

OPINION

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As Jewish parents of students, don't use us as an excuse for persecution

We must not abandon our democratic principles. Offensive speech remains protected speech.

By Kenneth Obel
and Jennifer Obel

As Jewish parents raising two daughters, we rarely spoke of antisemitism at home.

That changed with the 2017 "Unite the Right" rally, where white nationalists marched in Charlottesville, Va., while chanting, "Jews will not replace us!"

This is the "great replacement" conspiracy theory, which claims liberal elites are orchestrating mass immigration to displace white Christians. This rhetoric has inspired deadly violence, including the murders at the Tree of Life Synagogue in Pittsburgh, two mosques in Christchurch, New Zealand, and the Chabad of Poway in California.

Still, we reassured our daughters — and each other — that these were isolated events. Surely, we believed, our country's commitment to religious freedom and civil rights would remain steadfast.

Then came the events of Oct. 7, 2023.

Hamas launched a horrific attack on Israel marked by mass murder, kidnappings, and rape. It was the greatest loss of Jewish life since the Holocaust, and a profound trauma. In the immediate aftermath of the attack, many American Jews felt Israel's military response was justified, not as revenge but as self-defense.

Others, including passionate campus protesters, both Jews and non-Jews, viewed Israel's actions in Gaza as causing immense civilian suffering. The war sparked a highly publicized uproar at universities nationwide.

At Columbia University and other institutions, administrators grappled with the challenge of fostering a safe academic environment for Jewish students on campus while also preserving freedom of expression.

It is fair to question how university leaders handled campus unrest. However, what the federal government is currently doing should alarm every American, especially Jewish Americans.

Under the guise of protecting Jewish students, the Trump administration has launched a sweeping campaign to penalize universities and stifle dissent from students who express views it opposes.

This includes rounding up and incarcerating foreign students and misusing Title VI of the Civil Rights Act to make drastic cuts in federal funding to universities. These actions do not protect Jews — they endanger the very freedoms and institutions that have made Jewish life in America possible.

Take the detention of Palestinian green-card holder Mohsen Mahdawi after he arrived for what was supposed to be his citizenship interview — one of the final steps in becoming a naturalized U.S.



A student wrapped in an Israeli flag listens to pro-Palestinian protesters gathered on campus at the University of Texas at Austin on April 30, 2024. Eric Gay / AP, File

citizen. Naturalization is a special, long-awaited process for all immigrants, particularly for Jews who came to the U.S. to escape the pogroms, the Nazis, or Soviet repression. In our home, as in other Jewish homes, we proudly display our grandparents' naturalization certificates. Witnessing Mahdawi being whisked away by U.S. Immigration and Customs Enforcement agents was horrific.

Mahdawi has not been accused of any crimes. In his cases, along with hundreds of others, the common thread is the detention of Muslim individuals — legally in this country — who have spoken out or demonstrated regarding Israeli actions in Gaza.

This is persecution, not protection, and we want nothing to do with it.

Jewish success relies on the freedoms guaranteed by the Constitution, including the rights to worship and speak without fear, and the opportunity to freely associate and learn at our nation's leading universities.

These freedoms laid the foundation for generations of Jewish contributions: U.S. Supreme Court Justice Ruth Bader Ginsburg, novelist Saul Bellow, former New York Mayor Michael Bloomberg, and Meta CEO Mark Zuckerberg all launched from elite institutions that once excluded us.

Jews are where we are today largely because the doors to these critical hubs of learning opened to us.

Now, in our name, the Trump administration is attempting to

dismantle the universities that have helped Jews flourish. Republicans who have spent years promoting the antisemitic great replacement theory are attacking universities under the pretense of defending us. It's completely hypocritical, and yes, thechutzpah is staggering.

These devastating cuts — including \$175 million from the University of Pennsylvania, \$790 million from Northwestern, \$1 billion from Cornell, and \$2.2 billion from Harvard — will harm all students and risk Jewish students being scapegoated for everyone's pain.

It would be bad enough if Jewish concerns were merely being used as a pretext. But it's worse: Some Jewish-aligned organizations are actively helping to carry out these abuses. Groups like Canary Mission and Betar USA (the latter listed in the Anti-Defamation League's "Glossary of Extremism and Hate") have gone beyond advocacy and directly collaborate with federal authorities. Both now claim to have provided names of students to arrest (including Mahdawi).

If true, this is a disgrace, a stain on Jewish values.

Jewish history teaches us what happens when countries silence dissent and persecute the "other." Jews have experienced being rounded up on the streets by agents of the state. We have suffered violence from politicians who wielded unchecked power. The pattern we observe today is all too familiar: the suppression of one group under the guise of protecting another. History demonstrates that it rarely ends there; the "other" has often

been us.

If we disagree with student protesters for crossing moral lines or justifying atrocities, we should speak up and challenge them with our voices. However, we must not abandon our democratic principles. Offensive speech remains protected speech.

These days, we engage with our college-age daughters about antisemitism. We recognize the discomfort they feel amid the broader turmoil on their campuses (they attend Cornell and Columbia, which face funding cuts). We also discuss justice for all people, even those with whom we may disagree. We cannot shield ourselves by sacrificing others.

Earlier this month, Jews around the world sat down to read the Passover story as we celebrated our deliverance from bondage in Egypt into freedom. An enduring theme is that this story of oppression is not just a historical memory; it reminds us of our duty to seek justice today. The Haggadah says: "In every generation, we must see ourselves as if we personally came out of Egypt."

Right now, in *this* generation, we are confronting an unprecedented assault on our freedoms and democratic institutions by a modern-day pharaoh. Like Jews in generations past, we must carry forward our tradition: to stand firmly against oppression, defend the vulnerable, and never mistake silence for safety.

Kenneth Obel is a lawyer for start-up companies, and Jennifer Obel is a retired oncologist.