

An Open Letter from Philadelphia Jewish Clergy Calling for the Release of Mahmoud Khalil
This letter appeared in the [Philadelphia Inquirer](#) on April 23, 2025.

We write as Philadelphia-area rabbis and cantors in response to ICE detaining Mahmoud Khalil, a recent Columbia University graduate, without due process and threatening to rescind his Green Card. As clergy who care deeply about Jewish safety both here and in Israel, we believe this action and the Trump administration's promises to target more pro-Palestine activists with deportation threaten democracy, the rule of law, and the constitutional right of free speech — without making Jewish students any safer. Deportations without due process of law have resulted in the deportation of innocent people, some of whom have ended up jailed in El Salvador. Such illegal actions by ICE at the behest of this administration are unconscionable.

The detention of Mahmoud Khalil, and his temporary disappearance before he resurfaced in a prison in Louisiana, should send chills down the spine of anyone who believes in the rule of law, free speech, and the right to protest. While Green Card holders on rare occasions may have their residency revoked for cause, this process requires the Department of Homeland Security to give notice to the person, who then has the opportunity for a hearing. In the disturbing video of Khalil's arrest shared by the ACLU, plain-clothes agents can be seen at Khalil's apartment at night, refusing to answer questions from his wife about who they are or the basis for his arrest, and taking him away in an unmarked car. By detaining Khalil and threatening to take away his Green Card without following this process, the U.S. is overturning precedent and violating his basic rights as a legal resident. To date, Mr. Khalil has not been charged with any crime.

As Jewish leaders charged with keeping our communities safe, we reject the administration's claim that depriving immigrant protesters of their right to due process will make Jews safer. If the Trump administration were genuinely concerned about fighting antisemitism, its leaders would not be halting the work of the Department of Education's Office for Civil Rights, which is the body charged with such investigations. Nor would they be platforming white nationalists or those who perform Nazi salutes.

Rabbis and cantors across the U.S. are concerned about the rise of antisemitism. Many people in our communities have experienced antisemitic bomb threats, vandalism and other direct attacks in their synagogues, schools, online, and elsewhere. But detaining and deporting students without due process will not make our community safer. Already, we have seen students arrested without a warrant, sent to detention centers without their families being notified, and threatened with deportation without a hearing. These actions directly endanger these students and threaten the very foundations of American democracy, including the right to free speech and to due process.

University campuses should be protected as places of animated debate and discourse so that they can fulfill their mission of research, inquiry and discovery. This entails the protection of free and disagreeable speech and the right to protest, even while responding to hate speech and harassment in accordance with their campus codes of conduct. They have every right to discipline students who engage in hate speech or incitement, whether against Jews or any other group, or who interrupt classes, and we would like to see strong enforcement of those codes. Universities also have the right to restrict access to campus buildings to current students.

The administration's attacks on universities, including the cancellation of \$400 million in grants to Columbia and similar cuts to other universities, do nothing to protect Jewish students but only send a message to universities that they must obey the directives of the Trump administration or be punished. This will not stop with claims of fighting antisemitism. The administration could easily use the same means to crack down on universities promoting diversity initiatives, hosting LGBTQ groups, or providing reproductive care in student health centers or associated hospitals. The universities need to stand up to Trump for the sake of their own future as well as that of the country.

We know that the Trump administration's brazen attacks on the Constitution are much more likely to succeed if individuals and organizations respond with compliance. We call on all institutions to stand up for democracy, civil liberties, the rule of law, and the independence of institutions of higher education by loudly opposing the administration's actions.

As rabbis and cantors concerned with both the safety of Jewish students on campus and about upholding democratic norms, we call on the Trump administration to release Mahmoud Khalil immediately and to stop extra-legal deportations.

Signed,

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Rabbi Rebecca Alpert

Rabbi Tsurah August

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