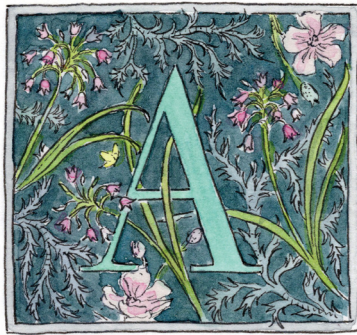


JULIA JASSEY

You Can Graduate Any Time You Like, but You Can Never Leave

*Leaving elite institutions isn't the way
to solve the campus crisis*



AS THE LEADER of a grassroots organization of Jewish college students, I'm often asked by prospective students and their parents which campuses to avoid. It's a question motivated by a reasonable fear, all the more so after October 7. But to ask the question is to misunderstand the problem. If Jews are going to turn the tide on antisemitism, avoidance isn't only the wrong approach—it's no longer possible.

For a while, Jewish leaders figured that rampant antisemitism was limited to a small number of universities that students could avoid and activists should expose. If there was an anti-Zionist movement on an elite campus that we didn't want to say no to, we told ourselves

we could look the other way for four years before dusting ourselves off in the so-called real world.

Those days are gone. It's been suggested that "we all live on campus now," a transformation that's usually described as a shift in ideas that arose in academia and filtered into the broader American culture. The values and habits that made the United States a place of Jewish thriving—respect for difference and the free exchange of ideas, among others—were eroded first at universities and shortly afterward in much of the rest of American life.



But that's not the whole story. The immense technological change of recent years has saturated the "real world" with screens and social-media platforms and remade our reality. American life moved into a hothouse increasingly defined by the qualities of campus life: ideological intensity, information whiplash, minimal privacy. It's no coincidence Facebook and other ubiquitous social networks were created by college students. Consciously or not, they reshaped the world on their terms.

The social-media revolution had benefits, such as reducing barriers to news and community. It also coarsened our politics, diminished the reliability of information, and supercharged antisemitism. Rather than cutting through the fog of war, our new world of instant information-sharing has made it thicker—and more corrosive—than ever. Biased and fabricated information about the current Israel– Hamas war spreads like gossip. On X, formerly Twitter, radical organizations share false or misleading information across the country at a speed previously possible in few places other than a tightly meshed campus. On campus, collaboration with outsiders is rampant, with nonaffiliated activists congregating at university gates

and even crowding campus demonstrations. With the line between students and nonaffiliates blurrier than ever, the challenges we battle on and off campus are less distinguishable than ever.

The Jewish community has been slow to react to these changes. We've often responded with fear—for instance, asking which colleges we should avoid—because we haven't yet come to terms with the fact that this is an interconnected crisis.

Surely no student should have to endure harassment, bullying, exclusion, or violence just because she is Jewish. But we cannot fight back by withdrawing. We can't run and hide, or bide our time for four years, hoping to later emerge into normality. This is the new normal—and if we don't face it with strength, starting on campus, we won't change it.

In other words, asking which campuses to avoid is a bit like asking which social-media platforms we should delete in response to rising vitriol; neither approach is a wide-scale or long-term solution. Donors and alumni may be able to leverage their preexisting relationships to withhold giving until changes are made, but students don't have that power. Students make change by showing up and demanding it.

Anti-Israel protesters, if nothing else, know this and have proved flexible and fast-acting (often by breaching the rules and sometimes the law) on campus and social media alike. Part of their advantage is structural: Anti-Zionist organizations are often collectively led by diffuse groups of students. By contrast, the flagship Jewish organizations on campus are centrally run by an older generation of leaders. Student perspectives and initiatives can take a back seat, especially in fast-changing environments. Moreover, students are, by default, not pushed into leadership. What can follow is a lack of resolve, then silence. It's time we turned the tables.

At the beginning of my first year at the University of Chicago, I joined the French club — as any college student would join a club that promises baguettes and cheese, even though I don't speak French. In the basement of a student hall, I half-listened to a conversation buzzing over my head in French, until I heard a word I did understand: "Nazi." I interjected, curious to know why Nazis were under discussion. I mentioned that my great-grandparents' families were killed during the Holocaust. A German student responded, "Back in Germany, we don't say that your great-grandparents died in the Holocaust. We say that they took an extended vacation to Germany and never came back."

I was frozen. Uncomfortable laughter filled the room. I joined in. I wanted to speak up, but I felt paralyzed: I had no idea what to say. I felt too ashamed to report the incident, too afraid to draw attention to myself so early in my college career.

I learned that fear is not the most demoralizing response to antisemitism. Silence is.

Later in my first year, the Covid pandemic hit. Students were sent home, and our lives moved online. I started to connect with Jewish students on other campuses, and I realized, with both shock and comfort, that I was not alone. I learned that I wasn't the only one who offered an ambiguous answer of "Jewish" when asked about my family background, thinking I could spare myself the ugly looks I'd get if I shared that my maternal grandparents were born in Israel. I learned that my peers from around the country also hid their identities — and that, when they didn't, they were also harassed, bullied, and threatened for believing that Israel should exist, or worse, for embodying signs of its existence by being Israeli or of Israeli descent. So many of us felt outnumbered on our campuses, without any idea of where to turn to speak up for ourselves. We found our voices online.

During that pandemic year, we watched as other social movements coalesced on social media. But there wasn't the equivalent for embattled Jewish students. Our informal network started in 2020 as an Instagram page called Jewish on Campus (JOC) through which students anonymously shared their stories: a place to be heard and to connect, to find community and resonance. The page quickly became a hub. Today we reach more than 100,000 followers, the majority of whom are 18 to 24. They engage with us on Instagram at a rate 35 times higher than the average for nonprofit accounts.

It wasn't long before it became clear that our community could be more than a space for Jewish students to be heard. We realized that the foundation of our network — the stories we receive from across the country — could themselves be a tool for change. We heard from students at the University of Vermont who were being excluded from membership in student groups because they were Zionists and subjected to learning environments in which a TA threatened to lower their grades based on their identity. We received most of these Vermont students' stories as we had so many others, sent in from students to share and commiserate with: They submitted them to us because they knew they could trust us and they needed connection and affirmation.

But the UVM students thrust us into leadership by turning to us and asking how we could take action together. Like far too many other students, many of us didn't know at first that powerful corrective action was available. As Brandeis Center president Alyza D. Lewin explained in SAPIR last summer, discrimination or harassment that targets individuals with a shared ancestry — including students of Jewish descent — is a violation of federal law. We worked with the Brandeis Center to help the UVM students file a complaint with the Department of Education Office for Civil

Rights (OCR), which reached a resolution with the university. We've since filed three more complaints.

We also leveraged our network when we met with White House officials before the release of the first-ever U.S. National Strategy to Counter Antisemitism to make sure the perspectives of students were included. We successfully pushed for the Strategy to call for universities to include Jewish students in DEI programs and for a “Dear Colleague” letter from OCR to remind administrators of their obligations to protect Jewish students. And when those administrators didn't do their jobs to protect Jewish students, we continued to push them toward action. Last summer, OCR opened an investigation into our JOC-Brandeis Center complaint from SUNY New Paltz after Jewish students were kicked out of a sexual-assault survivors' group in part for posting on social media that “Jews are an ethnic group who come from Israel.”



It's easy to feel discouraged or disheartened, given that fomenting antisemitism has become normal on campuses and in cities around the United States. But I see a different picture.

Every day, I get to help the next generation of proudly Jewish students develop their skills with strength and determination. They're growing up hardened to this new normal, and they're quickly coming to define the future of the Zionist movement in America. Rather than fleeing the battle on campus and social media, students at Columbia and many other schools across the country have stayed in the fight by calling out antisemitism, showing up as proud Jews, and building networks of change. We're providing them what I initially didn't have as a student: a community, training, and resources. We had already worked hard to

develop campus leaders by stripping away the intimidation and connecting students around the country with Jewish on Campus's staff, who are mostly students themselves. Since October 7, those efforts have gone into overdrive.

Armed with JOC's training on engagement with media, politicians, administrators, and fellow students, our student leaders have used their platforms, knowledge, and access to fight for change. Students in our network know that the story is always bigger than one campus. We zoom out and reframe the dynamic, both by showing students who feel alone that they have a robust national network of allies and by bringing their voices to Congress and national media outlets. It's easy for the story of an individual student to appear meaningless on a hostile campus, but the equation changes when that story reaches the American public, which, according to polls, is much more sympathetic toward embattled Jewish students.

Jewish students at Columbia might be experiencing one of the most hostile antisemitic campus environments in America. But we don't change it by leaving—not when we can arm ourselves with tools to force it to improve. While it might seem that Jewish students are more isolated than ever, I see a steely generation full of the resolve that the American Jewish community sorely needs, now and in the future. They're standing tall in a fight from which they know there is no place to run. *