

Testimony concerning SB 297

Last November, 2023 I addressed the Cleveland City Council in a statement which I am including as part of my testimony against SB 297 in order to draw attention to the fact that characterizing any criticism of Israel as antisemitic is already causing harm to Jews and others who have chosen to stand publicly for Palestinian rights. SB 297 will not protect Jews against the legitimate harms of antisemitism as it claims, but rather endanger us and others for speaking out against oppression and injustice. I am opposed to SB 297's codification of The International Holocaust Remembrance Alliance's expanded definition of antisemitism into state law as it will only serve to protect the state of Israel from being held to account for its ongoing human rights violations. SB 297 will be used to criminalize speech and actions that express solidarity with the Palestinian people and criticize Israel's ongoing genocide and long running systems of occupation and apartheid. This bill is a clear attack on free speech and on those who choose to exercise their rights to expose violence and the discriminatory policies that uphold systems of harm.

Israel claims to be the most democratic country in the world, how then, can it be antisemitic to evaluate Israel as anything but a democracy? According to The Jerusalem Declaration: "the same norms of debate that apply to other states and to other conflicts over national self-determination apply in the case of Israel." I urge the Judiciary committee to abstain from moving forward with adopting IHRA into state Law, and instead review alternative definitions of antisemitism including the Jerusalem Declaration on Antisemitism and the Nexus document which have been put forward by hundreds of scholars of antisemitism, Holocaust studies, Jewish studies and Middle East studies, and can more appropriately provide guidance without repressing legitimate speech and actions around Palestinian advocacy and criticism of Israeli state policy.

Please see my statement from November 20, 2023 delivered to Cleveland City Council below.

"I am coming forward as a Jewish person in support of an immediate ceasefire.

*I am not here to tell you what you already know- the death tolls in Gaza and Israel, the worsening conditions caused by the siege and blockade, the hostages, the numbers of CHILDREN dead, and the unaccounted for bodies buried under rubble. **What you may not know due to a monolithic rhetoric that is being weaponized to cause more violence is this: anti-semitism is a real, lived experience that is NOT, I repeat, it is not the voicing of dissent against systematic state violence.** As a Cleveland constituent, I am here to tell you that your messaging is making me, a Jewish American, an immigrant, and a descendant of Holocaust survivors feel scared, and intimidated into silence. My great grandparents, with their children in tow, fled from Nazi occupied Ukraine, Belarus, and Poland. **Calling out state violence and asking for a ceasefire to be rendered as anti-semitic is a reprehensible, silencing political strategy that has to stop now.***

I feel alone, isolated, and outraged by the hijacking of anti-semitism. This redefinition deflects from actual harm. It is a gag order that incapacitates and immobilizes me from speaking and acting with my moral judgement and principles to demand the end of the indiscriminate murder of innocent civilians. How will you protect me from actual anti-semitism when you are being complicit in the perversion of that term? How will you protect your Palestinian, Arab, and Muslim constituents from anti-Palestinian hate and islamophobia when speaking out for their own safety is construed as anti-semitism?

***Peaceful anti-war protests with Palestinians and Jews standing together have been deemed as hate crimes and so has any criticism of the Israeli government's cart blanche response to the attacks of October 7th.** As a Jewish American, it is incumbent upon me to voice my outrage at how my tax dollars are being spent to wage war and kill thousands of children.*

If the very core of my Judaism isn't to stand besides the oppressed because doing so is anti-semitic, then I am utterly lost, and confounded by my identity. If my safety means that others should be harmed, I am lost.

***You do not get to justify the use of violence in my name or the name of my ancestors, and I refuse to succumb to the political tactics of silence at the cost of precious lives.** Palestinian lives are precious, Muslim and Arab lives are precious, Israeli and Jewish lives are precious. My very history positions me to speak to you today. I am a Jewish American, an Immigrant, and a Clevelander and you are my representatives. I implore you to demand a cease fire now."*

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