

Testimony of Alyza D. Lewin
President of US Affairs, Combat Antisemitism Movement
Before the New Jersey Advisory Committee to the US Commission on Civil Rights
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Chairman George, members of the Committee, thank you for the opportunity to testify at this hearing.

My name is Alyza Lewin. I'm President of U.S. Affairs for the Combat Antisemitism Movement (CAM), an American organization dedicated to fighting global antisemitism. I am an attorney with more than 30 years of experience fighting against antisemitism and all forms of discrimination.

Today, I would like to make four points.

First, the Jewish people have a shared ancestry and ethnicity that is rooted in their historical connection to the Land of Israel.

Second, correct understanding and recognition of this Jewish shared ancestry and ethnicity is essential for the proper application of Title VI of the Civil Rights Act.

Third, one of the defining characteristics of modern antisemitism is the deliberate erasure of Jewish peoplehood and the denial of Jewish history and heritage, specifically, the erasure and denial of the Jewish people's ancestral connection to the Land of Israel.

Finally, the International Holocaust Remembrance Alliance's Working Definition of Antisemitism is the best tool we have to help educators, administrators, law-enforcement officials, and society at large distinguish between a good-faith political debate about the Middle East, on the one-hand, and expression that dehumanizes, vilifies and targets Jews on the basis of their Jewishness, on the other. The practical framework provided by the IHRA Definition is necessary to ensure that society recognizes and addresses all forms of contemporary antisemitism while fully respecting First Amendment protections.

So, let's dig in.

Jews are frequently understood and described as adherents of a religion. And it's true, Judaism is the oldest monotheistic faith. But, Jews are defined by more than religious belief and practice. The Jews are also a people with a common shared ancestry and ethnicity. Indeed, in 2020, a PEW study found that 27% of Jews in America defined themselves as "Jews of no religion."

Jews express their Jewishness in different ways. Some define their Jewishness primarily through religious observance, including observing the Jewish Sabbath and kosher dietary laws. Others emphasize Jewish history, culture, language, family, or the Jews' shared collective memory. Yet across these differences, the overwhelming majority of Jews understand themselves to be part of a single people bound together by a common ancestry and an unbroken historical relationship with the Land of Israel.

That relationship is not a modern political invention.

Jerusalem – also referred to as “Zion” in the Bible - was the spiritual and political center of Jewish life long before it became sacred to other faiths. Judaism has always been an ethno-religion – a belief system inextricably connected to cultural heritage, traditions, history – and land. The connection between Jews and the Land of Israel permeates the Jewish calendar, Jewish life-cycle events, Jewish law, Jewish prayer, and Jewish history. Over half of the 613 commandments in the Hebrew Bible are connected to the Land of Israel and can only be fulfilled there. Jewish holidays are pegged to the agricultural seasons in Israel and commemorate events that occurred in the Land of Israel. For millennia, Jews have prayed facing Jerusalem. At the conclusion of the Passover Seder, and at the end of Yom Kippur (the Jewish Day of Atonement) Jews have repeated for centuries, "Next year in Jerusalem." Throughout nearly two thousand years of exile, dispersion, and persecution, the Jewish people never relinquished either the memory of their homeland or the hope of returning to it.

Jewish peoplehood is not a political statement. It reflects a historical reality. And that has important legal consequences. Which leads me to my second point.

Title VI of the Civil Rights Act of 1964 prohibits discrimination in any program or activity receiving federal financial assistance on the basis of race, color, or national origin. Title VI does not include “religion” as a protected category. However, for more than two decades, Title VI has been interpreted (by both Democratic and Republican administrations) as protecting members of faith-based communities when they are targeted on the basis of their actual or perceived shared ancestry or ethnic characteristics, rather than their religious practice. Accordingly, Jewish students, as well as Muslims, Sikhs and others, are protected when they are targeted because of their shared ancestry or ethnicity, even though they also belong to a religious community.

Here's what Title VI does not do. It does not protect individuals from discrimination that targets them on the basis of theological belief or religious practice. Discrimination of that sort is protected by the First Amendment which guarantees every American the free exercise of religion.

This brings me to my third point - the campaign to erase and deny the Jewish people's shared ancestry and ethnicity. When Jews are defined solely on the basis of religion, when hate against Jews is defined very narrowly – as only hate that targets Jews on the basis of the faith Jews observe and the clothes they wear – then civil rights protections

for Jews are endangered. Because if Jews do not have any shared ancestry, then how does Title VI protect Jews?

Today, those who claim Israel has no right to exist routinely erase and deny the ancient history of the Jewish people in the land of Israel. They accuse Jews of being colonizers and insist that everyone who wishes to be part of their movement, including Jews, disavow the very notion that the Jews are a people with an ancestral homeland. Those who refuse this ultimatum are frequently branded as “Zionists,” shunned, excluded, and treated as pariahs. Calls to “globalize the intifada” and for “resistance by any means” are interpreted by followers as justification to use violence against those who refuse to label “Zionists” as “oppressors.”

One of the greatest challenges we face in addressing antisemitism today, is that many of our leaders – on campuses, in government, in unions, in the media, in law enforcement, and even in the judiciary – seem either unable or unwilling to recognize the difference between a good faith political debate and antisemitism. This is due, in part, to a well-organized and well-funded campaign that seeks to mask Jew-hatred under the guise of political debate.

So how can we learn to tell the difference between the two?

The answer is my fourth point – we must utilize the International Holocaust Remembrance Alliance (IHRA) Definition of Antisemitism.

During our Q&A we can get into more detail about the proper way to use the IHRA definition.

Here are just a few key points to keep in mind:

- a) One - The IHRA definition does not prohibit, punish, or silence speech. It is not a criminal code. It is a definition, like in a dictionary, to be used as a guide to help society recognize when individual Jews, the Jewish people (as an ethnic group), or “Israel” (when referred to as a “Jewish collectivity”) are being targeted on the basis of their Jewishness. As the IHRA Definition states explicitly – criticizing Israel the way people around the world criticize any government is not antisemitism. However, when Jews – either as individuals or as a collective – are demonized, delegitimized, or held to a double-standard, that is likely antisemitism.
- b) Two - To utilize the IHRA Definition effectively, it’s necessary to understand Jewish peoplehood, history and heritage as we discussed. It is also necessary to understand the progression that antisemitism traditionally follows. Antisemitism follows a pattern. First – antisemitism scapegoats the Jew. As the IHRA Definition explains, the Jew is frequently accused of “conspiring to harm humanity” or blamed for “why things go wrong.” These accusations take the form of conspiracy theories that claim the Jews control everything from the media,

government and banks to the weather. Then, once the conspiracy theories gain acceptance, society turns on the Jews, because people begin to believe that the Jews are the source of their misfortune. According to this reasoning, if the Jews are what stand between society and utopia, then society would be better off without the Jews.

Today, the terms “Israel” and “Zionist” are frequently substituted into the conspiracy theory paradigm as the collective Jew. So instead of saying “The Jews control the media,” the antagonists say “Israel” or “the Zionists” control the media. When the terms “Israel” and “Zionist” are used this way, as a proxy for “Jews,” the antagonists are not engaging in a good-faith political debate, they are targeting Jews on the basis of their Jewishness.

So, in sum –

To ensure that existing civil rights laws are applied equally to Jews, the same way civil rights laws are applied to protect others, it is essential to understand Jewish shared ancestry and ethnicity. Administrators, law enforcement officers, and others must be able to recognize that when Jews are targeted by those who are hostile to the very notion that Jews are a people with a shared history rooted in the Land of Israel, that is not about politics, that is about undermining truth and history and how Jews have defined what it means to be Jewish since the beginning of time.

Today, when Jewish students, Jewish businesses, and Jewish property are targeted because of the victim’s “Zionism,” that inevitably has nothing whatsoever to do with the victim’s political opinion. The perpetrators don’t interview the victims to learn their opinions of Prime Minister Bibi Netanyahu or a “two-state solution.” Rather, the assailants target individuals who refuse to loudly and publicly disavow Israel as the ancestral homeland of the Jewish people. That is why crimes targeting “Zionists” need to be understood as hate crimes targeting Jews.

Antisemitism has been described as a mutating virus. During the Middle Ages, Jews were targeted because of their religious faith – accused as Christ-killers. The Nazis, who sought a pure Aryan race, viewed the Jews as the ultimate race polluters. They targeted Jews as a “race.” Today, Jews are increasingly targeted on the basis of Jewish peoplehood and the Jews’ ancestral connection to the Land of Israel. That is the Jewish people’s shared ancestry and ethnicity. Our civil rights laws already protect Jews from this type of ethnic and shared (national) ancestry discrimination. The challenge is that too many in society are deliberately erasing and denying just this component of Jewishness. That must stop if we are going to effectively address this form of contemporary antisemitism.

Thank you.

I look forward to answering your questions.

Addendum

During the Q & A following my testimony, members of the Advisory Committee requested additional information and examples of individuals who had been targeted on the basis of Jewish shared ancestry and ethnicity. This Addendum is provided to assist the Committee in understanding and recognizing when Jews who refuse to disavow Jewish peoplehood and the Jews' ancestral connection to the Land of Israel are dehumanized, harassed and discriminated against on the basis of this component of their Jewish shared ancestry and ethnicity.

Background – The University of Vermont

Harassment of Jewish students on the basis of Jewish shared ancestry and ethnicity pre-dates October 7, 2023. In May 2023, the US Department of Education issued a Resolution Agreement in response to a Title VI complaint that had been filed against the University of Vermont (UVM). (Documents related to the UVM Complaint and Resolution Agreement are available [here](#).) The UVM Resolution Agreement was the first antisemitism complaint resolved by the Biden Administration and it was referenced repeatedly in the Administration's US National Strategy to Combat Antisemitism.

The UVM [Complaint](#) describes how in May 2021, the UVM sexual assault survivor support group (UVM Empowering Survivors, the largest support group on campus with thousands of members) posted publicly that "Zionist" students were no longer welcome in the group and would be "blocked." When Jewish students reached out to UVM Empowering Survivors to discuss the matter, group leaders refused to engage, claiming that the support group is an "anti-Zionist" group. UVM Jewish students were not excluded from the support group on the basis of political belief. Indeed, the members of the UVM Empowering Survivors group had no idea whether or not the Jewish students they excluded supported the Prime Minister of Israel, actions of the Israeli government, Palestinian human rights, or what has been referred to as a "two-state solution." The support group merely branded and blocked as "Zionists" all Jewish students who refused to disavow their Jewish shared ancestry by loudly and publicly disavowing the Jewish people's connection to Israel.

In addition, according to the UVM complaint, a university recognized book club required its members to pledge "no" to Zionism (thereby excluding "Zionists"), and a UVM teaching assistant frequently harassed "Zionists" online. For example, the TA posted on social media asking if it would be "unethical" for her to deny Zionists credit for participation, and separately posted about the "serotonin rush of bullying Zionists on the public domain."

In its [Resolution](#), the Department of Education treated this form of harassment as a form of national origin discrimination on the basis of shared ancestry and ethnic characteristics.

SUNY New Paltz

In August 2022, a CNN Special Report hosted by Dana Bash called “*Clash of Hate: Antisemitism in America*” featured an [interview](#) with a Jewish student at SUNY New Paltz who had also been targeted on the basis of her shared ancestry and ethnicity. The student, who had founded a sexual assault survivor support group, was removed from the group by her co-founders after she shared an [Instagram infographic](#) that said “Jews are an ethnic group who come from Israel” and “You cannot colonize the land your ancestors are from.” The Jewish student was then vilified, harassed, and publicly condemned as a “Zionist” merely because she had publicly recognized the Jewish people’s ancestral connection to the Land of Israel. The harassment escalated to anonymous threats on Yik Yak. The school refused the student’s request for a security escort and advised the student not to attend class. The student then left campus for her own safety. In June 2022, the student filed a Title VI [complaint](#) with the US Department of Education. The university [resolved](#) the matter in December 2024.

Harassment of Jews on the basis of shared ancestry and ethnicity post October 7, 2023

In the year that followed Hamas’ brutal attack on Israel on October 7, 2023, Jewish and Israeli students were regularly excluded from university “encampments.” It was not uncommon during the protests to hear [explicit calls](#) to remove Zionists from campus. At [Columbia University](#), for example, Jewish students were told “Zionists off our campus,” “We don’t want no Zionists here,” and even [“Zionists don’t deserve to live.”](#)

More recently, as universities began enforcing their “time, place and manner restrictions,” the number of instances of loud, public antisemitism on campuses decreased. The hostility towards “Zionists,” however, remains and is becoming normalized, not only on campus but beyond.

New Jersey examples

Rutgers ([May 2024](#)) – A Jewish student at Rutgers was photographed at a pro-Israel demonstration. Her photo was then included on “Free Palestine” posters that were posted on her dorm room door and around campus to harass and intimidate the Jewish student.

Rutgers ([November 2023](#)) – A Rutgers student made an online threat against a Jewish/Israeli student member of the Jewish fraternity, AEPi. The threat posted on Yik Yak said: “Palestinian protesters, there is an Israeli at AEPi go kill him.”

Columbia High School ([March 2024](#)) – an email distributed to staff at Columbia High School the day after Ramadan began instructed teachers when speaking about Ramadan to “contextualize that the U.S. is a co-conspirator with Israel, preventing Muslim Palestinians from partaking in Ramadan as the Israeli Zionist occupation enacts a genocide against them.”

The Anti-Defamation League (ADL) included the following incidents in its [report](#) on antisemitic incidents that occurred in New Jersey in 2024:

- Middle school students asked about a Jewish classmate’s identity. When the Jewish student stated that he is Israeli, his classmate physically assaulted him.
- A Jewish senior living facility received a threatening antisemitic and anti-Zionist letter that read, in part: “You and anyone who supports this genocide . . . should be tried for crimes against humanity and hung by the neck until dead.”
- An individual left a threatening antisemitic post on a Jewish day school’s Facebook page that read: “Great place to bomb.”
- An individual approached a visibly Jewish person outside of their home and stated, “Your people are committing genocide” and “You and your people will be wiped off the map.”
- A group of individuals driving by a synagogue yelled “fuck you Jews, free Palestine” out their window at congregants.
- A Jewish individual received a Facebook message from a former friend that read: “Fucking Nazi c*nt,” Hope your entire family is exterminated” and “Blood of Palestinians on your families’ hands.”

The following 2025 incidents were pulled from the [ADL's H.E.A.T. Map](#):

- A student said to a classmate wearing a shirt with an Israeli flag, "Free Palestine" and "Iran should bomb you." (10/6/2025- Cliffside Park)
- A Jewish woman wearing a Star of David necklace was harassed by a group of people who shouted, "Genocide" and "Baby killers" at her as she was leaving a restaurant. (9/24/2025 - Glen Rock)
- A Jewish nurse was harassed by colleagues who repeatedly played antisemitic and anti-Israel videos within earshot. (9/10/2025 – Passaic)
- An individual harassed a visibly Jewish family at the zoo and shouted, "Free Palestine" at them. (8/14/2025 – Paramus)
- A professor at Montclair State University assigned a reading to students in a class unrelated to the Israeli-Palestinian conflict that contained various antisemitic claims, including: "Zionist Israelis...turned Gaza into Auschwitz" and "October 7 was engineered to seize control of the remaining Palestinian land." (7/25/2025 – Montclair)
- At an anti-Israel rally organized by groups including Students for a Democratic Society and Students for Justice in Palestine at Rutgers University's Hillel, a speaker said of a Jewish elected official, "Hillel has invited a Zionist, genocidal psychopath to campus!" (4/29/2025 - New Brunswick)

- An individual in a passing car yelled, "Free Palestine," at a group of Jewish students. (4/28/2025 – Passaic)
- Antisemitic messages were written on a whiteboard at Kean University that read: "Jews are evil," "Fuck Jews," "Death to Israel," and "Jews should die." Other antisemitic messages were left on a chalkboard as well. (4/21/2025 – Union)
- Anti-Israel protesters directly harassed Jewish students outside of an event at Princeton University, telling them to "go back to Europe" and calling them "inbred swine." (4/7/2025 – Princeton)
- At an anti-Israel rally organized by PAL-Awda, the Princeton Palestine Liberation Coalition, Students for Justice in Palestine, American Muslims for Palestine, and Democratic Socialists of America at Princeton University, protesters displayed signs with messages that included: "Zionism is Terrorism." (4/7/2025 – Princeton)
- During a lesson on decolonization, a high school teacher reportedly referred to Hamas, an antisemitic U.S.-designated terrorist group, as a "freedom fighter group" and said Hamas only took Israeli hostages who were "living on Palestinian land." (4/1/2025 – Piscataway)
- At an anti-Israel protest organized by Students for a Democratic Society and Students for Justice in Palestine at Rutgers University, protesters displayed signs that read: "Sinwar Lives," referring to the deceased Hamas leader and architect of the October 7, 2023, terrorist attack. (3/27/2025 - New Brunswick)
- At an anti-Israel rally organized by groups including PAL-Awda, Teaneck for Palestine, American Muslims for Palestine and Jewish Voice for Peace at a synagogue, a protester shouted, "You're sickos, you want to kill children!" (3/24/2025 -Teaneck)
- Two individuals harassed a Jewish customer at a gym who was wearing jewelry with Jewish symbols, saying, "Fuck Israel." (3/17/2025 – Lodi)
- During an anti-Israel protest at a synagogue, individuals spray-painted: "Terrorists This Way" on the ground with an arrow pointing at the synagogue. (1/27/2025 - South Orange)

The New Jersey Education Association (NJEA) has also been [criticized](#) for promoting antisemitic perspectives including by promoting an anti-Israel curriculum called "[Teaching Palestine](#)"

In May 2026, the US Equal Employment Opportunity Commission opened an investigation of the [National Education Association](#) in response to a complaint alleging that the educators union promoted a hostile environment for Jewish members.

CAM Survey

According to a recent [study](#) released by the Combat Antisemitism Movement, 57% of Jewish Americans experienced antisemitism in the past year. As a result, Jews are changing their behavior. According to the CAM study, 38% of Jewish American respondents said they now hide things that identify them as Jewish, 32% said they avoid posting anything online that would identify them as Jewish, and 23% said they had skipped Jewish events or observances out of fear.

The CAM survey also found broad Jewish communal support for the International Holocaust Remembrance Alliance (IHRA) Working Definition of Antisemitism. Respondents were required to read the entire [IHRA Working Definition](#) before answering questions. After reading the definition, 71% of those polled said the definition accurately described antisemitism, and more than two-thirds said the definition should be adopted by institutions.