

May 13, 2024

Dear President Cudd,

Many campuses across this country, including PSU, have been sites of large student protests in the past weeks in opposition to Israel's seven month assault on Gaza and to demand an end to the historical denial of Palestinian rights. The "Gaza Solidarity Encampments" are unique at each campus, but the movement is united in the call for the Israeli genocide in Gaza to end, for disclosure by the university on where their funds are invested, divestment from those corporations that are supporting Israel, and in opposition to Israel's ongoing denial of Palestinian human rights, including the right to self-determination. One commonality between the different campus encampments is the diversity of students involved in the protests—Jewish, Palestinian and others from many backgrounds. These are places committed to non-discrimination and to mutual respect. In reports from students in various encampments, we have seen Shabbat services on Friday nights, Passover seders and space for Muslim students to pray. Core values of this movement include mutual respect and equal rights.

Jewish Voice for Peace-Portland (JVP-PDX) is writing to you to provide a Jewish perspective that might be different from one you may have received from the Jewish Federation of Portland and other Jewish Zionist organizations concerning the recent protests for Palestine. It is important to know that there is no one group who can claim to speak for the Jewish community. Too often the Jewish Federation claims to be that group, which is simply untrue. The Jewish community, like all others, is not monolithic in its beliefs. On the question of Israel, a growing number of Jews, especially young Jews, are speaking out in opposition to Israel's policies and actions regarding Palestine. They do so out of the best of Jewish values—understanding that all life is sacred and that one group of people cannot be free until all people are free.

[Jewish Voice for Peace](#) is the largest progressive, Jewish anti-Zionist organization in the world, and describes itself as: "*...a national, grassroots organization inspired by Jewish tradition to work for a just and lasting peace according to principles of human rights, equality, and international law for all the people of Israel and Palestine. JVP has over 200,000 online supporters, over 70 chapters, a youth wing, a Rabbinic Council, an Artist Council, an Academic Advisory Council, and an Advisory Board made up of leading U.S. intellectuals and artists.*"

We want to underscore the importance of dissent and freedom of expression within our democracy. This is critical to the health of a democratic society, and is especially important on campuses, where critical thinking, discourse, and deep examination are essential components of a healthy educational environment. Of course, we will not all

agree on all issues, but we must commit to having open spaces for such discourses centering First Amendment rights to freedom of speech. It must also be remembered that the students at PSU have, for many years, appealed to the Board of Trustees to divest from corporations involved in the violation of Palestinian human rights. What is happening now is not new. In the past, student demands for divestment were ignored and [insulted](#), and many of the student leaders were in fact [doxxed](#) for having brought up the divestment resolution.

One of the common responses by pro-Israel groups to any criticism of the State of Israel is to label it as being antisemitic. For years, pro-zionist/pro-Israel groups have enacted different approaches to censoring pro-Palestinian speech, writings, and actions—all predicated on [the narrative](#) that all criticism of Israel is inherently antisemitic. This censorship of pro-Palestinian organizing has taken various forms including [legislation](#) that defines criticism of Israel as being antisemitic, attempts to [blacklist](#) and fire academics, and [doxxing, slandering and intimidating](#) students and faculty. In 2015, Palestine Legal and the Center for Constitutional Rights compiled hundreds of cases where students were harassed on campuses or their speech curtailed simply for organizing or speaking out for Palestinian rights. Their comprehensive report entitled, [The Palestine Exception to Free Speech](#) provides important documentation of many cases. The case examples above are just representative of many such repressive responses, and since the 2015 report, these types of responses have only [intensified](#). Charging antisemitism in response to organizing for Palestinian liberation is a simple trick in the playbook of, not only Zionist Jews, but also Christian Zionists and conservative, right-wing forces who want to shut down the free speech of this movement. Often it is [antisemites themselves](#) who level these charges.

Working to end Israel's policies of [Apartheid](#), [illegal settlement](#) construction, uprooting Palestinian villages, [destroying olive trees](#), denying [freedom of movement](#), the [65 Israeli laws](#) that discriminate against Palestinians, [collective punishment](#), illegal detention, lack of [legal due process](#), and [abuse of political prisoners](#), including [children](#) are all calls for social justice in the best sense of Jewish values. Ending a genocide is rooted in our own Jewish historical experience—Never Again for Anyone. Organizing for Palestinians to have freedom, equality, safety, and self determination are rooted in Judaism's strong teachings that all are created equal and that all life is sacred. Declaring such actions as being antisemitic is an affront to our Jewishness.

Jewish safety and freedom is bound in the freedom, equality, and self determination of Palestinians. "None of us is free until all of us are free". The university has the obligation to acknowledge and unpack the difference between when someone might feel uncomfortable and when someone is actually unsafe. As [Frederick Lawrence](#), former

president of Brandeis University, recently stated, “You are not entitled to be intellectually safe. You are entitled to be physically safe.” This is an important distinction. Students who claim that hearing slogans calling for Palestine liberation makes them “uncomfortable” are to be challenged—is this intellectually uncomfortable, or are they truly physically unsafe? Almost always, it is the former. As Lawrence reminds us, intellectual discomfort cannot be a reason to stifle free speech.

In many cases, people can feel uncomfortable because their long-held beliefs are being questioned or phrases or terms are being used about which they may not actually understand the history and meaning. The phrase “from the River to the Sea Palestine will be Free” is one such slogan that has been identified by Zionist students as being antisemitic. This slogan calls on the [aspiration of Palestinians](#) for freedom. It calls for access to justice and equal rights for Palestinians throughout Israel-Palestine - a call for the end of Israeli oppression, it is not a call to remove Jews.

Clearly and with all certainty, we stand in opposition to antisemitism, anti-Muslim, anti-Arab, and all forms of discrimination and hate. The Palestine liberation movement is clear that this is not a movement against the Jewish people, but rather, one that is opposed to the policies and practices of Zionism and of the State of Israel that systematically privileges one group of people (Jewish Israelis) while denying rights and freedoms to another group (the Palestinians). Antisemitism, anti-Muslim and anti-Palestinian speech and actual hate-crimes are increasing. In fact, many in the Palestine justice movement have strong stands on opposing all forms of discrimination and bias. For this reason it is important to be clear on definitions of these forms of bigotry. It is also imperative to not conflate criticism of Israel (a nation-state) with antisemitism (discrimination, tropes, stereotypes and injury to Jews because of their religion).

In terms of trainings, we have heard that Zionist pro-Israel community members are urging PSU to institute trainings on antisemitism. We support such training only if they address all forms of bias and hate—antisemitism, Islamophobia, anti-Arab anti-Palestinian bias and combating hate toward any marginalized group. We know from student reports that there are cases of anti-Muslim, anti-Palestinian, anti-Arab threats. Again, all of our safety and freedom is bound with one another’s.

Protecting student safety is essential. So too is the obligation to protect students’ right to freedom of speech. JVP-Portland condemns militarized police coming onto campus. Tactics used at PSU and other schools of calling in a massive police presence, committing brutal arrests, use of tear-gas and other chemical weapons, and issuing

academic punishment are not acceptable in a democratic society, and certainly not on a university campus.

Finally, but not less important, we urge you to focus attention and action on the serious demands made by the students. These calls to act come at 7 months into a plausible genocide committed by Israel with unspeakable numbers killed, injured, displaced—having lost homes, memories, and all that makes a life. The Israeli assault on Gaza has caused more deaths and, specifically deaths of children than in any other conflict in modern history. All of this is occurring with military funding and political cover provided by the US government.

Corporations who are profiting mightily by manufacturing arms, providing technology and in other ways supporting Israel's genocide in Gaza are held in the portfolio of the university's investments. These same companies are involved throughout Palestine in upholding Israel's apartheid policies that deny Palestinian rights. The students are demanding that PSU disclose their investments and divest from any that are complicit in Israel's policies of apartheid, violations of human rights, and genocide.

JVP-Portland urges PSU Administration to:

- Engage directly with the students and faculty on your campus and foster an environment of open discourse on the critical topic of Palestine/Israel;
- Enact no academic repercussions on students involved in the recent protests. Campuses across the US who are listening to and engaging with their students and faculty on these issues are modeling the profound importance of academic freedom. We urge PSU to follow this path.
- Commit to an understanding in the ways groups who are supportive of Zionism and the Israeli government conflate activism for Palestine with antisemitism and use that as their basis to stifle free speech and punish Palestine activists.
- Commit to not accept nor codify any definition of antisemitism that characterizes criticism of the State of Israel as inherently being antisemitic.
- Disclose and divest any funds that support Israel from PSU's portfolio.