theory of staged psychosocial development with identity at its core, giving emphasis to the challenges and opportunities for new forms of individual integration that occur in the transition from adolescence to adulthood.

As Robert Weisskirch and his coauthors summarize the developmental consensus, these are the years of emerging adulthood when individuals, Jews among them, are developing a sense of their own distinct identity, developing new relationships and viewpoints, and forming the basis and perspectives for making long term decisions.² In this way the college years shape the futures that young adults can imagine for themselves.

These emerging adults who are in the process of exploring and consolidating their identities, including Jewish students, are at a moment of special vulnerability. An emerging ethnic identification at that point can be a double-edged sword, at once providing a bulwark against prejudice and discrimination and making people sensitive to their presence and the consequent psychological impact. During the process of ethnic and identity exploration and formation individuals are less secure and confident about themselves, which can increase emotional vulnerability. On the other hand, those students with stronger ethnic identity and support from their family and environment are more resilient and may not react as diffusely and fragily to intimidation, hate, and ostracism. Nonetheless, they will still be sensitive to their presence.

As part of their identity, most US Jews, including students, religiously observant or not, have a deep attachment to Israel. As the ADL observed in 2023, "A large majority of American Jews feel attached to Israel as the Jewish homeland or view a relationship with Israel as part of their Jewish identities, regardless of their views about Israeli government policies"; the Pew Research Center reported in 2021 that 80% of US Jews overall shared that attachment.³

In the wake of the Holocaust, not only assimilation within European countries but mere survival was categorically in jeopardy. The attachment to Israel was strengthened as knowledge and details about the Holocaust spread in the postwar years. That attachment persists today, both among Jews who approve of a given Israeli government's policies and those who do not. Israel is integral to their self-understanding, to their larger historical community, to a sense of peoplehood, identity, and belonging, and even to self-esteem. Yet only more recently have we embraced the truth that commitments to Israel are not simply a political phenomenon among Jewish students. The commitment to Israel is a central feature of Jewish young adult identity and peoplehood. Alyza Lewin, President of the Louis D. Brandeis Center for Human Rights Under Law, who has for several years urged acceptance of the fact that Israel is central to Jewish psychic life, argues that the "yearning for Zion—the emotional tie with Israel—is a deep, spiritual, integral part of Jewish identity."⁴

The concerted and escalating effort to stigmatize Israel on campus offers cruel testimony to that reality. It can break down students' sense of group belonging and an important component of their emerging identity. The rise of campus antisemitic antizionism, detailed below, is now pervasive in both rightwing and leftwing culture. It threatens Jewish student identity development in ways for which traditional political analysis cannot account. For too long many have assumed that all attempts to criminalize and delegitimize the Jewish state have Israel as their primary target. On campus, with a vulnerable age group at stake, Jewish student identity itself is an equally important target, no longer an accidental byproduct of antizionism but one of its deliberate goals.

The sometimes-murderous threats posed by radical rightwing antisemitism have not so far manifested on campus, but they form part of the cultural milieu in which Jewish identity develops, and they can inform campus antizionism. But the most immediate threats to Jewish identity

are from the left. Taken together, the threat of violence from the right and the vilification of Israel and endorsement of Hamas's violence from the left have made many Jewish students increasingly feel unsafe. Those feelings have thus escalated since the October 7, 2023, massacre in Israel, given that threats of violence against Jews and aggressive antisemitic rhetoric have flooded social media in its wake. That trend was in evidence even before Israel mounted its ground campaign against Hamas. On campus, Students for Justice in Palestine (SJP) chapters initiated a pro-Hamas offensive immediately after the attack, often declaring that Israel's prior conduct warranted the attack. SJP saw the pogrom as a triumph and an opportunity, not a disaster. SJP is now supported by nearly a hundred Faculty Justice in Palestine chapters.⁵ Widely designated a terrorist group by Western nations, Hamas for SJP and its faculty allies is the revolutionary vanguard of anti-colonialism. Jews, meanwhile, were immersed in trauma. Jewish students and faculty alike often felt very much alone, even when support groups are present, though support rarely exists for Jewish faculty.

Even though a majority of the 3,500 US campuses do not appear to have a general problem with antisemitism and fewer still are true centers of antisemitic or anti-Israel activism, most of the large campuses with substantial Jewish student populations have created hostile environments for their Jewish students. There are clusters of such campuses on the east and west coast and in the Midwest, and the number of such campuses may have increased since 10/7. Unfortunately, since that includes some of our largest enrollment campuses, it means that the number of students exposed to antisemitism exceeds what the number of campuses involved would suggest. Moreover, especially since the October pogrom in Israel, it is clear that problem campuses in the United States include several of our most elite and influential schools, among them Cornell, Columbia, Harvard, and Yale. Commuter and community colleges tend to be less politicized, but that is little consolation to

the thousands of Jewish students who are regularly exposed to antisemitism. The large data file of antisemitic incidents maintained by AMCHA records about 500 schools that have had one or more antisemitic incidents between 2015 and 2023. That number is likely to increase.

The research carried out by Leila Beckwith and Tammi Rossmann-Benjamin established several other facts about campus antisemitism.⁶ It confirms that the majority of schools with large populations of Jewish students are also centers of antisemitism. The presence of a Students for Justice in Palestine chapter, the major national antizionist and anti-Israel student organization, is a reliable predictor of heightened antisemitism, especially if Jewish Voice for Peace (JVP) is also active on campus. Even though JVP formally declares itself to be an antizionist group, it was shocking to experience its support for the Hamas massacre. Beckwith and Rossmann-Benjamin describe JVP as a kind of "force multiplier," maximizing the impact that other antisemitic constituencies have. There are about 200 campuses with an active SJP chapter. Finally, the presence of several faculty members who demonize Israel and support the BDS movement correlates with demonstrable antizionist and antisemitic campus environments. This does not mean, however, that Jewish students cannot experience antisemitism in specific contexts anywhere.

Extraordinary pressures are now being applied to Jewish college students in the midst of a critical stage in their identity development. That points to the need for an analysis that consolidates our understanding of the psychological needs and risks at stake. To the degree possible within an essay, we need to draw together a wide range of research results and update the conclusions they warrant in the new environment we confront.

We will proceed below first by specifying the critical features of identity formation during the college years that begin with late adolescence. Then we will describe the challenges that antizionism presents to that process, challenges

exacerbated because antizionism has effectively merged with antisemitism.⁷ We devote a separate section to the current role played by identity politics and conclude part one of this essay with a review of the increasing challenges Jewish students confront in a radically polarized campus environment.

YOUNG ADULT IDENTITY FORMATION

The academic environment is an epicenter for identity-formation development during the early years of adulthood. The period between eighteen and twenty-nine years of age is called emerging adulthood, a category pioneered by Jeffrey Arnett and one now widely recognized as critical to the individual's lifetime personal and social development.⁸ It is in these years that people leave their familiar environments (home, friends, family, and surroundings), and venture into the unfamiliar, forming new friends and relationships, new living arrangements, and often caring for themselves for the first time. It is a period when individuals spend time in unstructured situations and face the need to choose between alternative decisions with lifetime consequences without the familiar support or advisors they had. As Seth Schwartz and his coauthors argue, "If emerging adults are to make enduring life commitments (e.g., romantic commitments, career choices) by the end of their 20s, they must first undertake the psychological task of individually forming a stable and viable identity that can guide and sustain these commitments."⁹ The college years represent a pivotal part of this journey of exploration of self and new choices, undertaken without the benefit of familiar support systems and surroundings.

When relationships and environments are familiar, even if unpleasant, individuals typically can figure out how to navigate them; yet, when people and milieus are different, and the necessary sense of belonging, stability, support, and security don't exist, it is critical for the student to find a way to obtain them. These insecure,

destabilizing, usually anxiety-producing situations nurture the yearning to be part of a group, to feel accepted. As Lars Leeman and his collaborators emphasize, in this unfamiliar environment, individuals are at increased vulnerability to assaults on their identity by the prevailing social or power group because the individual's perception of feeling accepted, socially included and connected is built on the relationship between the individual and their social environment. Kelly-Ann Allen and her coauthors add that the need to belong includes the urge to communicate with one another.¹⁰

The unfamiliar college or university environment produces new pressures to conform. As Roy Baumeister has argued in an influential series of essays, the need to belong and to form the requisite human attachments is a fundamental human motivation; it is hardwired in us.¹¹ During the course of their adolescence, young people may have found ways to resist some social pressures or at least define themselves so as to gain a measure of freedom from them. In the instability and unfamiliarity of the college environment, increased vulnerability and the need to feel part of a community gives power and attractiveness to the prevailing popular consensus. On some campuses the popular political consensus is aggressively antizionist, opposed not only to Israel's policies but to its very existence. Thus, the need to belong cuts two ways, promoting the desire to identify with particular groups but also leading those in the group to construct an outside group of rejected others.¹² Group membership provides opportunities to satisfy the fundamental human need to communicate, but social exclusion and ostracism frustrates that need, potentially with long term psychological consequences. Antizionism has created a new way to fashion a cohort of rejected Jews, Jews who do not belong.

The campus campaign to exile Zionists inevitably triggers bitter historical echoes. It is as if the centuries-long struggle for Jewish assimilation has abruptly come to an end. But then it

appears assimilation with a question mark is still possible, though with a new requirement: you have to condemn and symbolically excise part of your Jewishness, namely whatever love you harbor for Israel. As with assimilation historically, Jews who pass the test will continue to suffer doubt about their hidden loyalty. If you wish to be accepted, you must condemn the Jewish state over and over again. Better yet, join Jewish Voice for Peace and become a local leader of the boycott movement.

As the rise of antisemitism continues to include antisemitic violence, its traumatic character, perhaps distinctly for those who thought antisemitic violence clearly in the past, triggers echoes with the Holocaust. That will likely continue to be the case because Hamas's October 2023 murder spree is a watershed event in the history of antisemitism and a catastrophe for Jews worldwide. It will take future research to determine whether intergenerational trauma—psychological trauma endured by contemporary Jewish communities and identity groups carried on as part of the group's collective memory and shared sense of identity—is reawakened as a consequence. But it is certain to play a major role for Israelis in the wake of this merciless pogrom, and it will likely haunt Jews worldwide as well.

In the immediate wake of the barbaric Hamas assault, leftwing pro-Palestinian campus groups began to do their best to justify the wanton murder of Jews. Thirty student groups at Harvard issued a statement declaring Israel “entirely responsible for all unfolding violence.” It was echoed at Yale and the University of Virginia. Hamas solidarity rallies were staged at the University of Illinois and elsewhere. In addition to many US Jewish students having friends and relatives in Israel, most Jews have an attachment to Israel that makes Israelis part of their extended family and community. The Hamas pogrom was thus guaranteed to be experienced as immensely personal, but with campus efforts to both applaud and normalize Hamas's murder spree, long-term traumatic

effects were made still more likely. The sense of *collective* Jewish isolation was then enhanced with a massive November 2023 anti-Israel rally in Washington, DC, and large rallies in other cities. But for many Jewish students, as University of Florida Hillel Director Jonah Zinn pointed out in a November 16, 2023, community briefing, the feeling of being alone is most unavoidably maximized by online antisemitism.

It is essential in this context to understand the processes that contribute to healthy identity formation, as well as the factors that can contribute to psychological crisis and potential mental health problems. As Juuso Repo summarizes earlier research, “Emerging adults can be expected to experience changes in their sense of autonomy and belongingness in relation to their families, peer groups, and the society. They represent a particular at-risk population regarding mental health, as the symptoms of chronic problems such as anxiety and depression typically begin before the age of 24 years old.” Lexine Stapinski reports that victimization at school has been identified as a major risk factor for anxiety disorder in adulthood. Andriik Becht adds that identity uncertainty in emerging adulthood represents a significant risk factor for the development of mental health problems and psychopathology.¹³

Jeffrey Arnett identifies emerging adulthood as a period having five features: a) age of identity exploration; b) age of instability; c) age of self-focus; d) age of feeling in-between; and e) age of possibilities.¹⁴ Emerging adulthood offers the most opportunity for identity exploration in the areas of love, work, and worldviews. This is a time when emerging adults focus on their own distinct individuality (“who am I”) as well as a sense of relatedness to others (“how do other people see me”). Both components are central. Healthy personal identity consolidation requires a sense of self that is internally consistent and coherent, based on reflective commitments, and that supports independent adult functioning and integration into a validating adult community.

Combining an evolving sense of self-esteem with productive personal relationships is central to that process. Richard Robins and Kali Trzeniewski point out that self-esteem shows systematic changes that are meaningfully connected to age-related life experiences and contexts. "The role of the self, as an organizing psychological construct, influences how individuals orient their behavior to meet new demands in their environment and new developmental challenges." They add that the best way to understand self-esteem development is to understand the self-evaluative mechanisms that drive it. Ulrich Orth and Robins note that high self-esteem prospectively predicts success and well-being in relationships, work, and health. Roy Baumeister and his coauthors argue that high self-esteem is strongly interrelated to happiness and correlates with high self-regulation strategies.¹⁵ People with high self-esteem use better self-regulation strategies than those with low self-esteem. Better self-regulation means that individuals are managing their emotions and actions, and therefore can follow-through with plans they make for themselves. It is difficult to develop high self-esteem in an environment where one feels attacked, demeaned, or ostracized.

There is normal stress that follows from going to live in an unfamiliar environment with new people. The process of confronting those challenges can, however, be buffered by supportive and protective relationships. But stress in the form of personal attacks and ostracism can threaten identity and erode self-efficacy sufficiently to put students at risk for developing mental health problems. Weisskirch observes that a strong sense of ethnic identity can be a buffer from those forces, but an uncertain search for an ethnic identity conversely can lead to depression when met with aggression.

The protective factors facilitating positive development include interpersonal strengths and the availability of social resources, in addition to cognitive/individual strengths. Relationships with peers are associated with better adolescent mental health and successful adaptation to one's

environment and identity development. Importantly, Weisskirch and his coauthors showed that Jewish Americans who have a sense of belonging and resolution as Jewish Americans also report higher self-esteem; they showed as well that Jewish American ethnic identities are consolidated during this time. Yet antizionist and antisemitic forces on campus can combine to challenge and undermine Jewish student self-esteem and identity.

Subjective, interpretive factors related to social inclusion and exclusion reflect an individual's relationships and sense of agency in the socio-ecological system. The individual's perception of feeling socially included is important because it builds on a sense of community with supportive, stable relationships between individuals and their social environment. Adolescents' experiences of social exclusion, such as being bullied or feeling lonely, are associated with long-lasting symptoms. Research on the impact of social inclusion shows that it positively affects the individual's participation, sense of belonging, as well as citizenship, agency, and responsibility. Bullying and victimization at school has been identified as a major risk factor for anxiety disorder and other psychological problems in adulthood, along with creating future problems in relationships. Research has shown that students who have positive relationships with their teachers tend to be less bullied by their peers. Yet faculty and academic departments now play a significant role in attacks on Jewish students.

Cultural identity refers to the ways in which individuals define themselves in relation to the groups to which they belong (e.g., family, religious community, nation). Jean Phinney adds that, during the emerging adulthood years, ethnic minorities have to figure out their own identity in the context of the larger society.¹⁶ The campus to a significant degree creates a distinct world unto itself that is the society students confront. To thrive in that world, students have to operate with a sense of psychological safety, a concept we need to define.

PSYCHOLOGICAL SAFETY ON CAMPUS

Fulfilling the mission of higher education requires the freedom to learn and explore; it cannot be realized without a sense of psychological safety. Alexander Newman defines psychological safety as “a shared belief amongst individuals as to whether it is safe to engage in interpersonal risk-taking” in a given setting. In a psychologically safe setting, people “feel that their colleagues will not reject [them] for being themselves or saying what they think”; thus they “are able to engage in constructive conflict or confrontation, and feel that it is safe to experiment and take risks.” This overlaps with trust, but “psychological safety is conceptually different as it focuses on how group members perceive a group norm, whilst trust focuses on how one person views another.”¹⁷ Universities are not in the business of providing intellectual safety. Intellectual discovery requires challenge and risk; psychological safety helps make that possible.

As Amy Edmondson emphasizes, feeling psychologically safe allows people to perform their best at home, school, and work. Yet, Alums for Campus Fairness reports that 95% of Jewish college students and recent graduates feel that antisemitism is a major problem on campuses and at least 80% have experienced it personally. As Adelaide McClintock and others define it, having a psychologically safe educational environment refers to the perception that the learning environment is safe for interpersonal risk taking, exposing vulnerability, and contributing perspectives without fear of negative consequences.¹⁸

Researchers like Edmondson note that psychological safety makes a significant difference in teaching and learning, promoting development, innovation, and collaboration. Yet Jewish students frequently state that they feel psychologically and occasionally physically unsafe at their universities. Their exposure to antisemitic speech causes psychological damage whether that is intended or not. Exposure to antisemitism encompasses not only overt

aggression but also casual contact with ignorant stereotypical views. Casual antisemitic remarks may be initially discounted, but over time they can chip away at student confidence and undermine what might otherwise be a positive experience. All these forms of exposure are associated with negative psychosocial consequences. As we will detail below, students, staff, and faculty frequently feel the need to mask their Jewish identity to avoid negative actions by others. Weisskirch suggests those Jews with light complexions may choose to pass as members of the majority group, thereby accepting an identification assigned by others, though the self-denial involved can lead to internalized shame and depression.

Individuals commonly do not report incidents of antisemitic harassment and bullying, perhaps because they believe matters will get worse if events are publicized or because they believe there is no administrative recourse for this type of identity abuse. As ADL and Hillel report together, “a fear of backlash—including a fear of being targeted by the perpetrator and fear of negative academic, social, or professional repercussions” leads students not to seek redress for incidents of antisemitism.¹⁹ For their part, administrators too often “mistakenly believe that the antizionist animus on campus is simply one side of a good-faith political debate”; they do not recognize that “Judaism is an *ethno-religion*, a belief system inextricably connected to cultural heritage, traditions, history—and land.”²⁰ Relentless demonization of the Jewish collective, Israel, thus registers as individual bullying and harassment, which increasingly occurs online as well. Indeed, as Roy Baumeister observes, “Online interaction has also greatly increased the opportunities for bullying and brutal mob action, for spreading false information about other people, and for making a slight mistake that will damage one’s identity for years to come.”²¹

As the ADL/Hillel survey reports, the number of such incidents dramatically increased after Hamas’s October 2023 attack: “Prior to

10/7, two-thirds (66.6%) of Jewish students said they felt 'very' or 'extremely' physically safe on campus, compared to less than half (45.5%) post-10/7. Feelings of emotional safety among Jewish students changed even more dramatically—two-thirds (65.8%) of Jewish students said they felt 'very' or 'extremely' emotionally safe before 10/7, which fell to a third (32.5%) after 10/7.”

THE INCREASING ANTISEMITIC THREAT

Since 2016, Jewish student sense of vulnerability to antisemitic violence has increased in tandem with that of the off-campus Jewish public. The August 2017 “Unite the Right” rally in Charlottesville, Virginia, with its Nazi-style torch parade and mass chanting of “Jews will not replace us,” capped with the murder of a counter-protestor, introduced many to the threat of far right violence. In October 2018, a fanatic antisemite gunned down eleven Jews worshipping at the Tree of Life synagogue in Pittsburgh, Pennsylvania. In April of the following year a gunman attacked a Chabad synagogue in Poway, California. Jewish institutions across the country hired guards and took other security measures if they had not already done so. These antisemitic events established and continued to deepen a break with the past for American Jews, but a still more massive caesura for Jews worldwide accompanied the unspeakable brutality of the 2023 Hamas assault in Israel.

Meanwhile, pervasive and markedly vulgar antisemitism proliferates on social media and on the dark web. Available worldwide, it makes “it can't happen here” an increasingly impossible local claim. The vast increase of antisemitism on social media and on websites affects student well-being even though most of it does not originate on campus. The American Jewish Committee's report on the state of antisemitism in the United States in 2022 disclosed that 69% of American Jews between the ages of eighteen and twenty-nine had encountered online antisemitism more

than once over the past year and another 15% had done so once.²² They will encounter it again. The psychological impact can be long lasting.

Fear and anxiety among Jewish students have also grown with a series of violent attacks on and mass murders of other minorities, including African American and LGBTQ+ Americans. As Graham Wright and his collaborators observe, while antisemitic elements of the Black Lives Matter movement have been deeply troubling, especially in the light of the historic Jewish commitment to the civil rights movement, BLM also “serves as a reminder that American society is often still hostile and unwelcoming to members of ethnic and religious minority groups.”²³ Jeffrey Cohen adds that concern about antisemitism intersects with awareness of a deteriorating climate for other minority groups.²⁴ The overall rise of far right political violence also serves as a warning to Jews. Shame about openly expressing racist beliefs in some quarters has disappeared over the last decade.

Chaya Abrams and Kelsey Armeni argue that Jewish students consequently “hold anticipatory fear of the physical and psychological damage that anti-Semitism brings to Jewish identity.”²⁵ As Weisskirch observes, “Although individual Jewish Americans may not personally have experienced discrimination, they may still feel that they experience discrimination as a group.” While it is useful to differentiate between perceptions and actual encounters with antisemitism, psychology has long taught us to respect the authenticity of feelings and perceptions. Moreover, an online encounter with a call to kill Jews is quite real and a part of the individual's lived experience. Some, including Sara Aeder, assert that the “disconnect between lived experience and the perception of antisemitism,” between direct experience and what people “merely read about,” needs to be emphasized so that unrealistic fears do not multiply and misrepresent reality.²⁶ Yet perceptions are people's reality. That said, we cannot be certain whether current anxieties reflect realistic concerns about

the future or unwarranted fear, whether the events of 2017–2019, let alone 2023, should be treated “as isolated occurrences or as harbingers of a new wave of anti-Jewish violence and bigotry.”²⁷ But historical precedent suggests that an elevated level of antisemitism will persist even if it declines somewhat after the current war in Gaza concludes.

Lee Pachter and his coauthors point out that research has shown that perceived discrimination itself can have negative health outcomes.²⁸ And in one area we do have near certainty: the intensification of anti-Israel and anti-Jewish sentiment on campus is not about to diminish or disappear. Some antizionists, including David Samel, insist that claims a crisis of antisemitism is under way in higher education are a hoax.²⁹ Not all campuses by any means are permeated with antizionism and antisemitism. And students in the hard sciences and other fields can sometimes quietly do their work, keep their heads down, avoid campus disputes, and protect themselves from hostile campus settings.

At the University of Illinois at Urbana-Champaign, until the Gaza solidarity encampment debuted in April 2024, you could be working in the Plant Sciences Lab and be oblivious to events many blocks away on the main quad, where students were milling around the forty-foot-wide Israeli Apartheid Week wall. If you arrived at the quad and discovered it unexpectedly, as Cary Nelson did in 2012, the shock of seeing antizionism physically installed in the heart of the university would remain for years. There could hardly be a less ambiguous way of declaring the institution a hostile space for Zionists and Jews. But the University administration declared the wall a fire hazard and mandated that it be disassembled each night and erected anew the following morning. Finding that an unworkable chore, the student group sought a department with a building on the quad that would provide space for a much smaller wall that the university would permit to stand overnight. Nelson’s own Department of English agreed to do so.

The most potent antisemitism and the greatest threats to Jewish student wellbeing are typically concentrated in particular academic disciplines and the departments and programs that represent them. For students who major in those disciplines—among them Women’s or Gender Studies, Middle East Studies, and African American Studies—their whole academic and departmental social opportunities are permeated, saturated, with antizionism that crosses the line into antisemitism. A number of other humanities and social science disciplines on a given campus, often including anthropology, operate with the same bias. Those students experience the university as a whole as antisemitic; indeed, their university experience *is* antisemitic. The psychological impact may be as great as if there were no countervailing force on campus. Large university campuses in particular are complex social entities. They include subcultures with a certain degree of relative autonomy and isolation from one another. Residential and commuter campuses also present different cultural patterns.

Similarly, Jewish students active in pro-Zionist or simply visibly Jewish groups are likely to be targeted by antisemites. That exposure to antisemitism may well have increased since the 2016 US presidential campaign. There is unquestionably a greater sense of cultural permission fueled by the far right to vent negative feelings about all minority groups—African Americans, Asian Americans, and Jewish Americans among them. A survey of members of AEPi, the main Jewish fraternity reveals high exposure to antisemitism among its members.³⁰

Evidence for the impact of these trends now includes the documentation provided in support of several legal actions. In 2022, for example, a complaint was filed with the US Department of Education’s Office of Civil Rights on behalf of two Jewish students in Brooklyn College’s graduate mental health counseling program. The complaint alleges that the students were subjected to antisemitic harassment from both program faculty and fellow students. Program

faculty advanced “the narrative that all Jews are white and privileged and therefore contribute to the systematic oppression of people of color.” Since there are many Jews of color, among them half the Jews in Israel, the students unsurprisingly pushed back, objecting to an accusation that is both factually wrong and inherently antisemitic. Instead of welcoming free debate on the topic, program faculty and administrators then sought to put the students in their place, issuing this demand: “get your whiteness in check.” Other students chimed in, eagerly bullying the two Jewish students.³¹

Philip Rodkin and his coauthors define bullying as “aggression within the context of a relationship of abuse—an asymmetric power relationship and accompanying specter of abuse elicits outrage and the unequal, coercive power is what distinguishes bullying from aggression.”³² Bullying can readily combine political and personal motivations. It can pressure students to conform or mask their identity, or it can serve instead to isolate and ostracize them. It can channel or disguise antisemitic impulses.

In the college environment bullying encompasses both face-to-face assaults and cyberbullying. Cyberbullying, moreover, can spread anonymously. The presence of other bystanders during cyberbullying decreases the likelihood that a bystander will defend the cyberbullying victim. The moral disengagement, heightened anti-social conformity, and bad relationship with bullies significantly affect the bystander's readiness to defend victims.

The Brooklyn College incidents are similar to those that have taken place at several other institutions, among them Stanford University and George Washington University. The US Office of Civil Rights is investigating complaints about those schools as well. At issue will not only be the facts in dispute but also a fundamental determination of whether the actions were antisemitic and whether they constituted racial and ethnic discrimination and discrimination based on shared ancestry. Those issues have been

the core of scholarly and legal analysis of the cases as well.

These high profile legal cases highlight the wider phenomenon: the creation of hostile educational and psychological environments for Jewish college students. In its review of 2022-2023 anti-Israel campus activism, the ADL observed a coarsening of rhetoric “devolving into outright calls to ostracize Zionists from all aspects of life, including calls for Zionists to be fired from their jobs, ‘confronted’ and ‘disrupted,’ effectively marginalizing the mainstream Jewish community.” That effect was magnified by some organized college group support for Hamas after its October 7, 2023, murder spree. The need for a compensatory sense of Jewish community escalated as well.

Antizionist and antisemitic faculty members exacerbate the problem by creating hostile learning environments in classrooms that alienate Jewish students. An antisemitic classroom environment is one in which Jewish and other pro-Israel students cannot speak up without fear of punishment, harassment, ostracism, and humiliation. Formal departmental declarations of the falsehood that Israel within its pre-1967 borders is an apartheid racist state, advanced for the first time in May 2021, have perilous psychosocial consequences for Jewish students. As Nelson's *Hate Speech and Academic Freedom* details, those official statements add significantly to the normalization of antizionism that has accelerated over the past few years. They facilitate harassment based on social identity that is far more targeted than traditional bullying. Healthy group dynamics and learning become impossible in such settings. Indeed, relevant medical research demonstrates that there are physical effects from such psychological assaults, as well as impacting the students' ability to learn and undergo appropriate identity development.

These developments place us at the intersection of politics and psychology as we seek to understand how emerging adults' Jewish identity development is in crisis. They raise a number of

general concerns: What psychological impacts do such assaults as these have on the identities of Jewish students? What psychological characteristics and institutional contexts make students more or less vulnerable to these stresses? In what ways do antisemitic educational environments damage identity development during emerging adulthood with long-term psycho-social consequences? How does faculty antizionism interdict healthy and normal student self-expression?

Studies of US campus antisemitism conducted before 10/7 have been partly superseded by subsequent events. But the questions asked in such studies had already left some issues unresolved. Students can fairly say they do not believe their campus is overall hostile to Jews while still having been deeply affected by a number of antisemitic incidents, remarks, or classroom experiences. Studies that try to answer whether a campus as a whole is antisemitic rely on an average of student views, which leave intensely antizionist individual departmental culture invisible. Averaging the views of students in women's studies, physics, and chemistry does not tell us what most matters about Jewish student life. A college does not have to be pervasively antisemitic to have an adverse social or psychological impact on some of its students.

Notably, student governments dominated by antizionist and anti-Israel activists have succeeded in passing divestment or boycott resolutions even when a majority of students would be opposed. The symbolic and psychological effect of such votes can be significant even when they do not represent majority opinion. They brand the student body as antizionist whether or not the vote is truly representative. And they ostracize Jewish students psychologically.

IDENTITY POLITICS

There is wide recognition that the contemporary American campus includes considerable student jockeying for influence, credibility, prestige, and status by way of identity politics. One trend due largely to the influence of the political left has

been to establish what amounts to one or more identity-based hierarchies in which relative prestige depends on establishing your identity group's victimhood status. In debates over student antizionist divestment or boycott resolutions, historical realities are sometimes set aside in favor of struggles to prove that members of your contemporary group are not only the most mistreated and discriminated against but actually the only "true" such victims. At the University of Illinois at Urbana-Champaign, a recent student government debate over a resolution to divest from companies doing business in Israel never mentioned either any actual Israeli practices or policies or even the Israeli-Palestinian conflict. Instead, hours were spent with Palestinians, Jews, and their allies trying to prove which group suffered the most discrimination on campus. This is not a way to assess a political and cultural struggle on the other side of the planet. One of us (Cary Nelson) participated in the debate as a faculty representative and tried to no avail to shift the focus toward more conventional political grounds where history and facts could be debated. The American Jewish Committee in its campus action plan urges that we "recenter the conversation about the Middle East back to a place of fact-based exchange," but the combination of high emotion, identity-based politics, and organized group passion often puts that goal out of reach.³³

The project of criminalizing Zionism and discrediting its allies joins with the larger project of denying Jewish peoplehood, and both agendas play out on the terrain of campus identity politics. The fact that Jewish peoplehood with its national, cultural, historical, and racial diversity does not map onto the characteristics of other ethnic groups makes it easier for Israel's opponents to discount Zionism as a feature of Jewish identity. Identification with Zionism is then restricted to an ethical debate. Palestinian groups are often among those who insist that Judaism is a religion and a religion only. A generalized campus respect for ethnicities, supposedly embodied in DEI initiatives, thus does not

extend to Jews. "On campuses dominated by the politics of identity and oppression, the specific nature of the denigration faced by Jewish Zionist students, which draws upon classic antisemitic themes of Jewish malevolence and undue privilege, power and control, has not only made Zionist students social pariahs, it has made it extremely difficult for them to draw attention to the harms they are experiencing and to seek redress. Unlike bigoted acts directed at members of identity groups perceived as lacking privilege and power, which usually evoke enormous sympathy for the victimized group and a collective resolve to fight the bigotry, bigoted acts directed at Zionist Jews are more likely to evoke sympathy for the perpetrators than the victims."³⁴

THE ANTIZIONIST CHALLENGE

After centuries of discrimination and violence against Jews, a number of European countries during the Enlightenment slowly began to grant basic civil and political rights to their Jewish populations. With intellectual underpinnings in place, progress accelerated in the nineteenth century. But a ferocious counter-reaction to Jewish emancipation formed as well, eventually producing a new racialized antisemitism that supplemented the existing religious bias. With some Jews believing acceptable forms of assimilation and unambiguous full citizenship within existing European states impossible, they created the Zionist movement. It was dedicated to recreating a Jewish homeland that would give full realization to Jewish national aspirations. From the start, across its multiple incarnations, Zionism was at once a political, cultural, religious, and spiritual movement, a movement incorporating a historical legacy, and it remains so today. Although various geographical destinations were considered as possibilities for a homeland, the Jewish longing to return to Zion, their ancestral home, had been part of Jewish culture and religious observance for two thousand years, and it proved the compelling option. Indeed,

Jews had continued to live there through the centuries.

Conventional criticism of Israeli government policies, unlike calls for Israel's elimination, fall within the realm of ordinary political debate. Like the policies of most other nations, they can be changed, and Jews who feel emotionally threatened by such critiques have the option of pressing the Israeli government to institute reforms. The challenges coming from ordinary political debate fall short of the existential challenge of proposing, as BDS cofounder Omar Barghouti does, national euthanasia as the only sensible corrective to misguided Israeli government actions.

Although antizionists often insist to the contrary that their stand is strictly political, many of their attacks on Israel—at least since the UN adoption of a "Zionism is racism" resolution in 1975—have included not just political but moral condemnation. Moral condemnation often means an accusation cannot be adjudicated through reasoned debate, since antizionists persuade themselves a transcendent principle of justice is at stake and that it implicates Israel's supporters in the judgment. To be a committed Zionist, to Zionism's opponents, carries a freight of personal moral illegitimacy and ethical error. To be a Zionist from this perspective is to be personally blind to the fundamental values guiding humanity. Even Jews who support the existence of a Jewish state are consequently often enough leery of the Zionist label. Nothing about a Zionist commitment to the national liberation of the Jewish people and to their right to return to a state of their own in their ancient homeland actually entails a commitment to Jewish supremacy and to the suppression of Palestinian rights, but the contemporary antizionist movement insists otherwise.

Antizionism aims to force a break with the whole history of anti-Jewish persecution and with the resulting political and spiritual motivations behind the Zionist movement. It aims to redefine, reconceptualize, and resemanticize

Zionism and turn it exclusively into a vehicle of oppression. If that project can succeed, it will, so antizionists hope, help Jews to break their fundamental identification with a Jewish state.

If embracing a Zionist identity invests students with pride in the restoration of a Jewish state after two thousand years of exile and persecution, the accusations against Zionism can, conversely, levy a political burden on them. But our concern here is also with additional burdens, the short- and long-term psycho-social, psychological, and physical ones. For some students the political accusations are easier to dismiss than the psychological consequences, especially if the psychological effects are enhanced by feelings of hatred, harassment, isolation, and social ostracism. The online *APA Dictionary of Psychology* defines ostracism as “an extreme form of rejection in which one is excluded and ignored in the presence of others.” It has “powerful negative effects on psychological well-being and is detrimental to multiple domains of self-functioning. Specific consequences include not only sadness, hurt feelings, and changes in social perception (e.g., increased likelihood of interpreting ambiguous situations as threatening) but also decreased satisfaction of four fundamental human needs: belonging, control, self-esteem, and meaningful existence.”³⁵ To be clear: the ostracized Jew remains part of the overall campus community but feels isolated and alienated within it.

Even single experiences of ostracism typically provoke reflexive responses that include sensations comparable to physical pain, and those experiences can be relived, especially if further episodes occur. Efforts to cope follow in a second stage. But Jewish students who experience long-term ostracism through four or more years of college life saturated with antizionism or antisemitism risk more serious effects. As Kipling Williams and Steve Nida detail, “The effects of long-term ostracism are likely to be devastating. In this third stage (resignation), coping resources are depleted, and feelings of alienation, helplessness, low self-worth, and depression and suicidal ideation may occur.

Targets of long-term ostracism may also experience adverse effects on general health that are indicative of a suppressed immune response.”³⁶ These are the “cascading consequences of ostracism.” Antizionist and other extremist groups recognize the coercive effects of long-term ostracism and seek to use them. Indeed, Jewish history is replete with discussions of ostracism as a feature of antisemitism, much of which merits reflection in the current context. Many effects apply to both groups and individuals.

Over several years there have been multiple efforts to declare Zionist Jews unfit for participation in progressive campus groups and causes for which those Jews have deep affinities. Many Jewish students see commitment to those social causes—including anti-racism, climate change, and reproductive rights—as central parts of their identity and their Jewishness. Indeed, as Zionism embodies the pursuit of justice for the Jewish people, it is not only compatible with other forms of justice but interlinked with them. For many Jewish students, internalizing antizionism requires a disabling fragmentation of their identity. The psychological cost of exclusion and ostracism can be greater on campus than in many other settings, particularly if the campus is roiled by debates over Israel, by activism from antizionist groups, and by pronouncements from antizionist faculty.

The corrosive impact of antizionist faculty—and increasingly the academic departments they dominate—is a major component of antisemitic campus culture that distinguishes it from the off-campus world. The 2022 study by Beckwith and Rossman-Benjamin found that schools with five or more faculty who support a boycott of Israeli universities are 3.4 times more likely to suffer incidents denigrating Jewish identity. Faculty demonization of Israel is not simply an abstract political argument. It pressures students to redefine their Jewishness by denying and expelling its Zionist component. Student groups typically reinforce that pressure by championing antizionist Jewish students, including members of Jewish Voice for Peace,

as exemplary models of Jewish identity, indeed the only Jews truly committed to freedom and justice. Antizionist Jews are thus actually more true to Judaism, or so the reasoning goes. They are, we are to believe, freed from the psychological burden of an inner demon when they disavow Zionism. They rejoin the human community, or so antizionist hatred would lead us to believe.

Faculty antizionism has undergone a significant escalation with each of Israel's recent conflicts with Hamas. But, as Nelson documents, since the 2021 war that escalation underwent a change in character, not just intensity. May 2021 was the first time in history that academic departments adopted a formal statement calling for a boycott of Israeli universities and condemning Israel as an apartheid state; 160 academic programs at over 120 US colleges and universities signed. Antizionism was now not simply prevailing faculty opinion but department policy. It would increasingly impact department recruitment and student advancement. But it would also academically, politically, and psychologically isolate a department's Zionist students and faculty. They are branded as other, outcasts within, morally defective and inauthentic members of the department community.

It was at that point that faculty antizionism began fully to abandon reasoned argument. No longer tied to interpretations of verifiable events, antizionism lost its sense of being potentially driven by fact or evidence. Embracing identity politics, it increasingly divided the campus into "in" and "out" groups. And it made increasingly wild and disparate accusations against Israel and Zionism. From a detached perspective, the results turned antizionism statements into theater of the absurd. But college students could not so easily objectify or understand the consequent assaults on their identity.

An important example of the emotionally driven escalation of anti-Israel rhetoric took form in September 2023. That month, a bicoastal group of faculty members at University of California Santa Cruz and New York

University, supported by others nationwide, announced the establishment of the Institute for the Critical Study of Zionism (ICSZ).

The ICSZ website includes an FAQ page that details the definition of Zionism. "Zionism extends to Zionist institutions and logics, their role in the production of racial and gendered knowledge, their function in naturalizing and reproducing structures of militarised colonial violence, and the ways that Zionism interplays with, and relationally shapes, bigger spheres including politics, culture, the movement of capital, and ways of thinking about the world."³⁷ Behind the clotted academic jargon is the allegation of a vast Zionist conspiracy. ICSZ claims it will promote "research on the role of Zionism in the development of US hate crimes policy and homonationalism, the linkages between Zionist and Hindutva politics, the ties between Zionist institutions, the Israeli state, and the evangelical Christian right, the Zionist surveillance technology deployed at the US-Mexico border, the destruction of Indigenous agriculture in Guatemala, the centrality of Zionism in the opposition to and attempted cooptation of ethnic studies in the United States, and the fostering of post-9/11 interventionist human rights politics with regard to North Korea." Israel's power and influence supposedly extend everywhere. This is not a coherent argument. There is no substantiating evidence, no data, to support these grandiose, emotionally charged statements.

We are instead in the presence here of a contemporary update of the insidious, antisemitic trope of the worldwide conspiratorial Jewish octopus so often depicted by the Nazis and earlier antisemites. In its contemporary version, the Zionist octopus is an obstacle to the progress of humanity. Israel is the heart of all evil. In 2018 the national office of Students for Justice in Palestine declared "we know that Zionism is ethnic cleansing, destruction, mass expulsion, apartheid, and death," but ICSZ has vastly expanded antizionism's rhetorical reach. One cannot begin to evaluate the psychological

impact that organized faculty antizionism has on student identity formation without asking how a young adult who identifies with Judaism and Israel might manage his or her internal struggle with these accusations. To withdraw from campus culture is but one rational defensive option.

As the AMCHA report emphasizes, “No other student identity group has been subjected to anywhere near the kinds of sustained, coordinated attacks on their identity and attempts to expunge it from campus—attacks carried out and condoned by large numbers of students, student organizations, faculty, academic departments, and outside national and international groups—as have Jewish students who feel a connection to the Jewish state.” Moreover, this multifaceted assault “can also have a profound impact on the significant number of Jewish students who come to campus with little or no background in Judaism or personal connection to Israel. When such Jewish students witness the relentless assault on Zionism, Zionists and the campus organizations that support them, including Hillel, Chabad, and pro-Israel student organizations, they are likely to be far less open to partaking of opportunities to explore their Jewish heritage and identity during their undergraduate years.”³⁸ As Barry Farber and Arielle Poleg report, some “students believed the tone of campus activism around Israel-Palestine issues was inflammatory, divisive, and alienating, leading to student disengagement from political involvement and affiliation with their campus Jewish community.”³⁹ A 2021 survey commissioned by the Louis D. Brandeis Center for Human Rights Under Law found that half of US Jewish fraternity students felt it necessary to hide their Jewish identity. When individuals are fearful and hide their identity, they are limited in their ability to learn and flourish.

So far, this account takes us only to the escalation accompanying the 2021 war with Hamas and its aftereffects. Each war has left in its wake a new normal, a new established floor

or baseline for antizionist and antisemitic hatred. With Hamas’s barbaric October 2023 assault on Israelis, followed by Israel’s most comprehensive ground campaign in Gaza, the floor for widely accepted hostility was raised yet again. Jewish students at a number of campuses felt more unsafe than they had before as they saw their identities castigated. Online hatred crossed a line into endorsement for anti-Jewish violence.

A month after the October massacre the Berlin-based Decoding Antisemitism project reported on its analysis of 11,000 social media comments posted on YouTube and Facebook, concentrating on mainstream news stories to determine the extent to which antisemitic ideas are penetrating politically ‘moderate’ debates online. They conclude that a significant radicalization of online discourse about Israel, Israelis, and Jews has taken place in the wake of the pogrom. Their February 2024 report documents a continuing escalation.⁴⁰ This is a good indication of what online environment students now confront. As Matthew Bolton writes, “explicit affirmation, glorification or celebration of violent killings of Jews” is now no longer rare.⁴¹

That translates into antisemitic incidents that can have a powerful effect on Jewish students. As the ADL/Hillel report observes, “even one incident on campus was strongly associated with decreased feelings of safety on campus.” Indeed, “the second most reported effect of victimization among Jewish students across incident types is feelings of helplessness and hopelessness, a common indicator of negative mental health effects stemming from victimization.” But 10/7 flooded some campuses with antisemitism, introducing instances of repeat trauma.

Its first incarnations rapidly followed October 7, with leftwing students and others blaming Israel for Hamas’s murder spree. That the brutal and repulsively intimate killing of civilians met with political approval was deeply unsettling. That set the stage for more aggressive

denunciations of the ground campaign. The long-term effects are yet to be verified, but the normative floor for campus antisemitism—its tolerated rhetoric, conventions, and passions—appears to have been raised yet again.

Are there strategies we can use to pursue responses to these challenges? That will be the subject of the second part of this essay, forthcoming in the *Journal of Contemporary Antisemitism*.

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