

# Forward

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## Antisemitism Decoded

with Arno Rosenfeld



**Welcome to the re-launch of our antisemitism newsletter, now called Antisemitism Decoded!** You're not yet subscribed to this newsletter so make sure you [sign up](#). That way you'll continue receiving this biweekly guide to separating the signal from the noise about antisemitism and understanding current debates over Jewish safety.

*I launched Antisemitism Notebook last year during a flurry of national headlines about antisemitism, and it quickly became a forum to help make sense of contested understandings of Jewish safety.*

*As it became clear that the battles would continue and your needs were shifting, we paused to sharpen the newsletter's mission with reader input from a survey hundreds of you completed and nearly a dozen one-on-one interviews. Many of you loved the newsletter — one reader called it a “phenomenal resource” while another said “I’ve not found another publication coming close to the in-depth analysis in this newsletter” — but we also heard requests for more assistance in making sense of antisemitic incidents, more graphics and a slower cadence.*

*We’re relaunching with a new name — Antisemitism Decoded — that speaks to our goal of helping you interpret the torrent of information about antisemitism and with some new features, including the Forward Grid, which you can learn more about below, and Data Decoder, focused on charts and graphics.*

I hope you'll find this newsletter valuable, and I would love to [hear your feedback](#).



## UP FIRST

### **'Is she a fanatical, racist Zionist or just a Jew?'**



Photo: Getty Images

As more Jewish leaders have opposed the Trump administration's crackdown on colleges and universities in recent months, virtually all of them hasten to add that the underlying problem of campus antisemitism is a serious one.

Amy Spitalnick, who has become a chief critic of President Donald Trump's antisemitism strategy from atop the Jewish Council for Public Affairs, said during a recent CNN appearance, for example, that "*of course* antisemitism exists on a number of college campuses."

Yet it has often been unclear what, exactly, pervasive "campus antisemitism" is actually describing. Some consider the protests against Israel to be inherently antisemitic, but that is hotly contested. Others point to instances of explicitly antisemitic taunts or assaults, for example, but those are rare.

Harvard may have finally provided an answer.

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It's been clear since shortly after the Israel-Hamas war began that hostility toward Israel has reached a fever pitch in progressive spaces that many Jews called home, just as compromise and civil discourse was falling out of favor.

But those sounding the alarm over campus antisemitism — to Congress, on social media, in official statements — have been determined to go beyond that explanation. Maybe because it seemed to frame the problem as a political disagreement, or even allowed [blame to be assigned](#) to Israel. Or because it generated less political currency. *Jews feeling uncomfortable* is different from *Jews being unsafe*.

Whatever the reason, descriptions of campus antisemitism that go beyond social discomfort penetrated the national conversation. Former President Joe Biden [spoke last spring](#) about “Jewish students blocked, harassed, attacked while walking to class,” while Trump has [accused](#) colleges of promoting “antisemitic propaganda.”

A new report from Harvard's antisemitism task force took a different — and more courageous — tact: Social alienation is the central problem, and it's a big one. “Perhaps the best way to describe the existence of many Jewish and Israeli students at Harvard in the 2023-24 academic year is that their presence had become triggering, or the subject of political controversy,” the authors wrote.

The report avoided the dramatic yet [often confusing](#), inconsistent, and isolated accounts in a similar report from Columbia University that described Jewish students “chased out of dorms, spat on, and pinned against walls.”

The Harvard task force instead chose to focus on the more subtle ways that the ability for Jewish students to fully participate in campus life was constrained by venom toward Israel.

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One Jewish graduate student told the task force about a gathering where a few of his friends said that they felt unsafe around an Israeli student on campus because of his nationality. The graduate student said he “defended him as a person” without discussing the Israeli-Palestinian conflict, but

subsequently found himself shunned by more than a dozen of his closest friends.

“I learned that one of the people in the friend group had labeled me a Zionist,” he said. “As such, when that group spends time together, I will not be invited anymore because some of the people do not want to associate with me.”

Skeptics might discount this as an instance of antisemitism because the friends shunned this student over a disagreement related to Israel. But regardless of their actual political stance on Israel, Jewish students are far more likely than other students to know Israelis and have a textured view of the country. Expressing that, even in mild ways, marked some Jewish students with a scarlet letter, a theme that came up throughout the report.

“Is she a fanatical, racist Zionist or just a Jew?” a non-Jewish Harvard student asked a friend about a Jewish peer, according to another anecdote included in the 311-page document.

“I don’t want to go to Hillel, I fucking hate Zionists,” one student told his Jewish roommate when they were considering whether to attend an event there.

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The confounding aspect of this reality is that it’s almost impossible to discipline students for this behavior. “What can Harvard Law School do about the dirty looks?” asked one Jewish law student.

While the report’s authors call for tightening some disciplinary standards, their overall recommendations, which focus on creating a “culture of pluralism,” are thoughtful and nuanced. They treat the rise of anti-Zionism on campus not primarily as the reincarnation of ancient hatred toward Jews but as a political and social phenomenon tied to both conditions on the ground in the Middle East and broader trends, like a growing emphasis on group identity and the oversimplification of complex topics.

This is a brave stance because it acknowledges that the situation is less ominous than some have argued. “Harvard is home to a dazzlingly talented and thriving Jewish community,” the authors write.

Arrests, suspensions and funding freezes might work to address the real but rare instances of [physical assaults](#) or the [most extreme](#) expressions of antisemitism. But a heavy-handed approach is unlikely to win hearts and minds, especially at a time when [support for Israel is tanking](#) among basically every demographic group in the U.S., and Israeli officials seem [determined to confirm](#) the worst accusations they've faced from campus protesters.

By acknowledging that the most pervasive expression of campus antisemitism at Harvard leaves Jewish students feeling socially ostracized in relationships and spaces they once belonged, the task force has taken the first step toward actually addressing it.

### GO DEEPER

- At Harvard, reports on antisemitism and anti-Palestinian bias reflect campus conflict over Israel ([Forward](#))
- Harvard's President Is Fighting Trump. He Also Agrees With Him. ([New York Times](#))
- Final Report from the Presidential Task Force on Combating Antisemitism and Anti-Israeli Bias ([Harvard](#))



### YOU MISSED THIS

## Antisemitic conspiracy theorist at the White House



Screenshot

## WHAT HAPPENED

The White House invited Dominick McGee, a far-right online influencer who spread antisemitic conspiracy theories about [the tunnel under Chabad's Brooklyn headquarters](#), to participate in a press briefing for “new media” personalities on May 1.

McGee, who goes by the name Dom Lucre [online](#), asked Press Secretary Karoline Leavitt whether the Trump administration was considering investigating Hillary Clinton or “Barack Hussein Obama.”

Leavitt called the question “refreshing” and added that “the legacy media would never ask it.”

## WHY IT MATTERS

McGee, who was [banned](#) from Twitter in 2023 for posting a video depicting child sexual abuse, was reinstated by Elon Musk. He [seized](#) on the news of a tunnel being discovered under 770 Eastern Parkway last year to claim that “Jewish families around the country” engaged in “satanic ritualistic sex abuse.”

His invitation to the White House underscores the Trump administration’s close ties to a world of online antisemitism even as officials describe fighting antisemitism on college campuses as a top priority.

## GO DEEPER

- Meet the new right-wing faces in the White House briefing room ([The Guardian](#)).
- Twitter explodes with antisemitic misinfo after secret tunnel found under NYC synagogue ([Rolling Stone](#)).

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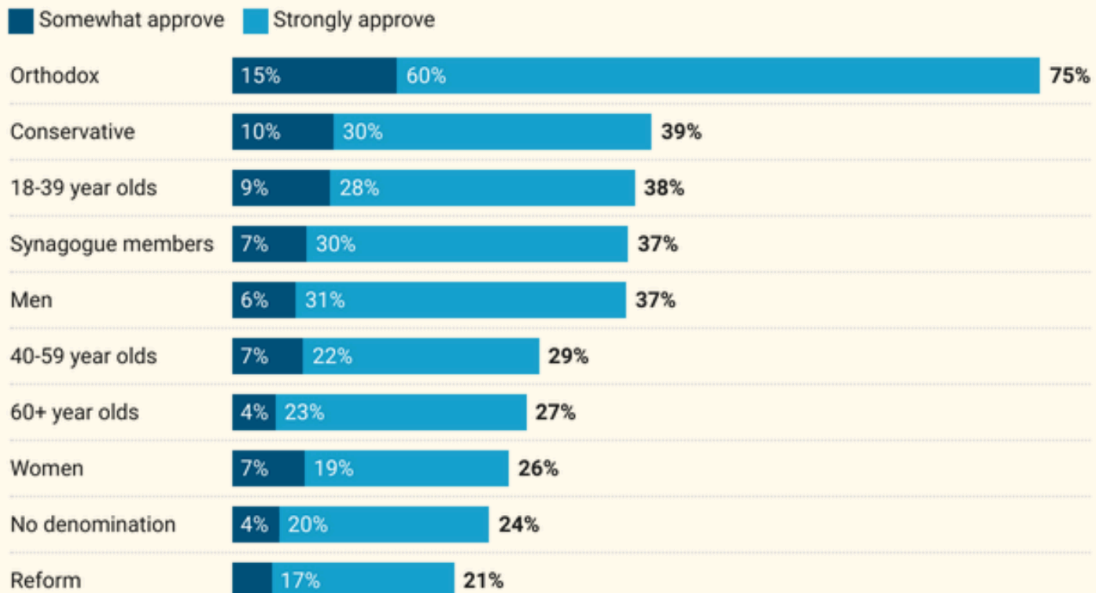
\$180

\$500



## DATA DECODER

### Who approves of how Trump is handling antisemitism?



Responses to "Do you approve or disapprove of the way President Trump is handling antisemitism?" online poll of 800 registered Jewish voters conducted 4/15-18. Margin of error is +/- 3.5%.

Chart: Arno Rosenfeld/The Forward • Source: Mellman Group • Created with Datawrapper

Jewish voters expressed a dim view of President Donald Trump's job performance in the first major poll about his time in office, with only 24% saying they approved. But a slightly higher share — 31% — said they agreed with his handling of domestic antisemitism.

The approval rate on Trump's handling of antisemitism varied widely among Jewish demographics. Unsurprisingly, Orthodox Jews — the denomination most supportive of the president — gave him the highest marks, while more liberal Reform Jews offered the lowest marks.

But one item that caught my eye? Younger Jews were significantly more likely to support Trump's approach to antisemitism, which has focused on campus activism that targets Israel, than older Jews.

This dovetails with another [recent poll](#), sponsored by the Israel on Campus Coalition, which found that 40% of Jewish college students ranked the Israel-Hamas war as one of their top three political priorities, far higher than issues like healthcare (27%), the economy (25%) and abortion (23%) that typically top the list for older Jews.



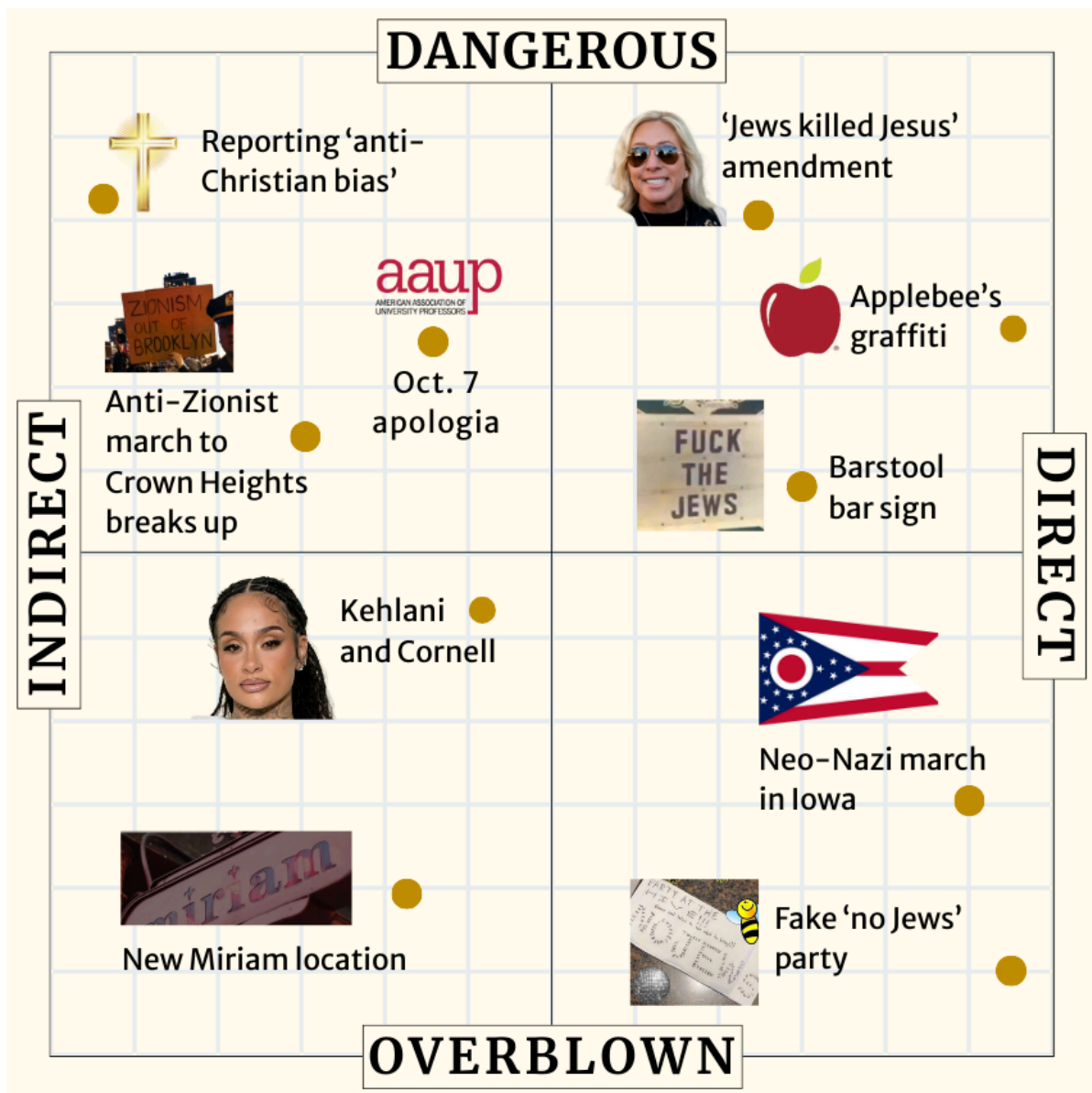
## FORWARD GRID

*The pitched battles over how to define antisemitism underscore the extent to which society has become fixated on classifying incidents in binary: Something is either antisemitic — and therefore bad — or it's OK. But this is a [brittle classification system](#).*

*My reporting is instead guided by two sets of questions: **First, who was the incident directed at?** Did it target Jews as Jews, or did it target someone who is Jewish but not necessarily because they're Jewish? Or maybe it didn't directly involve Jews at all. **And second, how alarming was the incident?** Did it involve violence or harassment? Is it likely to have a tangible impact on the lives of American Jews?*

*The Forward Grid, inspired by New York magazine's [famous Approval Matrix](#), allows an incident to be plotted along two axes that show whether — and to what extent — it was directed toward Jews as a group, and how serious a threat it poses on a spectrum from “dangerous” to “overblown.” The grid will be accompanied by incident summaries and links to learn more.*

*It's intended to help make sense of the deluge of potentially antisemitic incidents you hear about in the news and to provide a framework for thinking about Jewish safety that goes beyond “antisemitic” and “not.”*



**'Jews killed Jesus' amendment:** The Antisemitism Awareness Act was amended last week at the behest of far-right lawmakers worried that its endorsement of the controversial International Holocaust Remembrance Alliance's working definition of antisemitism would make it more difficult to accuse Jews of having killed Jesus. This amendment, along with others, stalled the bill, which initially faced opposition from progressives concerned that it would stifle criticism of Israel. ([Forward](#))

**Applebee's graffiti:** The chain restaurant's location in Miamisburg, Ohio, was briefly closed after multiple individuals spray-painted a swastika and antisemitic slogans including "F— Jews" and "Jews work here" on the doors and windows. The manager said "he felt that the graffiti was personal because he is Jewish." ([Dayton Jewish Observer](#))

**Barstool bar sign:** Two men, including a Temple University student, at a Philadelphia bar owned by Barstool Sports, an online media empire, paid for a sign at their booth that read "F— the Jews." Barstool CEO Dave

Portnoy, who is Jewish, fired the two waitresses involved but bristled at a reporter who suggested that Barstool's raucous bro culture brand might have encouraged the incident. "Here's what I would say is causing that kind of environment," he said. "All of these colleges who let Jewish kids get harassed on campus 24-7." Temple University has suspended student Mo Khan over the incident. Khan has since appeared on the show of Holocaust denier Stew Peters, who said during the conversation that humanity should "join together" to fight "Jewish supremacy." ([JTA, Forward](#))

**Reporting 'anti-Christian bias':** The Veterans Affairs Department has created a new anti-Christian bias task force and is ordering staff to report colleagues for "any instance of anti-Christian discrimination" including "any informal policies, procedures, or unofficial understandings hostile to Christian views." ([The Guardian](#))

**Oct. 7 apologia:** An article by three Jewish academics in the official magazine of the Association of American University Professors, which has been an outspoken defender of pro-Palestinian campus protests, [declared](#) that it's "not too late to tell the truth about antisemitism on campus." They described the Oct. 7 Hamas terrorist attack as a "revolt" in which militants "attacked the infrastructure of occupation"; they say the attack was unfairly smeared as "senseless violence." ([Academe Blog](#))

**Anti-Zionist march to Crown Heights:** A second potential showdown between pro-Palestinian demonstrators and Orthodox Jews in Brooklyn was averted after a heavy police presence kept a few dozen protesters far away from Chabad headquarters, their destination. The event, billed as "Flood Crown Heights" — an apparent riff on "Al-Aqsa Flood," Hamas's name for the Oct. 7 attack — followed a clash near the Hasidic movement's base two weeks ago during a visit by far-right Israeli minister Itamar Ben-Gvir, when a group of Jews surrounded and harassed a woman who lived in the neighborhood. ([New York Jewish Week](#))

**Neo-Nazi march in Iowa:** Four masked men [marched](#) through Marion, Iowa, carrying a flag belonging to the Aryan Freedom Network and handing out flyers reading, "Who's working in the interest of white Americans?" The event was quickly rebuked by local leaders, and dozens of people attended a counterrally over the weekend organized by the Marion Alliance for Racial Equity and the Cedar Rapids NAACP. ([Iowa News Now](#), [KCRG](#))

**Fake 'no Jews' party:** An invitation for a party at the Savannah College of Art and Design reading "No Jews" made headlines, but it turned out to

be a hoax perpetrated by someone who was not a student at the school, where there was no party. The social media post either showed “his disdain for the Jewish community, or he’s going through a mental episode, and we’re not quite sure just yet,” said Rabbi Zalman Refson, co-director of Chabad of Savannah. ([JTA](#))

**Kehlani and Cornell:** A trio of pro-Israel organizations [objected](#) to Cornell hosting Kehlani for an end-of-year concert, referring to her as an “antisemitic singer” for “promoting anti-Israel rhetoric.” Cornell canceled her appearance. Kehlani [insisted](#) that she’s “not antisemitic, nor anti-Jew.” The singer’s Central Park concert has since also been canceled. ([Cornell Daily Sun](#), [New York Times](#))

**New Miriam location:** Miriam, a popular Israeli restaurant in New York City, is opening a new location in the West Village months after its Brooklyn location was tagged with graffiti reading “genocide cuisine” and “Israel steals culture.” Chef and owner Rafael Hasid said he tried to put that incident “behind me” and that “we get so much love and support.” ([Bloomberg](#), [Forward](#))

Where would you place these incidents on the grid?

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