

Dear Chairman Manning, Vice Chair Reynolds, Ranking Member Hicks-Hudson, and Members of the Senate Judiciary Committee,

As a rabbi and a resident of Cleveland Heights, Ohio, I commend the Ohio Senate for taking a stand against antisemitism. I was alarmed to see photos recently of neo-Nazis marching with swastikas in Columbus. My great-grandparents came to this country fleeing antisemitism in Russia, and none of my relatives who stayed in Europe survived. It is important that we take antisemitism seriously.

However, I am writing to oppose SB 297.

Codifying the IHRA definition of antisemitism into law is a mistake. The IHRA definition is widely held to be a confusing and inaccurate definition of antisemitism that dangerously conflates criticism of the State of Israel with antisemitism and can therefore be used to stifle free speech. Over the past year, criticism of Israel has increased, as the state has engaged in human rights violations and war crimes. Under SB 297, these criticisms would be labeled antisemitic. But it is not antisemitic to demand accountability from a country, and no state is above international law regardless of the religious makeup of its inhabitants.

The conflation of antisemitism and criticism of Israel is a common tactic of supporters of Israel, in an attempt to stifle free speech and legitimate criticism of Israel. I urge the Ohio Senate not to fall for this. Indeed, if you want to protect Jews from antisemitism, there is another definition of antisemitism, signed by hundreds of scholars in the fields of Holocaust History, Jewish Studies, and Middle East Studies, which would be more appropriate – the Jerusalem Declaration on Antisemitism. The Jerusalem Declaration on Antisemitism (<https://jerusalemdeclaration.org/>) was written to “provide clear guidance to identify and fight antisemitism while protecting free expression.” It clearly outlines when criticism of Israel crosses the line into antisemitism and when it does not.

I urge you, do not stifle free speech in an attempt to protect Jews. Ultimately, stifling free speech only hurts minorities and therefore would not be helpful to Jews living in Ohio. A more robust understanding of antisemitism is needed, such as the definition and guidelines offered by the Jerusalem Declaration on Antisemitism.

Thank you.

Sincerely,
Rabbi Miriam Geronimus
Cleveland Heights, OH