



In Our Name: A Message from Jewish Students at Columbia University

Directions: Read these excerpts from an open letter written and signed by members of Columbia University’s Jewish students, in response to language, behaviors, and the climate on campus that blurred the lines between criticism of Israel and antisemitism. For each portion, reflect and write in response to the guiding question.

<p>To the Columbia Community:</p> <p>Over the past six months, many have spoken in our name. Some are well-meaning alumni or non-affiliates who show up to wave the Israeli flag outside Columbia’s gates. Some are politicians looking to use our experiences to foment America’s culture war. Most notably, some are our Jewish peers who tokenize themselves by claiming to represent “real Jewish values,” and attempt to delegitimize <i>our</i> lived experiences of antisemitism. We are here, writing to you as Jewish students at Columbia University, who are connected to our community and deeply engaged with our culture and history. We would like to speak in our name.</p>	<p>Why may it be disempowering for others to speak on behalf of a community? Why may it be empowering to speak for oneself?</p>
<p>Most of us did not choose to be political activists. We do not bang on drums and chant catchy slogans. We are average students, just trying to make it through finals much like the rest of you. Those who demonize us under the cloak of anti-Zionism forced us into our activism and forced us to publicly defend our Jewish identities.</p> <p>We proudly believe in the Jewish People’s right to self-determination in our historic homeland as a fundamental tenet of our Jewish identity. Contrary to what many have tried to sell you – no, Judaism cannot be separated from Israel. Zionism is, simply put, the manifestation of that belief.</p> <p>Our religious texts are replete with references to Israel, Zion, and Jerusalem. The land of Israel is filled with archaeological remnants of a Jewish presence spanning centuries. Yet, despite generations of living in exile and diaspora across the globe, the Jewish People never ceased dreaming of returning to our homeland — Judea, the very place from which we derive our name, “Jews.” Indeed just a couple of days ago, we all closed our Passover seders with the proclamation, “Next Year in Jerusalem!”</p>	<p>Why did these students decide to write this letter?</p> <p>What do they want their audience to understand? Why?</p>



<p>Many of us are not religiously observant, yet Zionism remains a pillar of our Jewish identities. We have been kicked out of Russia, Libya, Ethiopia, Yemen, Afghanistan, Poland, Egypt, Algeria, Germany, Iran, and the list goes on. We connect to Israel not only as our ancestral homeland but as the only place in the modern world where Jews can safely take ownership of their own destiny. Our experiences at Columbia in the last six months are a poignant reminder of just that.</p>	
<p>We were raised on stories from our grandparents of concentration camps, gas chambers, and ethnic cleansing. The essence of Hitler's antisemitism was the very fact that we were "not European" enough, that as Jews we were threats to the "superior" Aryan race. This ideology ultimately left six million of our own in ashes.</p> <p>The evil irony of today's antisemitism is a twisted reversal of our Holocaust legacy; protestors on campus have dehumanized us, imposing upon us the characterization of the "white colonizer." We have been told that we are "the oppressors of all brown people" and that "the Holocaust wasn't special." Students at Columbia have chanted "we don't want no Zionists here," alongside "death to the Zionist State" and to "go back to Poland," where our relatives lie in mass graves.</p>	<p>How does antisemitism operate today, according to these students?</p>
<p>This sick distortion illuminates the nature of antisemitism: In every generation, the Jewish People are blamed and scapegoated as responsible for the societal evil of the time. In Iran and in the Arab world, we were ethnically cleansed for our presumed ties to the "Zionist entity." In Russia, we endured state-sponsored violence and were ultimately massacred for being capitalists. In Europe, we were the victims of genocide because we were communists and not European enough. And today, we face the accusation of being too European, painted as society's worst evils – colonizers and oppressors. We are targeted for our belief that Israel, our ancestral and religious homeland, has a right to exist. We are targeted by those who misuse the word Zionist as a sanitized slur for Jew, synonymous with racist, oppressive, or genocidal. We know all too well that antisemitism is shapeshifting.</p>	<p>What does this paragraph reveal about the nature of antisemitism?</p>
<p>Our love for Israel does not necessitate blind political conformity. It's quite the opposite. For many of us, it is our deep love for and commitment to Israel that pushes us to</p>	<p>What is the difference between anti-Zionism and criticism of Israel's government? What does</p>



<p>object when its government acts in ways we find problematic. Israeli political disagreement is an inherently Zionist activity; look no further than the protests against Netanyahu's judicial reforms – from New York to Tel Aviv – to understand what it means to fight for the Israel we imagine. All it takes are a couple of coffee chats with us to realize that our visions for Israel differ dramatically from one another. Yet we all come from a place of love and an aspiration for a better future for Israelis and Palestinians alike.</p>	<p>this distinction matter?</p>
<p>If the last six months on campus have taught us anything, it is that a large and vocal population of the Columbia community does not understand the meaning of Zionism, and consequently does not understand the essence of the Jewish People. Yet despite the fact that we have been calling out the antisemitism we've been experiencing for months, our concerns have been brushed off and invalidated. So here we are to remind you:</p> <p>We sounded the alarm on October 12 when many protested against Israel while our friends' and families' dead bodies were still warm.</p> <p>We recoiled when people screamed "resist by any means necessary," telling us we are "all inbred" and that we "have no culture."</p> <p>We shuddered when an "activist" held up a sign telling Jewish students they were Hamas's next targets, and we shook our heads in disbelief when Sidechat users told us we were lying.</p> <p>We ultimately were not surprised when a leader of the CUAD encampment said publicly and proudly that "Zionists don't deserve to live" and that we're lucky they are "not just going out and murdering Zionists."</p> <p>We felt helpless when we watched students and faculty physically block Jewish students from entering parts of the campus we share, or even when they turned their faces away in silence. This silence is familiar. <i>We will never forget.</i></p> <p>One thing is for sure. We will not stop standing up for ourselves. We are proud to be Jews, and we are proud to be Zionists.</p>	<p>How do these examples differ from criticism of Israel's government?</p>



We came to Columbia because we wanted to expand our minds and engage in complex conversations. While campus may be riddled with hateful rhetoric and simplistic binaries now, it is never too late to start repairing the fractures and begin developing meaningful relationships across political and religious divides. Our tradition tells us, “Love peace and pursue peace.” We hope you will join us in earnestly pursuing peace, truth, and empathy. Together we can repair our campus.

What does it take to repair fractures in a community?