

Draft

Honorable Chair and Education Committee members,

Thank you for providing the opportunity to speak today. My name is Alon Leshem. I am a constituent of Senate District 37 and a Jewish student at the University of Pittsburgh.

This past year, while serving on the board for the Student Coalition for Israel at Pitt, I personally witnessed the resurgence of antisemitism. I've seen how the rhetoric used by groups on and off campus is alarmingly reminiscent of the words that accompanied the historical violence aimed at the Jewish people; how disinformation—spread through social media, club meetings, and chants—leads to physical action. The Jewish community of Pittsburgh knows all too well how antisemitic extremism manifests into tragic outcomes; in 2018, our community was the target of the deadliest antisemitic attack in the United States.

It has become increasingly difficult to go about our day-to-day lives on campus. When we held a vigil for the victims of October 7th the day after the attack and before any Israeli response, we were met with masked protestors chanting to “globalize the *intifada*”. My grandfather was attacked by a mob in the first *intifada*. It didn't matter that he was a fluent Arabic speaker. It didn't matter that he was an attorney who represented Palestinians in East Jerusalem. It didn't even matter that the crowd contained many of his clients. What did matter was that he was Jewish. The second *intifada* carries a similar connotation. All Israelis would listen to the news and hold their breaths while the long list of names was read out, anxious to discover whether yet another friend, classmate, or family member fell victim to the latest bus bombing.

Protests often feature language justifying both the aims and the means of the most radical Palestinian militants. Members of the university-recognized Students for Justice in Palestine (SJP for short) shouted different variations of the chant *min el meyeh lel meyeh / filastin 3arabiyeh*—that is, from the [river] to the [sea], Palestine is Arab. SJP is not talking about the West Bank and Gaza, they are explicitly stating that the entire area—including the land of Israel—must be Palestinian and under Arab control. This framing is especially dangerous when made in conjunction with justifications for terrorism presented in SJP's meetings aimed at radicalizing good-natured students. During a session I attended, a speaker said, quote,

[P]eople have a right to resist... and that's what the Palestinians are doing right now...
[All the groups] are on the same page including Hamas, and our task here is to stand with Palestine unconditionally.

The effects of this language were clear at the encampments established at Pitt. Signs called Zionists “pigs,” reminiscent of how Jews were called *schwein* in Germany. Jewish students were told that Israelis should “go back to Europe,” a sentiment ironically shared by European nations that once said, “go back to the land of Israel.” Prominent campers wrote about Zionists, saying, “know the threat and isolate it”, and—in response to the self-immolation outside the Israeli embassy, wrote— “[this incident], and the deliberate US-backed Israeli immolation of thousands of Palestinian babies, require nothing short of an **American uprising**”. Pictures of students who

held hostage posters were circulated, and those students were mocked and ridiculed for daring to advocate for the return of those taken on October 7th, like my family member Guy Gilboa-Dalal who is still being held in Gaza.

The encampment wasn't just words—a Jewish student waving an American flag was grabbed from behind by a masked individual. After scuffles with the police, several people were arrested on charges including rioting and aggravated assault. Buildings were vandalized with antisemitic graffiti, and a weapon was thrown out of a window. SJP did not disavow this violence; instead, they embraced it and encouraged everyone to pressure university officials and the county district attorney to drop the charges and provide amnesty to the students involved. Protesters also demanded the removal of Hillel, called for the academic boycott of—and divestment from—Israeli institutions, and advocated for the university to constrict its working definition of antisemitism. These demands were unfortunately echoed by groups including the Student Government Board. SJP builds coalitions with other groups to target events sponsored by Jewish organizations. A letter objecting to and calling for the protest of an Israeli speaker—who talked about how he responded to and got injured in the fighting at Kibbutz Be'eri on October 7th—was signed by dozens of organizations, many of whom have no stake in the conflict. Because groups, regardless of intention, fall in line with the radical rhetoric spewed by extremists, Jewish and Israeli students feel isolated and alienated. We are constantly left wondering which of our classmates, which of our professors, which of our neighbors, are secretly harboring extremist beliefs, supporting our destruction, and opposing my very existence. My family found refuge in Israel as far back as 13 generations ago, escaping from antisemitic violence in the Middle East, North Africa, And Europe.

As you heard—as you will continue to hear—my experiences are not unique. Jewish students deserve to be safe—and to feel safe—on campus.

Thank you for your time.