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IDEAS

# WHY THE MOST EDUCATED PEOPLE IN AMERICA FALL FOR ANTI- SEMITIC LIES

At Harvard and elsewhere, an old falsehood is capturing new  
minds.

By Dara Horn

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BY NOW, DECEMBER'S congressional hearing about anti-Semitism at universities, during which the presidents of Harvard, the University of Pennsylvania, and MIT all claimed that calls for the genocide of Jews would violate their university's policies only "depending on the context,"

is already a well-worn meme. Surely there is nothing left to say about this higher-education train wreck, after the fallout brought down two of those university presidents and spawned a thousand op-eds—except that all of the punditry about diversity and free speech and criticism of Israel has extravagantly missed the point.

The problem was not that Jewish students on American university campuses didn't want free speech, or that they didn't want to hear criticism of Israel. Instead, they didn't want people vandalizing Jewish student organizations' buildings, or breaking or urinating on the buildings' windows. They didn't want people tearing their mezuzahs down from their dorm-room doors. They didn't want their college instructors spouting anti-Semitic lies and humiliating them in class. They didn't want their posters defaced with Hitler caricatures, or their dorm windows plastered with FUCK JEWS. They didn't want people punching them in the face, or beating them with a stick, or threatening them with death for being Jewish. At world-class American colleges and universities, all of this happened and more.

I was not merely an observer of this spectacle. I'd been serving on now-former Harvard President Claudine Gay's anti-Semitism advisory committee, convened after the October 7 Hamas massacre in Israel and amid student responses to it. I was asked to participate because I am a Harvard alumna who wrote a book about anti-Semitism called *People Love Dead Jews*. As soon as my participation became public, I was inundated with messages from Jewish students seeking help. They approached me with their stories after having already tried many other avenues—bewildered not only by what they'd experienced, but also by how many people dismissed or denied those experiences.

In Congress, all three university presidents offered some version of the platitudes that “Hatred comes from ignorance” and “Education is the answer.” But if hatred comes from ignorance, why were America's best universities full of this very specific ignorance? And why were so many

people trying to justify it, explain it away, or even deny it? Our era's 10-second news cycle is no match for these questions, because the answers are deep and ancient, buried beneath the oldest of assumptions about what we think we know.

The through line of anti-Semitism for thousands of years has been the denial of truth and the promotion of lies. These lies range in scope from conspiracy theories to Holocaust denial to the blood libel to the currently popular claims that Zionism is racism, that Jews are settler colonialists, and that Jewish civilization isn't indigenous to the land of Israel. These lies are all part of the foundational big lie: that anti-Semitism itself is a righteous act of resistance against evil, because Jews are collectively evil and have no right to exist. Today, the big lie is winning.

IN 2013, David Nirenberg published an astonishing book titled *Anti-Judaism*. Nirenberg's argument, rigorously laid out in nearly 500 pages of dense scholarship and more than 100 pages of footnotes, is that Western cultures—including ancient civilizations, Christianity, Islam (which Nirenberg considers Western in its relationship with Judaism), and post-religious societies—have often defined themselves through their opposition to what they consider “Judaism.” This has little to do with actual Judaism, and a lot to do with whatever evil these non-Jewish cultures aspire to overcome.

Nirenberg is a diligent historian who resists generalizations and avoids connecting the past to contemporary events. But when one reads through his carefully assembled record of 23 centuries' worth of intellectual leaders articulating their societies' ideals by loudly rejecting whatever they consider “Jewish,” this deep neural groove in Western thought becomes difficult to dismiss, its patterns unmistakable. If piety was a given society's ideal, Jews were impious blasphemers; if secularism was the ideal, Jews were backward pietists. If capitalism was evil, Jews were capitalists; if communism was evil, Jews were communists. If nationalism was glorified, Jews were rootless cosmopolitans; if

nationalism was vilified, Jews were chauvinistic nationalists. “Anti-Judaism” thus becomes a righteous fight to promote justice.

This dynamic forces Jews into the defensive mode of constantly proving they are *not* evil, and even simply that they have a right to exist. Around 38 C.E., after rioters in Alexandria destroyed hundreds of Jewish homes and burned Jews alive, the Jewish Alexandrian intellectual Philo and the non-Jewish Alexandrian intellectual Apion both sailed to Rome for a “debate” before Emperor Caligula about whether Jews deserved citizenship. Apion believed that Jews held an annual ritual in which they kidnapped a non-Jew, fattened him up, and ate him. Caligula delayed Philo’s rebuttal for five months, and then listened to him only while consulting with designers on palace decor. Alexandrian Jews lost their citizenship rights, though it took until 66 C.E. for 50,000 more of them to be slaughtered.

In medieval Europe, Jews were forced into disputations with Christian priests that placed Jewish texts and traditions on public trial, resulting in Jewish books being burned and Jewish disputants exiled. Later legal trials expanded on this concept, requiring Jews to defend themselves against the absurd charge known as the blood libel, in which Jews are accused of murdering and consuming non-Jewish children—a claim that has echoes in current lies about Israelis harvesting Palestinians’ organs.

The absurdity of these charges is less remarkable than the high intellectual profiles of those making them: people like Apion, a scholar of Homer and Egyptian history, as well as Christian and Muslim scholars who were among the best-read people of their time. Similarly absurd claims of Jewish perfidy were later endorsed by civilizational luminaries such as Martin Luther and Voltaire. “Anti-Judaism,” Nirenberg argues, “should not be understood as some archaic or irrational closet in the vast edifices of Western thought. It was rather one of the basic tools with which that edifice was constructed.”



Demonstrators at Harvard University on October 14, 2023 (Brian Snyder / Reuters)

I've been thinking about Nirenberg's thesis in the months since the October 7 massacre in Israel, during which Hamas, an openly genocidal organization whose stated goal is the murder of Jews, lived up to its mission statement by torturing, raping, and murdering more than 1,200 people in southern Israel and taking more than 200 captives, including babies, children, and the elderly. Shortly after the attacks, a Cornell professor publicly proclaimed the barbarity "exhilarating" and "energizing," while a Columbia professor called it "awesome" and an "achievement." Comparable praise percolated through America's top universities, coming from students and faculty alike. On campuses around the country, students began gathering regularly to chant "There is only one solution: intifada revolution!"—a reference to a suicide-bombing campaign in Israel a generation ago that maimed and murdered well over 1,000 Jews. (If there is only one solution, perhaps one could call it the Final Solution.)

Students took these rallies inside libraries and other campus buildings. They vandalized university property with such slogans as “Zionism = Genocide,” “New Intifada,” and “From the river to the sea, Palestine will be free”—referring to a geographic area that encompasses the entirety of the state of Israel, where half the world’s Jews live. (At Harvard, some students opted for chanting an Arabic version: “From water to water, Palestine is Arab.”) On some campuses, the exhilaration escalated into death threats and physical assaults against Jewish students. When a Jewish Tulane University student tried to stop an anti-Israel protester near campus from burning an Israeli flag, protesters attacked him and other Jewish students, breaking one student’s nose.

It wasn’t just universities. Crowds cheering for “intifada” gathered in cities around the country, shutting down and disrupting train stations and airport access roads. Lest their support for Hamas be mistaken for support for Palestinians in general, or for peace, U.S. rally organizers named their efforts “floods” (“Flood Seattle for Palestine,” “Flood Manhattan for Gaza”) after “Operation Al Aqsa Flood,” Hamas’s name for its October 7 butchery. The enthusiasm was hard to contain. Some people tore down or vandalized posters of Israeli hostages. Others targeted synagogues and Jewish-owned businesses, spray-painting them with swastikas and slogans like “Israel’s only religion is capitalism.” In New York City, a Jewish teacher’s online photo holding a sign that said I STAND WITH ISRAEL was enough to prompt a schoolwide protest that devolved into a riot during which students destroyed school property; the teacher had to be moved to another part of the building to avoid the teenage mob screaming “Free Palestine!” In Los Angeles, a man invaded a Jewish family’s home before dawn with a knife, breaking into the parents’ bedroom while their four children slept, screaming “Kill Jewish people.” When police arrested him, he shouted, “Free Palestine!”

*Criticism of Israel is not anti-Semitic.* Jews are now required to recite this humiliatingly obvious sentence, over and over, as the price of admission to public discourse about their own demonization, in “debates” with

people who are often unable to name the relevant river or sea. The many legitimate concerns about Israel's policies toward Palestinians, and the many legitimate concerns about Israel's current war in Gaza, cannot explain these eliminationist chants and slogans, the glee with which they are delivered, the lawlessness that has accompanied them, or the open assaults on Jews. The timing alone laid the game bare: This mass exhilaration first emerged not in response to Israel's war to take down Hamas and rescue its kidnapped citizens, but exactly in response to, and explicitly in support of, the most lethal and sadistic barbarity against Jews since the Holocaust, complete with rape and decapitation and the abduction of infants, committed by a regime that aims to eviscerate not only Jews, but also all hopes of Palestinian flourishing, coexistence, or peace.

But there are nuances to sadistic barbarity against Jews, we are told, and sometimes gang-raping Jewish women is actually a movement for human rights. It hardly seems fair to call people anti-Semitic if they want only *half* of the world's Jews to die. The phrase "Globalize the Intifada," currently chanted at universities across America, perhaps widens the net a tiny bit—but really, who can say? Even the phrase "Gas the Jews," chanted at a rally organized by NYU students and faculty, is so very ambiguous. How dare those whiny Jews presume to know what's in other people's hearts?

Besides, American Jews had nothing to whine about: Had any of them actually *died* in the United States from all this exhilaration? That question was answered in November, when a Jewish man died in California after an anti-Israel protester allegedly clubbed him over the head with a bullhorn, the kind used to chant entirely non-anti-Semitic slogans—and of course that question had already been answered repeatedly with other anti-Semitic murders in recent years, some more publicized than others. (One murder even happened on campus: In 2022, an expelled University of Arizona student who repeatedly ranted about Jews and Zionists shot and killed his professor—who wasn't Jewish, though the student thought

he was.) But now the goalposts move again: Those actual murders, along with many other physical attacks against American Jews, are all just one-offs, lone wolves, mental-illness cases, entirely unrelated to the anti-Semitic rhetoric swirling through American life.

It remains unclear why anti-Semitism should matter only when it is lethal, or if so, how many unambiguously anti-Semitic murders would be necessary for anti-Semitism to be happening outside whiny Jews' heads. A realistic estimate might be 6 million. Even then, Jews have had to spend the past 80 years collecting documentation to prove it.

ONE CONFOUNDING FACT in this onslaught of the world's oldest hatred is that American society should have been ready to handle it. Many public and private institutions have invested enormously in recent years in attempts to defang bigotry; ours is an era in which even sneaker companies feel obliged to publicly denounce hate. But diversity, equity, and inclusion initiatives have proved to be no match for anti-Semitism, for a clear reason: the durable idea of anti-Semitism as justice.

DEI efforts are designed to combat the effects of social prejudice by insisting on equity: Some people in our society have too much power and too much privilege, and are overrepresented, so justice requires leveling the playing field. But anti-Semitism isn't primarily a social prejudice. It is a conspiracy theory: the big lie that Jews are supervillains manipulating others. The righteous fight for justice therefore does not require protecting Jews as a vulnerable minority. Instead it requires taking Jews down.

This idea is tacitly endorsed by Jews' bizarre exclusion from discussion in many DEI trainings and even policies, despite their high ranking in American hate-crime statistics. The premise, for instance, that Jews don't experience bigotry because they are "white," itself a fraught idea, would suggest that white LGBTQ people don't experience bigotry either—a premise that no DEI policy would endorse (not to mention the fact that



many Jews are not white). The contention that Jews are immune to bigotry because they are “rich,” an idea even more fraught and also often false (about 20 percent of Jews in New York City, for instance, live in poverty or near-poverty), is equally nonsensical. No one claims that gay men or Indian Americans never experience bigotry because of those groups’ statistically higher incomes. The idea that money erases bigotry apparently applies only to Jews. Again and again, the ostensible reasons for not addressing anti-Semitism in DEI initiatives quickly reveal themselves to be founded on ancient, rarely examined assumptions about Jews as invulnerable villains.

The sordid history of the concept of anti-Zionism vividly illustrates this dynamic—and is particularly relevant for its success in scrambling the radar of well-meaning people. Jewish civilization has been centered for thousands of years, in ways large and small, on its homeland in Israel, where Jews have had a continuous presence since ancient times. The modern political idea of Zionism as Jewish self-determination in this homeland emerged in the late 19th and early 20th centuries amid many other anticolonial movements around the world, as global power dynamics shifted from empires (Habsburg, Russian, Ottoman, British, French, Japanese) toward nation-states. The large and often violent population upheavals following Israel’s creation, including the displacement of most Arabs from what became Israel and the displacement of nearly all Jews from what became Arab states, paralleled similar population upheavals around the world as new states emerged from receding empires. In this, Zionism was typical.

But anti-Zionism as an explicit political concept has a history quite independent of the actions of Jews. In 1918, 30 years before the establishment of the state of Israel, Bolsheviks established Jewish sections of the Communist Party, which they insisted be anti-Zionist. The problem, Bolsheviks argued, was that Jewish particularism (in this case, Zionism) was the obstacle to the righteous universal mission of uniting humanity under communism—just as Christians once saw Jewish

particularism as the obstacle to the righteous universal mission of uniting humanity under Christ. The righteousness of this mission was, as usual, the key: The claim that “anti-Zionism” was unrelated to anti-Semitism, repeated ad nauseam in Soviet propaganda for decades, was essential to the Communist Party’s self-branding as humanity’s liberators. It was also a bald-faced lie.

Bolsheviks quickly demonstrated their supposed lack of anti-Semitism by shutting down every “Zionist” institution under their control, a category that ranged from synagogues to sports clubs; appropriating their assets; taking over their buildings, sometimes physically destroying offices; and arresting and ultimately “purging” Jewish leaders, including those who had endorsed the party line and persecuted their fellow Jews for their “Zionism.” Thousands of Jews were persecuted, imprisoned, tortured, or murdered.

Later, the U.S.S.R. exported this messaging to its client states in the developing world and ultimately to social-justice-minded circles in the United States. A thick paper trail shows how the KGB adapted its propaganda by explicitly rebranding Zionism as “racism” and “colonialism,” beginning half a century ago, when those terms gained currency as potent smears—even though Jews are racially diverse and Zionism is one of the world’s premier examples of an indigenous people reclaiming independence. Facts were irrelevant: Soviets labeled Jews as racist colonialist oppressors, just as Nazis had labeled Jews as both capitalist and Communist oppressors, and just as Christians and Muslims had labeled Jews as God-killers and Prophet-defilers. Jews were whatever a given society regarded as evil. To borrow the language of DEI, the big lie is systemic.

Even naming it—that is, calling out bigotry against Jews—can be classed as yet another sign of assumed evil intent, of Jews attacking beloved principles of justice for all. In an [April 2023 lecture](#), David Nirenberg, the historian, presented the example of an activist with a large following

whose boundary-pushing rhetoric met with accusations of anti-Semitism. The activist pointed out, as Nirenberg put it, that anti-Semitism “was merely an accusation that Jews used to silence criticism and squash free speech.” He brought libel lawsuits against newspapers that accused him of anti-Semitism, and won them. It is unfortunate for those making this argument today that this activist was named Adolf Hitler.

TWO WEEKS AFTER the October 7 massacre, I wrote an op-ed for a national newspaper about the intergenerational fears many Jews were feeling, describing a few choice moments from several thousand years of anti-Semitic attacks. A friendly fact-checker followed up, asking me to prove that the Russian Civil War pogroms of 1918–21 involved gang rapes, and appending a judicious *reportedly* in front of a detail I’d included from the Farhud pogrom in Baghdad in 1941 about attackers taking Jewish women’s severed breasts as trophies. I dutifully provided additional sources, combing through sickening testimonies about mutilated Jewish girls in 1919 and 1941, while simultaneously avoiding videos of mutilated Jewish girls in 2023.

As I piled up evidence to prove that these things happened, I remembered an oral-history interview my sister once did with our grandfather to share with our family at his 97th-birthday party, in which he described his own grandparents’ decision to leave their town in Ukraine after an aunt was attacked during a pogrom. “They raided her, et cetera, et cetera,” my sister’s notes from the interview say. *Et cetera, et cetera*, I thought over and over, as I hunted down sources on gang rapes of Jewish women to submit to the fact-checker, my vision going blurry. At the time, I hadn’t wondered what those sanitized *et ceteras* meant.

The same week I spent emailing documentation to the fact-checker of pogroms long past, the newspaper, like many other news outlets, published a banner headline about Israelis bombing a hospital in Gaza and killing 500 people inside. This was quickly proven to be a lie told by Hamas—a lie similar to the medieval blood libel, about Jews deliberately

targeting and murdering innocent non-Jewish babies—and a transparent psychological projection of the crimes that Hamas had actually committed in Israel, where Hamas terrorists had deliberately targeted and murdered hundreds of adults, children, and babies, and also repeatedly fired rockets at a hospital. Israel’s military has indeed killed many innocent people in Gaza during its war to destroy Hamas, and deserves the same scrutiny as any country for its conduct in war. But scrutiny is impossible when lies are substituted for facts. The newspaper later issued a regretful editorial note acknowledging its error. Unfortunately, Hamas’s lie had already inspired mass demonstrations around the world; rioters in Tunisia were so incensed by it that they burned a historic synagogue to the ground. I had been rightfully asked to prove that the Iraqi and Ukrainian pogroms happened. But the spokespeople for Hamas were taken at their word.

Shortly after the op-ed was published, I was invited to watch video footage of the October 7 attacks that the Israeli army had compiled from security cameras, online videos, and Hamas terrorists’ GoPro cameras. This grim footage was assembled specifically for the purpose of fighting back against denial. But even this horrifying and humiliating evidence, documented largely by the perpetrators themselves, apparently isn’t enough to prove that Jewish experiences are real. At a screening of the footage in Los Angeles, someone in the audience shouted, “Show the rapes!”

The attackers themselves provided footage of a woman’s naked, mutilated corpse and of a teenager with blood-soaked pants being dragged by her hair out of a truck. Since then, it has become clear that Hamas used rape and sexual torture systematically against Israeli women. Israeli first responders and forensic scientists have found corpses of women and girls with vaginal bleeding and broken pelvises. Teenage sisters were found murdered in their bedroom, one shot in the head with her pants pulled down, covered in semen; one woman was found with nails and other objects in her genitalia, while others were found to have

been shot through their vaginas. Eyewitness testimony has included details about a woman who was passed among many men, murdered while one of them was still raping her; at one point, her severed breast was tossed in the air. It's a detail familiar from the 1941 Baghdad pogrom, just as slicing a fetus out of a pregnant Jewish woman's body is a tactic Hamas unknowingly replicated from the Khmelnytskyi pogroms of 1648 Ukraine. *Et cetera, et cetera*. But who would believe it? "Show the rapes!"

ON MY TRAVELS around the country in recent months to discuss my work on Jews in non-Jewish societies, I met many Jewish college and high-school students who seem to have accepted the casual denigration of Jews as normal. They are growing up with it. In a Dallas suburb, teenagers told me, shrugging, about how their friends' Jewish fraternities at Texas colleges have been "chalked." I had to ask what "chalking" meant: anti-Semitic graffiti made by vandals who lacked spray paint. Synagogues are often chalked too. Another newly common verb among American Jews is *swatting*: fake bomb or active-shooter threats that force evacuations and instill fear. (The term is a reference to the SWAT teams that sometimes arrive at the scene, not knowing the threat is a hoax, and instill more fear.) These now happen so often at American Jewish institutions that they're almost boring; nearly 200 were swatted during one December 2023 weekend alone. (When it happened at my own synagogue in November, forcing a girl's bat-mitzvah service into a parking lot, the synagogue president warned congregants not to post any specific details about it online, in case people were tracking our evacuation procedures.)

American Jews in recent years have also developed, at great expense, a robust system of threat detection and "target hardening" to prevent or defuse actual attacks. An organization called Secure Community Network trains Jewish leaders and community members in situational awareness and self-defense; a rabbi in Texas who was held hostage with three congregants for 11 hours by a jihadist in 2022 credited this training

with saving his and his congregants' lives. Another group, Community Security Initiative, tracks threats on social media 24 hours a day; one flagged online threat to attack synagogues in 2022 led to the arrest in New York's Penn Station of two men carrying illegal weapons, ammunition, and a swastika armband.

Unfortunately, some bad actors find a sweet spot just past the security cameras. In Los Angeles, harassment of Jews walking to synagogue became common enough in recent years that some formed walking groups with volunteer guards; in December, one street harasser there assaulted an elderly Jewish couple, hitting the husband in the head with a belt buckle, causing a head wound—which was tame compared with a previous incident, in which two Jewish men were shot on their way home from two separate synagogues in February of last year. A week after the belt attack, a man in Washington, D.C., sprayed people leaving a synagogue with what police called a “foul-smelling” substance while shouting “Gas the Jews!”



Pro-Palestine students gathered at UCLA on October 25, 2023. (Frederic J. Brown / AFP / Getty)

In Minneapolis, a woman who works in communications for a Jewish organization told me how “Free Palestine” had, even before October 7, become a kind of verbal swastika—not because of its meaning, but because of how it is deployed. Apart from its use in political or protest contexts, it has also been used as an online-harassment technique: Trolls tag any post with Jewish content—including material unrelated to Israel—with #FreePalestine, summoning more freedom fighters to the noble cause of verbally abusing Jewish teenagers who dare to post pictures of challah. This verbal vandalism made the jump to real life, the woman explained, and harassers now routinely scrawl it on Jewish communal buildings, shout it at their Jewish schoolmates, and scream it out of car windows at anyone wearing a kippah.

It is remarkable how little any of this has to do with anything going on in the Middle East. This harassment isn’t coming from an antiwar plea, or a consciousness-raising effort about Israeli policies, or a campaign for

Palestinian independence, though those pretenses now serve as flimsy excuses. The only purpose of the chalking and swatting and taunting and assaulting and silencing is to dehumanize and demonize Jews. Every time Jews are forced to prove that they didn't deserve this, or to hide who they are, it is already working.

This new normal for American Jews isn't just communal, but personal. Many American Jews have quietly dropped friends in recent months after noticing those friends' posts online casually endorsing the murders of Jews. But even more striking is the low bar for the friends who remain. I've seen this most clearly among the young. In upstate New York, a Jewish high schooler told me how a friend of hers regularly passed her cartoons in class. "He just thought it was really funny," she said, and showed me a sample: a stick-figure caricature of a Hasidic Jew carrying a bag of money. "My friends," she added, "use my Jewishness to insult me. So they'll be like, 'Shut up, you're just a Jew. Shut up, Jew.' A couple of my friends say that all the time to me." I wanted to suggest that she find new friends.

At a Shabbat dinner I attended at one college, students went around the table sharing what they wished they could say to their non-Jewish friends: *I wish I could say I want to spend a semester in Israel. I wish I could say I work at a Jewish preschool. I wish I could say I volunteered at a Jewish hospital.* I sat at the table stupefied. They were in hiding.

IT WAS DURING this ongoing nightmare that Harvard administrators recruited me for advice on the anti-Semitism problem on campus. Against my better judgment, I agreed to join the committee. The Jewish Harvard students who desperately shared their horror stories with me backed them up with piles of evidence. They knew they needed to prove it.

The problem at Harvard, it quickly became clear from the avalanche of documentation deposited at my feet, was not small. The night of the



massacre, before the blood was dry, more than 30 Harvard student groups proudly announced that they “hold the Israeli regime entirely responsible for all unfolding violence.” The campus was almost instantly saturated with enthusiastic anti-Israel rallies, which many in the media depicted as the centerpiece of a free-speech debate.

But these protests were not merely outdoor public events that uninterested students could walk past. They also took place inside classroom buildings during lectures, inside the first-year dining hall and inside the largest campus library and other shared study spaces. Jewish students could no longer expect to be able to study in the library, eat in dining halls, or attend class without being repeatedly told by their classmates, sometimes through a bullhorn, that Jews are genocidal murderers deserving of perpetual intifada. (Civilian casualties in war, however horrific, aren’t genocide—but the demonization was the point. So was the vague romanticization of the intifada that targeted, maimed, and murdered Jewish civilians.) At the law school, hundreds of protesters marched through a classroom building during classes. Jewish students reported being targeted and chased through a building by their screaming peers. One video from the business school showed a Jewish student being physically harassed, accosted by protesters who surrounded him with their kaffiyehs.

This demonization of Jews, whether intentional or not, extended to Harvard’s teaching staff. Instructors who grade Jewish students used university-issued class lists to share information about events organized by pro-Palestine groups; at least one even canceled class so students could attend an anti-Israel rally. This pattern among Harvard instructors predated the current Israel-Hamas war. A third-party investigation conducted before the academic year began found that one professor had discriminated against several Israeli students; Harvard said it took action, but the professor rejected the findings and continued teaching. In a separate incident, one student claimed that a different professor asked

her to leave his classroom in the spring of 2023 after learning that she was Israeli, because her Israeliness made people “uncomfortable.”

Jewish students who came to Harvard hoping to take courses in Arabic language or Middle Eastern studies told me they often ended up avoiding those courses entirely, wary of professors and peers who made their lack of welcome clear. One recent doctoral student in a field of study unrelated to the Middle East recounted to me that well before October 7, her fellow Ph.D.s in training (the supply pool for teaching assistants) seldom gathered socially without dropping references to “Zionist dirtbags” and “Israeli scum.” One Harvard student described how a classmate, after learning he was Jewish, told him that “there should be no more Jewish state and no more Jews.”

After October 7, social-media platforms exploded with unambiguous Jew hatred in comments such as “Harvard Hillel is burning in hell” and “Let ’em cook.” In this environment, many religious Jewish students stopped wearing kippahs on campus or swapped them for baseball hats; someone spat in the face of one kippah-wearing student as he walked down the street. In an echo of medieval disputations, one Jewish student was invited by a Harvard employee to “debate” him about whether Israel plotted the 9/11 terrorist attacks, according to *The Harvard Crimson*. Later, the employee posted an online video featuring a screenshot from the student’s X account and the employee wielding a toy machete; the student reported the incident to the authorities and was told to file a restraining order.

Amazingly, Jewish students, whose numbers have dramatically declined at Harvard in recent years for reasons no one seems able to explain, did not respond to all this with their own hate-speech campaigns. Instead, both before and after October 7, Harvard Hillel’s students have reached out to their peers among Harvard’s anti-Israel activists—asking not for a cease-and-desist, but for a dialogue, or even just a cup of coffee. *Let’s get to know each other*, they offered. The anti-Israel activists refused to engage.

Jewish students tried again; they were rebuffed again. And again. This was hardly surprising. For some anti-Israel activists, even merely talking to “Zionists” (a label applied to the 80 percent of American Jews who regard Israel as an essential or important part of their Jewish identity) counts as “normalization”—that is, treating Jews as if they were normal humans, rather than embodiments of evil.

Again we are obliged to prove that this matters. No one died; why complain? “Has there been actual violence against Jewish students at Harvard or on other campuses?” one tenured Harvard professor wrote to our advisory committee to inquire. (The answer was yes.) “If Jewish student worries about physical danger are, in fact, exaggerated,” the professor authoritatively continued, “then students that hold these fears should be advised to leave campus and go home.”

But a hostile environment emerges from pervasive minor incidents, even those that don’t target individuals. Imagine that you are a woman in an office where your male colleagues and bosses gather regularly by the photocopier to discuss their favorite strip clubs. You avoid the photocopier, but then they expand their discussions to the break room, the lobby, the watercooler, the conference room. You avoid those spaces too, avoid those colleagues, hide in your cubicle, and wind up not getting promoted. In such a situation, your company would be responsible for a hostile environment that discriminated against you. The company would not be absolved by pointing out that no one had raped you yet, or that these men weren’t talking to or about you. It could not defend itself by advising you that if these conversations bothered you, you should leave and go home. A hostile environment is precisely one where tenured professors advise students to leave and go home.

The mountain of proof at Harvard revealed a reality in which Jewish students’ access to their own university (classes, teachers, libraries, dining halls, public spaces, shared student experiences) was directly compromised. Compromised, that is, unless they agreed—or at least

agreed to pretend, as many Jewish students who are neither religious nor Israeli now silently do—that there was nothing wrong with wallpapering America’s premier university with demonization of Jews. Coercing that silent agreement was the goal, and it was achieved not through arguments or evidence, but through the most laughably idiotic heckler’s veto: screaming at, chasing away, freezing out, or spitting on anyone who dared disagree with supporting the most successful Jew-killers since the Nazis. This left the great minds of Harvard debating the finer points of free speech for hecklers, instead of wondering why their campus was populated by hecklers. The question of why Harvard’s hecklers were heckling in favor of Hamas’s barbarism was too disturbing to consider, and so public discussions ignored it completely.

This heckling was not unrelated to the education that Harvard itself provided. Classes existed at Harvard, it turned out, that were premised on anti-Semitic lies. A course at the school of public health called “The Settler Colonial Determinants of Health” looked at case studies from South Africa, the United States, and Israel; its premise—not a topic of discussion, but the premise on which the course was built—was that Israel is a settler-colonialist state. (A Jewish student who wrote to the professor questioning what they saw as the ideological slant of the readings was told that it was “insulting” to suggest that the course had an agenda.) The “Palestine Program for Health and Human Rights” proudly announced that it “utilizes a decolonial framework in program development, leadership, and engagement”—meaning, one might reasonably assume, the “decolonizing” of Israel through the removal of its 7 million Jews. (The program is a partnership between Harvard and Birzeit University, a Palestinian institution where an Israeli journalist was expelled from an event in 2014 just because she was Israeli and Jewish.)

An astonishing number of pop-up lectures, panels, and events at Harvard both before and after October 7 were centered on the suffering of Palestinians in Gaza—a worthy topic addressed with almost no

mention of Hamas, even though Hamas has ruled Gaza for 17 years. Nor was there much mention of the fact that Hamas was founded in connection with the global Muslim Brotherhood, or of its comically wealthy sponsors in the Persian Gulf. Students had many opportunities to learn about Palestinian suffering from oppression by evil Jews, but far fewer opportunities to learn, for instance, about Hamas's success in co-opting foreign aid and crushing dissent, or the intifada that students hoped to globalize. Outside of their engagements at Harvard, some guest speakers publicly endorsed extreme anti-Semitic lies, including the straight-up blood libel that Israelis are harvesting Palestinians' organs or that the Israeli military uses Palestinian children for weapons testing. One could hardly blame students for repeating their educators' claims.

Out of respect for Gay's request that our committee's discussions with administrators remain private, I won't share here anything that we talked about in our many meetings. But I will say that one thing we did not discuss was Gay's congressional testimony on this topic, for which she and other administrators never asked for the advisory committee's advice. Instead, they consulted lawyers, a choice that backfired on national television.

The horror that the hearing laid bare was something far worse than a viral gaffe. Harvard was already being investigated by the Department of Education for allegations of violating Jewish students' civil rights under Title VI, and perhaps the president was advised against admitting any institutional failure. (In January, a group of students sued Harvard, describing the university as a "bastion of rampant anti-Jewish hatred and harassment.") Still, the only morally tenable position would have been to admit failure, to reveal that the problem was not all in Jews' heads; that there truly was an anti-Semitic environment at these incubators of American leadership; that these universities, along with far too many other pockets of the country, had reverted, slowly and then all at once, into what they had been a century earlier: safe spaces for

high-minded Jew hatred—not in spite of their aspiration that education should lead to a better world, but because of it.

IT IS FAIRLY OBVIOUS what Harvard and other universities would need to do to turn this tide. None of it involves banning slogans or curtailing free speech. Instead it involves things like enforcing existing codes of conduct regarding harassment; protecting classroom buildings, libraries, and dining halls as zones free from advocacy campaigns (similar to rules for polling places); tracking and rejecting funding from entities supporting federally designated terror groups (a topic raised in recent congressional testimony regarding numerous American universities); gut-renovating diversity bureaucracies to address their obvious failure to tackle anti-Semitism; investigating and exposing the academic limitations of courses and programs premised on anti-Semitic lies; and expanding opportunities for students to understand Israeli and Jewish history and to engage with ideas and with one another. There are many ways to advocate for Israeli and Palestinian coexistence that honor the dignity and legitimacy of both indigenous groups and the need to build a shared future. The restoration of such a model of civil discourse, which has been decimated by heckling and harassment, would be a boon to all of higher education.

Harvard has already begun signaling change in this direction: The university recently reiterated and clarified rules regarding the time, place, and manner of student protests. For Harvard to take more of these steps would be huge, but I have struggled to understand why all of them still feel so small. Perhaps it's because the problem is a multi-thousand-year fatal flaw in the ways our societies conceive of good and evil—and also because somewhere deep within me, I know what has been lost. There was a time, not so very long ago, when we didn't have to prove our right to exist.

Among the mountains of evidence that Jewish students sent me, one image has stayed in my mind. There are videos of crowds chanting

“Long live the intifada!” inside Harvard’s Science Center, and “There is only one solution: intifada revolution!” in Harvard Yard, along with other places equally familiar from my student days. But I keep coming back to the crowds marching and screaming in front of Harvard Law School’s Langdell library, because Langdell is a sacred place for me. On my 22nd birthday, in 1999, when I was a senior at Harvard, a law student I’d met at Hillel took me up through Langdell’s maintenance passageways to the library’s rooftop, where he asked me to marry him. I said yes.

I watched the video of the students marching and screaming in front of Langdell, and in an instant I remembered everything: studying in campus libraries for my Hebrew- and Yiddish-literature courses, talking for hours with Muslim and Christian and progressive and conservative classmates, inviting friends of all backgrounds to join me at Hillel, scrupulously following the Jewish tradition of “argument for the sake of heaven” in even the most heated debates, gathering for Shabbat dinners crowded with hundreds of students—and over those long and beautiful dinners, falling in love. My classmates and I often disagreed about the most important things. But no one screamed in our faces when we wore Hebrew T-shirts on campus. No one shunned us when we talked about our friends and family in Israel, or spat on us on our way to class. No crowds gathered to chant for our deaths. No one told us that there should be no more Jews. That night, my future husband and I worried only about getting in trouble for sneaking up to the library roof.

[Dara Horn](#) is the author of five novels and the essay collection [\*People Love Dead Jews\*](#).