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The Rise and Fall of Jews on Campus

*How the revolution that brought Jews to elite campuses
turned against them*



THE OPEN, virulent, and sometimes violent eruption of antisemitism at elite universities may be the most daunting social challenge faced by American Jews since the Ku Klux Klan's antisemitic campaign in the 1960s. The Klan had always hated Jews, but its threats—and actions—intensified after Jews emerged as a force in the civil rights movement. Three Jewish students were murdered in Philadelphia, Mississippi, during the Freedom Summer in 1964. In 1967, Temple Beth Israel in Jackson, Mississippi, was bombed, along with the home of its rabbi.

American Jews would overcome the intimidation of the Klan. And the civil rights movement would succeed in drawing the United States closer to its founding promise of equality. But today's surge of antisemitism at universities is an outgrowth of a related set of changes that began during the same period in American life.

In the 1960s, elite universities were pressured to do away with long-standing discrimination in admissions and hiring. To diversify their student bodies and faculties, they opened their gates widely to those from different backgrounds. Initially, this opening stressed merit and equal standards, without invidious discrimination. This transformation helped make American universities the best in the world, and it helped make our nation more perfect.

But on its coattails came pockets of far-Left radicalism. The strength of this movement of campus radicals grew over decades as it infiltrated and overhauled university administrations and power centers, emerging as the dominant social force on elite campuses. Today, many universities have morphed into hotbeds of illiberalism and antisemitism.



The latest attacks are dramatically different from those of the Klan, which were confined to the South, led by lower-class whites, and universally condemned by the country's leaders and its major organs of opinion. Today's campaign may be more perilous because it is more pervasive and has considerable support from legacy media outlets and the country's opinion leaders.

Antisemitic attacks at elite universities, mostly in the Northeast and on the West Coast, are cloaked in the language of social justice and led by a coalition of extreme left-wing students, Muslim students, faculty, and outside agitators. They meet with equivocation by most college leaders, who refuse to mete out serious punishment for harassment, intimidation, and open violations of the university's basic rules. The administrators, in their weakness (and, at times, complicity), betray basic academic values and fail to deter future violations.

How can Jews be hated and harassed in the name of social justice? It's a perplexing and disturbing question, one that should challenge the very concept of social justice as the Left conceives it.

Ironically, it is southern universities that have emerged as the positive counterweight in this onslaught against Jews. Many public universities in southern states have been much more active in shutting down violent protests and unauthorized encampments, defending freedom of speech, and protecting Jewish students. Not so at Berkeley, Columbia, Harvard, and their ilk.



It is crucial to distinguish elite universities' pathetic support for today's Jewish students from earlier antisemitism. The old discrimination, which lasted through the mid-1960s, was genteel, a soft glove over an iron fist. It consisted mainly of unstated quotas on Jewish enrollment and stringent limits on faculty recruitment, enforced by university leaders. Those practices matched similar exclusionary policies at WASP country clubs, neighborhoods, and many corporations.

This exclusion was essentially an effort to preserve the power, resources, and social exclusivity of an old ruling class, threatened by a rising meritocratic elite. For Jews, the most prominent symbols of that exclusion were quotas for Jewish students at Ivy League schools and their outright prohibition from restricted clubs, apartment buildings, and neighborhoods. Whole industries, such as commercial banks, insurance, and automobile companies, had no Jewish executives. White-shoe law firms had no Jewish partners. Jews responded by setting up their own small businesses and law firms, which generally grew and prospered.

The Protestant elite's exclusionary efforts collapsed in the mid-1960s for multiple reasons. The most obvious was the passage of

major civil rights acts, which prohibited a wide range of discriminatory practices (though not in private clubs and universities). Important as these laws were, the wall of exclusion had begun to cave in earlier. One reason is that, by the 1960s, Jews were increasingly prosperous and well-socialized Americans, not immigrants from the shtetls of Eastern Europe or their children raised in urban poverty. The Nazi genocide tainted any open expression of antisemitism and perhaps limited its private expression. Finally, the gatekeepers of upward mobility — top universities — made a fundamental decision to shift toward recruiting and educating the most promising leaders of the next generation, whatever their race, ethnicity, or religion, not simply the children of the current elite.

One mark of this shift was the changing demography of Ivy League universities. Instead of classes dominated by graduates of Andover, Exeter, and Choate, with Roman numerals after their names, the enrollment was now split between top students from prep schools and students from Bronx Science, Shaker Heights, and New Trier. This rising commitment to meritocratic standards paved the way for accepting top students with XX chromosomes at formerly all-male schools.

For Jews at elite universities, those were the golden years. How did it all go downhill?



One reason was the rise of a specific style of identity politics, led by the black-power movement. The emphasis was different from earlier efforts to mobilize groups based on their religion and countries of origin. While those groups were often antagonistic toward one another, they conceived of themselves first and foremost as Americans, bound together by shared patriotism.

The new politics of identity were different. They emphasized vic-

timhood and the demand that others view themselves as oppressors simply because of their identity. They demanded far-reaching compensation for historical wrongs, including positive discrimination and reparations from groups that played no part in that oppression. The shared value of American citizenship was deemphasized along with the goal of equal treatment, regardless of race, creed, or color. They were replaced by demands for race-based privileges and compensatory treatment.

Many universities endorsed the new demands and the sweeping ideology of perpetual guilt. They shifted, subtly, from seeking classes with the highest-achieving students, identified by their SAT scores and GPAs, to seeking classes that, as the argument goes, “looked more like America,” identified by percentages that matched those of the overall population. Since that goal could not be achieved by race-blind admissions, institutions such as the University of California began using positive quotas to give a leg up to underrepresented groups.

These compensatory policies were understandable in the aftermath of Jim Crow laws and widespread discrimination, but they lost public support over time. When these forms of positive racial discrimination, including quotas, were outlawed by a 1978 Supreme Court decision, admissions offices switched their method, often away from public view. Many began using racial preferences that amounted to a boost of several hundred SAT points, primarily for African Americans. Graduate and professional schools made similar changes.

Affirmative action was initially accepted by the public because Americans believed, rightly, that the long, sordid legacy of slavery, segregation, and Jim Crow laws meant it was unfair to ask black students in 1970 to compete on identical terms with white students from better schools and more-educated families.

But Americans also believed, wrongly, that these preferences

would — as they should — recede as the legacy of legal discrimination itself receded into history. The liberal goal was to restore a merit-based, race-blind society, including for college admissions and employment, in keeping with America’s commitment to equal treatment.

In fact, those racial preferences did not recede. The beneficiaries clung to them, with support from social justice advocates. Sources of that support included universities, which continued to give substantial preferences to underrepresented racial groups, devising admissions tactics to preserve the practice, often secretly, and battling hard against legal challenges. They resisted calls to share data about the scale of their preferences and whether they actually benefited the recipients in the long run. Did more students fail to graduate, for instance, or drop out of their preferred pre-med majors?

The economist Thomas Sowell argued that these racial preferences had those negative effects and actually harmed the putative beneficiaries. His point was proven empirically by the economist Richard Sander and journalist Stuart Taylor in their book *Mismatch*. Students admitted with subpar grades and test scores were more likely to switch to easier majors and either take longer to finish or drop out. Students who expected to become doctors disproportionately switched out of science majors and forfeited their preferred careers.

This regime of “positive” discrimination ended only because of a 2023 Supreme Court decision, *Students for Fair Admissions v. Harvard*. But resistance at universities continues. Progressivism has become entrenched in many humanities divisions — especially those majors with “studies” in their name.



A reflexively anti-Israel attitude is embedded in today’s leftist ideology. Among academic believers, that attitude quickly translates to open sup-

port for demonstrations that spill over from targeting Israel to smearing and harassing all Jews, who are depicted as “oppressors.” Campus bureaucrats who share that ideology find it consistent with their politics to minimally punish demonstrators and seek work-arounds to avoid the Supreme Court decision mandating nondiscriminatory admissions. They view that evasion of the law as a noble undertaking.

Behind this fight to preserve racial preferences lurks a significant shift in the values of American elites. The liberal ideas on free expression, race, economic systems, and even the nature of America that enabled Jews and other Americans to flourish have been swept away and replaced with a more regressive set of beliefs. Instead of opposition to discrimination, the force that animated the opening of universities in the 1960s, many now favor discrimination—as long as it benefits the right people. They alone will decide who the “right people” are.

Many on the Left no longer believe in the liberal idea of free speech or a racially integrated society where a fundamentally decent America seeks to remedy its historic wrongs and where, to quote Martin Luther King Jr., “my four little children . . . will not be judged by the color of their skin but by the content of their character.” The Left’s rejection of that benign, liberal vision is captured in this progressive response: “Co-opting ‘content of character’ has become a conservative bludgeon.”

How has this shift from liberal values to progressive ones affected Jewish students and faculty? Badly. That’s true even though many, perhaps most, American Jews think of themselves as progressive. First, virulent opposition to Israel is a staple of left-wing ideology. That frequently leads to attacks on all Jews and, out of fear, suppresses pro-Israel expression by all students. Second, Jewish admissions to elite universities have been systematically reduced by diminishing the role of high-school grades and standardized test scores in admissions decisions. The same is true, of course, for Asian Americans, who led

the successful suit against Harvard and a companion case against the University of North Carolina. Third, on many campuses, administrators have failed to protect students' free-speech rights and Jewish students' rights to safety. To quote an old legal maxim, "Where there is no remedy, there is no right." On these campuses, there are no rights to safety and free speech because there are no remedies — not even for intimidation, harassment, and threats against Jewish students.

This ideological bias stretches to faculty hiring, where it can be pervasive in the humanities and social sciences. A young Ph.D., known for being pro-Israel can be blackballed the same way Jews were excluded from "restricted" country clubs and co-op apartments, perhaps through the imposition of mandatory diversity statements during hiring.

Finally, Jewish students are harmed by a campus environment that progressives divide into "oppressed" and "oppressors" on the basis of racial identity. That view is a transformed form of Marxism in which racial identities are substituted for "working class" and "capitalist." The "oppressors" are then blamed for the bad outcomes of (specified) minorities. No one bothers to identify the causal link, much less one that current students or their families are responsible for. The only way to lessen the imputed guilt is to adhere to the progressive ideological catechism and make common cause with the leftist coalition on campus. The second-best way is to shut up and keep your head down. That fearful silence is widespread among Jewish students on campus.



There is a third option, however, and more Jews are availing themselves of it. They are avoiding schools with the worst records of antisemitism. Alumni donors, many of them Jewish, are closing their

wallets unless universities defend all students' safety and their right to speak freely. Students who have been harassed and intimidated are bringing lawsuits.

This peaceful pushback is badly needed to pressure universities to return to values for which they once strove. Continuing their present course doesn't just harm Jewish students and their rights. It damages the integrity of higher education itself. *