



Hillel: The Foundation for Jewish Campus Life at the Pennsylvania State University (Penn State Hillel) Testimony on Antisemitism on College Campuses

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Good morning, Chairman and members of the Senate Education Committee, my name is Aaron Kaufman and I am the Marcus Family Executive Director of Hillel: The Foundation for Jewish Campus Life at the Pennsylvania State University (Penn State Hillel). Penn State Hillel's mission is to enrich the lives of the Jewish students at Penn State so they may enrich the Jewish people and the world.

Thank you for holding this hearing. We need our partners in government to stand with Jewish students on campus to shine a light on the insidious rise of antisemitism and to work together to identify ways to make all of our campuses safe for Jewish students. I am submitting testimony regarding the Penn State Jewish student community's experiences with antisemitism on campus during the 2023-2024 academic year.

The horrific terrorist attack by Hamas in Israel on October 7, 2023 dramatically changed life for Jewish college students around the country, and this certainly is true for the Jewish students at Penn State as well. In the immediate aftermath of the attack, Jewish students were impacted in ways we haven't seen in recent memory, if ever. Many were reluctant to leave their rooms and apartments, had trouble focusing in class, and missed assignments. They had just witnessed an unbelievably barbaric attack in Israel, where many American Jewish college students have family and friends, and then Hamas called for a day of global Jihad against Jewish organizations worldwide later that same week. And then anti-Israel protests began happening on campuses across the country, filled with antisemitic language.

Penn State Hillel worked to ensure that the thousands of Jewish students on campus had the resources they needed for their physical safety and emotional and mental health, opportunities to learn the facts and hear from survivors of the attack, and the tools needed to respond to hateful rhetoric.

In the days following the attack, we partnered with other local Jewish organizations to organize a vigil that drew almost 1,000 people. We had counselors in our building every day for two weeks to support students' mental and emotional health. We offered educational programs about the geopolitical history of the region, trained students on what to do if they encountered antisemitism, brought in a survivor of the October 7 attack, and added numerous opportunities for students to simply connect with our staff and with each other.

Unfortunately, we also saw increased incidents of antisemitism and anti-Israel activity on campus. Within just a few days of October 7, there was an organized protest against Israel, complete with accusations of Israel being a genocidal state and chants of "From the River to the Sea, Palestine will be free," as well as calls for "intifada". This type of protest would occur a number of additional times during this past academic year, including one in the early spring that made use of swastikas and ancient antisemitic tropes. After this particular protest, our Hebrew-speaking students avoided using their native language on campus.

As the academic year went on, these protests increased in frequency. We also saw a number of incidents of antisemitism targeting individual Jewish students, a few examples of faculty exhibiting prejudice in the classroom, and by the spring, occasional instances of students banging on Hillel's windows holding up signs that said, "Free Palestine". Banging on the windows at the center for Jewish students at Penn State was not an attempt to engage in dialogue or change policy—it was intended to isolate and frighten Jewish students.

It is important to note that Hillel supports free speech, and that not all forms of protest or disagreement with Israel's response to the October 7 attack are antisemitic. However, we must reject any form of protest or behavior that crosses into antisemitism. There is no place for hate and prejudice against anyone.

This increase in antisemitism is sadly mirrored in our broader society. Since October 7, 2023, Hillel International has tracked 1,826 incidents of antisemitism on college campuses—a 700% increase compared to the previous year. In addition to the increased frequency of antisemitic incidents, Hillel International has also noted an increase in the intensity of these acts, with more physical harm and vandalism than ever before.

I firmly believe that the best way to combat antisemitism is by investing in Hillel's core purpose—building Jewish identity; creating engaged, articulate and confident Jewish college students. Another critical component is building bridges. To that end, Hillel invests heavily in university partnerships. Following the Jewish wisdom of "not separating oneself from the community," we work hard to ensure that Hillel is part and parcel of the campus environment. Over many years, Penn State Hillel has built strong partnerships across the University, from admissions and residence life to the President's office.

This has enabled us to work closely with Penn State during this challenging year. We have had senior university leaders attend and participate in key Hillel events this year. There have been quick responses to incidents of antisemitism, coordination with the University police, regular check-ins from senior university administrators, proactive efforts in reaching out to Penn State Hillel in advance of potentially concerning events, the close monitoring of those situations, and even de-escalation when necessary. Throughout the year, there has been excellent communication between Penn State Hillel and the University, and that communication has flowed in both directions. Indeed, President Bendapudi and many members of her administration have worked hard to ensure that Jewish students feel as safe and cared for as possible during an extremely difficult year, and I am deeply grateful that the University has responded with such concern and care.

This summer, we have had numerous conversations with university leaders on possible antisemitism training for student leaders, for new students, and for faculty and staff; and ensuring that Jewish students feel seen and welcomed on campus. I believe there are lessons in Penn State's responses this past year that can be applied to other colleges and universities.

As we look ahead to the upcoming academic year, I anticipate that Jewish students will unfortunately continue to face increasing levels of antisemitic activity. It is crucial that University leaders enforce their policies and codes of conduct to ensure that universities remain safe and welcoming spaces. Vigilance and coordination will be required by campus and community police departments. All students—including Jewish students—have the right to experience a campus environment free from intimidation and harassment. The work you are doing to raise awareness about this and to identify potential solutions is incredibly important. Thank you, and thank you for the opportunity to testify today.

Respectfully submitted,

Aaron Kaufman
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Hillel: The Foundation for Jewish Campus Life at the Pennsylvania State University