



## In Their Own Words: Articles by Massachusetts Jewish Leaders and Experts on Jewish Studies and on Antisemitism

Antisemitism is a real problem in the Commonwealth, and one that deserves serious attention. Given the mandate of the *Special Commission on Combating Antisemitism*, it is critical that policy makers address antisemitism with care, reflecting the diversity of all Jewish people in the Commonwealth and within a framework that embraces equity and inclusion for all. The following opinion pieces written by independent experts in Massachusetts present some of the diversity of Jewish views to inform policy makers' decisions.

**[“Harvard appears to think all Jews support Israel. That is discriminatory,”](#)** Barry Trachtenberg, Victor Silverman, Atalia Omer, Raz Segal, Rebecca T Alpert and Judith Butler, [The Guardian](#), Jun 12, 2025:

*“Harvard’s claims about campus antisemitism don’t only misrepresent Jewish diversity – they violate [Title VI of the Civil Rights Act](#) by subjecting Jews to harmful stereotypes about what constitutes “authentic” Jewish identity.”* - The authors are among 27 Jewish scholars of Jewish studies who filed an [amicus brief](#) in Harvard’s federal lawsuit.

**[“Why criticizing Israel is not antisemitic: I am a Jew, and I am offended when legitimate critiques of Israel’s violent campaign in Gaza are branded as antisemitic,”](#)** Mark Golden, [The Boston Globe](#), Feb 13, 2025:

*“All Americans must separate legitimate criticism of Israel from allegations of antisemitism. By doing so, we can foster a more open, honest, and constructive dialogue about the Israeli-Palestinian conflict and address the real dangers of antisemitism without using it as a tool to silence dissent.”*

**[“States Should Learn from Trump How NOT to Run an Antisemitism Commission,”](#)** Michael Felsen, [The Times of Israel](#), May 20, 2025:

*“If the Massachusetts Commission [on Combatting Antisemitism], and others like it, sit back quietly and cede to the administration’s Task Force the framing of, and solution to, the very real problem of increases in antisemitic incidents in this country, it will do so at the peril not only of Jews, but of all of Americans.”*

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## Opinion

# Harvard appears to think all Jews support Israel. That is discriminatory

Barry Trachtenberg, Victor Silverman, Atalia Omer, Raz Segal, Rebecca T Alpert and Judith Butler

We are Jewish scholars who filed an amicus brief with the US supreme court on Harvard's discriminatory assumption that being Jewish means supporting Israel

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**H**arvard is suing to stop the [Trump administration](#)'s unprecedented interference in the operation of the university, supposedly to protect Jewish students from [antisemitism](#). [Harvard](#) maintains it has already addressed a crisis of antisemitism on campus. The government is wrong in attacking Harvard, but so is Harvard in its defense.

We are part of a group of 27 Jewish scholars of Jewish studies who have filed an [amicus brief](#) in [Harvard's lawsuit against the Trump administration](#). We submitted the brief, drafted by the civil rights attorney [Yaman Salahi](#), because we support the university's fight against government overreach. Yet in doing so, the institution has committed a different kind of discrimination - one that violates federal civil rights law. We reject Harvard's troubling assumption that being Jewish necessitates supporting Israel, or that criticism of Israel's genocide in Gaza constitutes antisemitism.

Harvard's claims about campus antisemitism don't only misrepresent Jewish diversity - they violate [Title VI of the Civil Rights Act](#) by subjecting Jews to harmful stereotypes about what constitutes "authentic" Jewish identity.

Harvard's own [complaint and legal filings](#) perpetuate a pernicious fiction: that protests against Israel's actions in Gaza stem from prejudice against Jewish students rather than moral opposition to the systematic destruction of Palestinian life. This narrative relies on three false assumptions: that Jewish communities hold monolithic pro-Israel views, that Jewish students cannot tolerate different perspectives on Israel-Palestine, and that exposure to criticism of Israel constitutes a civil rights injury.

These assumptions aren't just empirically wrong - they're legally dangerous. As the US supreme court established in [Students for Fair Admissions](#), universities cannot operate on the "belief that minority students always express some characteristic minority

viewpoint on any issue”. The court explicitly rejected “impermissible racial stereotypes” that assume all “members of the same racial group think alike”.

The same principle applies when universities assume all Jewish people share identical views about **Israel** and Zionism. When Harvard treats criticisms of Israeli violence as antisemitism or of Israel as a state for Jews above the other people who live there, it reduces Jewish identity to a political litmus test - one that erases the rich diversity of Jewish thought and experience.

This erasure has real consequences for Jewish students and faculty who don’t conform to Harvard’s preferred stereotype. Consider Professor Atalia Omer, one of our co-signers and a Jewish Israeli academic who previously taught at Harvard Divinity School. Harvard’s antisemitism taskforce identified her courses on the Israeli-Palestinian conflict as contributing to campus hostility - despite the fact that she designed these courses as a Jewish scholar exploring the complexity of the region through multiple perspectives.

As **Professor Omer wrote**: Harvard’s report “attempts to redraw the boundaries of Jewish legitimacy” and effectively declared her “the wrong kind of Jew” - a determination that no educational institution should have the power to make.

This experience reflects a broader pattern affecting Jewish students and faculty. Harvard recognizes student organizations such as **Tzedek** (Hebrew for justice), which is “a home on campus for a liberatory approach to Judaism” and “anti-Zionist, non-Zionist, and Zionist-questioning Jewish students”. Similarly, the **Harvard Forward-Thinking Jewish Union** exists because some Jewish students felt they were not allowed to question Zionism in pre-existing Jewish campus spaces.

These students and scholars aren’t marginal voices. **Recent polling** shows that nearly one-third of Jewish Americans agree that Israel is committing genocide in Gaza, and more than half support withholding arms shipments to Israel. A **2020 Pew Research survey** found that only 45% of Jewish Americans consider “caring about Israel” essential to their Jewish identity.

Harvard’s approach doesn’t just erase Jewish diversity - it actively harms Jewish students who don’t conform to expected political views. Administrators **tried to stop a Passover seder** organized by anti-Zionist Jewish students, treating their religious observance as inherently problematic because of their political views. Jewish students report facing discipline for passive acts of solidarity like placing protest stickers on laptops while studying in university libraries. In this, Harvard is no outlier, as dissident **Jewish students and faculty** around the country have been targeted along with their Palestinian and Muslim fellows.

This discriminatory treatment stems from Harvard’s misguided adoption of the

**International Holocaust Remembrance Alliance (IHRA) definition of antisemitism**, which conflates criticism of Israel with prejudice against Jewish people.

This isn't just bad policy - it's illegal discrimination under Title VI. As the Israeli law professors **Itamar Mann and Lihi Yona argue**, when Jewish employees or students are told they have "betrayed their own race" or are "not acting Jewish enough" by supporting Palestinian rights, they face discrimination based on their failure to conform to ethnic stereotypes.

The supreme court **established** that employers cannot discriminate against workers for failing to conform to stereotypes about their protected characteristics. The same principle must protect Jewish students, staff and faculty from being punished for holding "the wrong" political views about Israel.

We support Harvard's legal challenge to federal overreach, but we reject the university's characterization of its own censorship as necessary protection for Jewish students. Many of the students facing discipline and marginalization are themselves Jewish. They don't need protection from their own political views - they need protection from institutions that would force them to choose between their Jewish identity and their political conscience.

Universities must stop policing the boundaries of Jewish legitimacy and start respecting Jewish agency. Jews are capable of forming their own views about Israel, Palestine and everything else. We don't need institutions to tell us what we must believe to be authentically Jewish.

As Jewish scholars who have devoted our lives to the study of Jewish issues and ideas that include a commitment to intellectual freedom and human dignity, we call on Harvard and other universities to abandon their efforts to enforce political orthodoxy in Jewish communities. Stop erasing Jewish voices that don't conform to your preferred narrative. Stop treating criticism of genocide as antisemitism. And start treating Jewish people as complex individuals capable of thinking for themselves.

Our Jewish identity is not conditional on support for any government's policies. Our commitment to justice is not separate from our Jewishness or from Jewish history - it flows directly from it. Universities that claim to protect us while silencing our voices have fundamentally misunderstood both antisemitism and Jewish identity itself.

*Barry Trachtenberg, Victor Silverman, Atalia Omer, Raz Segal and Rebecca T Alpert*

*The authors are among 27 Jewish scholars of Jewish studies who filed an amicus brief in Harvard's federal lawsuit*

The Boston Globe | OPINION

# Why criticizing Israel is not antisemitic

I am a Jew, and I am offended when legitimate critiques of Israel's violent campaign in Gaza are branded as antisemitic.



Tents sheltering displaced Palestinians were erected in the yard of a secondary school in the north of Gaza City on Feb. 10. BASHAR TALEB/AFP VIA GETTY IMAGES

Antisemitism has a long and tragic history, from its roots in the Middle Ages to the culmination of its most devastating manifestation during the Holocaust. Despite the horrors of the 20th century, antisemitism persists today. I do not deny its existence but want to clarify what antisemitism truly is — and what it is not.

Simply put, antisemitism is discrimination and hatred directed at someone simply because they are Jewish. However, in recent years, the term has been expanded by some to include criticism of Israel and its policies. This raises an important question: How has Israel become so deeply associated with Judaism, to the point where criticizing the state of Israel is often seen as antisemitic?

I was raised in the 1960s, and my parents were ardent supporters of Israel. Their primary concern was the safety of Israel — they feared that the state would be destroyed and, with it, the dream of a safe haven for Jews. Back then, my understanding of Zionism was simple: It meant loving and supporting Israel. When the relationship between American Jews and Israel strengthened, religious leaders in the United States grew concerned about assimilation, with more than 50 percent of Jews marrying outside the faith. This posed a threat to Jewish identity.

To address these concerns, religious leaders in America worked to preserve what they called [Jewish continuity](#) through Jewish traditions and values. Zionism was promoted without any concerns for the potential [negative impact](#) on the Palestinian people. With millions of dollars in support from philanthropists and the Israeli government, those religious leaders fostered a deep connection between American Jews and Israel, making support for Israel almost synonymous with being Jewish. For many, loving Israel became as integral to American Jewish identity as the Torah itself.

However, in the decades that followed, Zionism began to take on a different meaning. What was once seen as a movement for Jewish self-determination became increasingly associated with colonial oppression. Accusations of Israel engaging in [apartheid-like policies](#), land confiscation, and the abuse and displacement of Palestinians began to take hold. In light of the current assault on Gaza following the Oct. 7, 2023, attack by Hamas — with [more than 46,000](#) Palestinian civilians killed and Gaza's infrastructure in ruins — criticism of Israel seems more justified than ever.



In response, Israel's defenders, including many within the Israeli government, have pushed back, arguing that such criticism is fueled by antisemitism. My primary concern is that antisemitism is not only mischaracterized but also weaponized. This weaponization is used to stifle free speech, deflect legitimate criticism of Israeli policies, and demonize those speaking out. Here are a few examples.

In 2016, the International Holocaust Remembrance Alliance, backed by 35 member countries, published a [working definition of antisemitism](#), which has been widely adopted. This definition, however, has been [controversial](#). Of the 11 criteria it cites to define antisemitism, seven refer to criticism of Israel. This promotes a blurred distinction between "hatred of Jews" and criticism of Israeli policies.

In response, human rights groups such as B'Tselem, Adalah, Breaking the Silence, and Yesh Din have argued that the Israeli government uses the IHRA definition as a [coercive tactic](#) to silence dissent and prevent criticism of its policies toward Palestinians.

In one recent example, four [University of Rochester](#) students were accused of putting up posters on campus identifying faculty members (Jewish and non-Jewish) as "enablers of genocide" in Gaza. These accusations were based on the faculty's academic and economic ties to Israeli policies. This was immediately labeled an "antisemitic hate crime," and the students were expelled.

Then last month, Harvard University adopted the IHRA definition, despite concerns from First Amendment advocates that it will [stifle free speech](#). To be clear, there should be legitimate consequences for acts of violence and acts of vandalism but not for peaceful protests against the Israeli slaughter of Gaza citizens.

Jonathan Greenblatt, president of the Anti-Defamation League, has publicly equated antisemitism with anti-Zionism, likened pro-Palestinian student groups to Hezbollah, and called for the IRS to investigate those student groups for ties to terrorism. He has promoted the [Antisemitism Awareness Act](#), which relies on the IHRA definition of antisemitism. This legislation has been called yet another attempt to silence criticism of Israel.

[Mainstream media](#) regularly describe pro-Palestinian demonstrators as "anti-Israel," with no evidence to support such claims. At a pro-Palestinian demonstration I attended in Newton last year, I was called a "rapist" and a "self-hating, antisemitic Jew" by pro-Israel demonstrators. I am neither. Of course, some protesters may be antisemitic, but without evidence, how can one know what is in another's heart? To some Jews, the slogan "From the River to the Sea" is a call for the expulsion of Jews from Israel. But I think that particular reading is unfair, and that the slogan is simply expressing a call for basic human rights for Palestinians.

I have a very different view of what Israel is today compared to what I was taught as a teenager. Some fear that Israel will cease to exist; I believe it will continue but that it needs to take a different path. My hope is that Israel dramatically changes its policies so that Palestinians are given the basic human rights they deserve.

All Americans must separate legitimate criticism of Israel from allegations of antisemitism. By doing so, we can foster a more open, honest, and constructive dialogue about the Israeli-Palestinian conflict and address the real dangers of antisemitism without using it as a tool to silence dissent.

*Mark Golden is a psychotherapist from Newton.*



# States Should Learn from Trump How NOT to Run an Antisemitism Commission

MAY 20, 2025

In Massachusetts, where I live, a Special Commission on Combatting Antisemitism, established as part of the state's 2025 budget, held its first meeting a few days before Donald Trump was elected President. The Commission's charge is ambitious. It includes "recommending strategies, programs and legislation to combat antisemitism in the commonwealth," along with making "recommendations for the implementation of the United States national strategy to counter antisemitism."

The Commission's aspirations to recommend state and national policy are admirable, but with Donald Trump in the White House, are they even relevant anymore? On January 29, 2025 Trump issued his executive order on Additional Measures to Combat Antisemitism, followed shortly thereafter by the establishment of a multi-agency Task Force to Combat Anti-Semitism. Next came headline-grabbing assaults on universities Trump claims haven't done enough to protect Jewish students, and on visa-holding students like Columbia's Mahmoud Kahlil and Tufts' Rumeysa Ozturk who've been public with their pro-Palestinian advocacy. Trump is seemingly determined to suck all the oxygen from the combatting-antisemitism space.

But if the Massachusetts Commission, and others like it, sit back quietly and cede to the administration's Task Force the framing of, and solution to, the very real problem of increases in antisemitic incidents in this country, it will do so at the peril not only of Jews, but of all of Americans. Which is why antisemitism commissions, I submit, should consider the following approach:

## **Explicitly call out the Administration's weaponization of antisemitism**

The Trump administration has cynically weaponized antisemitism. The President's claim that he's cracking down on antisemitism to protect Jews – by cutting off universities' federal funding, including for needed scientific and medical research, and deporting students whose only crime is that they engaged in First Amendment-protected speech – is patently disingenuous, as Wesleyan University president Michael Roth cogently argues. Jews don't benefit when they're deemed the cause of these catastrophic actions, whose actual purpose (see Project 2025 in general and Project Esther in particular) is to pry universities away from their indispensable role as promoters of free speech, critical thinking, and liberal ideals.

Antisemitism commissions should endorse the April 15 statement issued by the Jewish Council for Public Affairs (JCPA) and "a broad coalition of mainstream Jewish organizations" and should expressly embrace its words: "We reject any policies or actions that foment or take advantage of antisemitism and pit communities against one another; and we unequivocally condemn the exploitation of our community's real concerns about antisemitism to undermine democratic norms and rights, including the rule of law, the right of due process, and/or the freedoms of speech, press, and peaceful protest."

## **Recognize that the IHRA definition of “antisemitism” is fundamentally flawed and that more useful alternatives exist**

Having a common understanding of what constitutes “antisemitism” is foundational for a commission whose purpose is to combat it. The International Holocaust Remembrance Alliance (IHRA) “definition,” with its examples (“the targeting of the state of Israel, conceived as a Jewish collectivity” or “claiming that the existence of a state of Israel is a racist endeavor”), has clearly been a source of controversy. More than five years ago, Kenneth Stern, one of its drafters, decried its weaponization by the first Trump administration, which used it as a means to suppress protected speech regarding Israel that it found distasteful. During Trump 2.0, students like Rumeysa Ozturk have more shockingly fallen victim to its application, for using what should be protected speech in a jointly-authored op-ed intended to hold Israel accountable for its “oppress[ion of] the Palestinian people and den[ial of] their right to self-determination.”

Stern’s message, which he has since reiterated, dovetails with an important recent critique by Israeli law professors Itamar Mann and Lihi Yona, regarding application of the IHRA standard to Jews: “By legally enshrining support for Israel as a defining characteristic of Jewish identity, the new definition of antisemitism imposes a straitjacket of Zionist identity on American Jews, in effect telling them that certain political positions are incompatible with being authentically Jewish.” The result is to delegitimize the ethnic/religious identity of Jews who, as a matter of ethical and/or religious belief, express a view of Jewish political existence and self-determination that’s other than Zionist.

Commissions and task forces would do well to reject the IHRA standard as its basis for determining what is and what isn’t antisemitic. The alternative approaches taken by the Jerusalem Declaration and the Nexus Document provide far more useful guidance. These two documents caution that when addressing antisemitism we need to focus on hatred of Jews because they are Jews, and not on political views such as whether one supports Palestinian rights or opposes Zionism. Antisemitism Commissions should invite discussion by proponents of these analytical tools, including members of the Concerned Jewish Faculty and Staff – along with IHRA advocates – before they determine which “definition,” or guidance, best serves the cause of combating Jew-hatred.

## **Consider that the assault on Gaza is a significant contributing factor in the rise of antisemitism here and abroad**

The Israeli government’s response to the horrendous events of October 7, 2023 needs to be recognized as contributing to the rise of antisemitism since that date. Hamas’ brutal killings and kidnappings, awful as they were, are broadly viewed by the international community, and under international law, as not justifying Israel’s clearly disproportionate retaliation and its horrific consequences.

The terrible, observable toll of Israel’s assault on the Palestinian people, and the infrastructure and cultural institutions in Gaza, feed the perception that Israel is a powerful bully intent on subjugating, and even destroying, an underdog. And since Israel is widely perceived as either the Jewish state, or the state of the Jews, Jews collectively, wherever they live, and however opposed they may be to Israel’s behavior, are viewed by many as perpetrators, or, at a minimum, guilty by association. Indeed, and unfortunately, it shouldn’t be surprising that antisemitism among at least some Americans has increased when our country has spent more than \$20 billion in one year arming the “Jewish state,” resulting in death and serious injury to tens of thousands of Palestinian civilians, including primarily women and children.

In a similar but less extreme context, I wrote about this in the Jerusalem Post several years ago, during an earlier, less cataclysmic Gaza war.



Moreover, when scholars like the Israeli-born-and-raised Omer Bartov, Dean's Professor of Holocaust and Genocide Studies at Brown University, call Israel's assault on Gaza a "genocide," it would be irresponsible for the Commission to fail to engage with his views on the subject. Bartov should be invited as a member of a panel addressing the impact of Israel's conduct on the proliferation of antisemitism, along with other speakers who have both similar and contrary views.

## **White supremacist and Christian Zionist antisemitism must be closely examined**

Hatred of Jews because they are Jews is anathema wherever it rears its ugly head, and it should be called out. But, as noted above, anti-Israel statements should not presumptively be equated with antisemitism, nor should pro-Israel rhetoric automatically imply an absence of antisemitism.

As reported in an influential 2021 study, "antisemitic attitudes are rare on the ideological left but common on the ideological right." The study notes that "it is clearly possible for one to support Israel while also harboring anti-Semitic views, such as that Jews as a collective seek to dominate institutions of finance, media, or government. Pro-Israel attitudes on the right can even stem from antisemitism: ...white nationalists may want Israel to thrive precisely so that Jews will leave the United States and go there."

The JCPA's April 15 statement warns: "Dangerous antisemitic tropes and conspiracy theories that over the past decade have already fueled a cycle of hate crimes and violence — including the deadliest attack on the Jewish community in U.S. history in Pittsburgh — have been mainstreamed by too many political leaders, civil society influencers, social media platforms, and others." Consider, among many examples, Donald Trump's characterization of some of the Charlottesville tiki-torch bearers as "very fine people", third-ranking House Republican Rep. Elise Stefanik's invocation of the "great replacement theory," and Elon Musk's apparent Nazi salutes and cozying up to Germany's far-right AfD party. These warning flags all need to be taken seriously, and strategies should be developed to address them.

Likewise, there's ample reason to examine the pro-Zionist agenda of the many millions who consider themselves Christian Zionists: what explains their zealotry, and what are its implications for Jews anywhere? Commissions should seek answers to these questions, as they consider the effect on antisemitism of the aggressive and annexationist behavior these allies of the Israeli government promote.

## **Commissions and task forces should broaden their scope**

Effective operation of the rule of law, and effective enforcement of both federal and state civil rights laws prohibiting discrimination against whoever is the target, are the best means for ensuring the safety of all, including Jews. Antisemitism task forces that single out hatred of Jews, when others suffer comparable attacks, don't benefit Jews, but rather set them apart for special treatment.

Any such commission or task force would be markedly improved by expanding its scope to study and combat not only the extent and causes of antisemitism, but also of other forms of stereotyping and hatred, and in particular hostility toward Muslims, which has similarly increased since October 7 and its aftermath. The Commissions should especially take a close look at recent studies that found far-right online hate groups have been leveraging the current conflict as an opportunity to spread both antisemitic and Islamophobic rhetoric, and that the Americans most hostile to Jews also tend to be hostile to Muslims.

These are compelling reasons to study, and combat, both forms of hatred together, something I've written about, from a local perspective. It's also worth noting that Harvard University, which has forcefully said "no" to the invasive, overwrought demands of Trump's antisemitism task force, wisely last year convened not only a Task Force on Combating Antisemitism and Anti-Israeli Bias but also one on Combating Anti-Muslim,

Anti-Arab, and Anti-Palestinian Bias. Reports from these committees have just been released, and are illuminating. State and local task forces would be wise to study the reports, and even emulate that model.

## Conclusion

Donald Trump's antisemitism task force is generating a great deal of heat and very little, if any, light on this fraught subject. Its sledgehammer approach is hardly designed to intelligently study the causes and useful means to address anti-Jewish sentiment, and, in fact, is far more likely to exacerbate hatred of Jews than to stanch it. Which is why state and local commissions – like the one in Massachusetts – need to step up, and push back against the Trump model. Instead, they should chart a course forward that targets individuals or groups who express hatred of Jews or Muslims on account of their being Jews or Muslims, and not on those who are moved to voice a protected political or ideological belief. Failing that, unfortunately, we can expect even less light and a lot more heat.

### ABOUT THE AUTHOR

Michael Felsen's op-eds on Israel/Palestine, American Jewish-Muslim relations, labor issues and politics have been published in Haaretz, The Jerusalem Post, The Hill, The Progressive, the Boston Globe, The Forward, and elsewhere around the world. An attorney who retired in 2018 after almost four decades in government, he remains active in pro bono work and writes on labor, immigration, and politics. He is also a past president of the Boston chapter of Workers Circle, a 130-year-old communal organization dedicated to secular Jewish education, culture, and social justice.