

THE LAURA FLANDERS SHOW

BEYOND THE HOLOCAUST: MODERN ANTISEMITISM AND THE AMERICAN UNIVERSITY

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SAMUEL CROSS: We live in a society that loves free speech and open expression, and especially on college campuses, you want all ideas to be out there. The issue is that not all ideas are good ideas, and you have to draw a line.

ABIGAIL HANDEL: My name is Abigail Handel. My grandparents were holocaust survivors, my family and I would attend occasional shabbat dinners at our local Rabbi's house, Hanukkah meant spending time with family, and Passover was a time to enjoy some traditional Jewish cuisine. As I was leaving for my first year of college, my sister suggested that this would be the time to discover my Jewish identity on a more intimate level. So, at the University of Wisconsin - Madison, I decided I would get involved in Hillel, the largest Jewish campus organization in the world. You don't have to be Jewish to join a Hillel. It's a space where you can study, hang out with friends, connect with your community, take Jewish classes, celebrate Jewish holidays, or just explore what spirituality means to you. I was excited to do all of the above. But on my first day of classes, some chalk tainted the excitement I felt for my Jewish exploration in college. On my first day of school, I felt a pit in my stomach when I saw chalking on the sidewalk targeting Jewish student groups, calling them "racist," "genocidal," and "having blood on their hands." This is a harmful reference to Israel, and it set me back. It made me nervous to get involved in Jewish life knowing there are people on campus who felt this way. What I, along with other members of the Jewish community, experienced was called antisemitism, and it's not unique to my campus. In fact, we are seeing a dangerous spike in antisemitism across American university campuses. So much so, that the White house established a national strategy to counter antisemitism. As a result of all this, I sought out to answer a pressing question: Are universities doing enough to combat this age-old form of hatred? But before I got into that, I spoke with Samuel Cross, the President of Rhodes College Hillel, and a Jewish Community Fellow, to understand what exactly antisemitism is.

SAMUEL CROSS: It is hard to encapsulate the entire definition of antisemitism in one statement, and that comes from the nuance of what Judaism is. It's a culture, it's an ethnicity, it's a people, and the hatred of all three of those is encapsulated in the idea of antisemitism or Judeophobia. So be it, a stereotype of them as an ethnicity, supersessionism as a religion, or just

Jewish hatred as a nation, all fall under that definition of antisemitism. Anti-Zionism slips into antisemitism whenever you see the appearance of age-old antisemitic theories or conspiracies appear, be that blood libel or exaggerations of Jewish features or criticism of Jewish tradition. It should be identified as specifically antisemitic in nature and not as a sort of foreign policy or political stance when it is rooted in those characteristics. At that point, it is no longer about the state of Israel or Palestine, and it becomes about the people themselves and their culture and their ethnicity. And that is when it crosses beyond a political topic into one of a racial issue.

ABIGAIL HANDEL: People are having a harder time recognizing antisemitism the further we get from the Holocaust and the more obvious manifestations of antisemitism that happened throughout the 19th and 20th centuries. And now, the policies of the government of Israel are at the forefront of criticism. Anti-Zionism is complex, but simply put, it's the rejection of Jewish nationhood or negating the historical and spiritual Jewish connection to Israel. The blurry line between anti-Zionism and antisemitism has created a toxic environment for American Jews on campuses, and what people might think is political discourse of Israel, is actually just antisemitic. This is why it is becoming increasingly important to call out the subtle attacks happening on university campuses. In 2022, someone threw eggs at Jewish fraternity at Rutgers University in New Jersey during a Jewish holiday. That is antisemitism. And last school year, at least nine student groups within the UC Berkeley Law school adopted a bylaw excluding Zionist speakers. That is antisemitism. I reached out to Savannah Lipinski, a recent graduate from UW-Madison and a first-year rabbinic student at the Jewish Theological Seminary, to describe the UW-Madison chalking for what they were.

SAVANNAH LIPINSKI: The chalkings were a clear demonstration, I think, of both anti-Zionism and antisemitism, which can sometimes have a very fine line. They went beyond targeting the actions of the state of Israel to targeting organizations on campus whose primary purpose is to provide community and religious services for Jewish students. Instead of targeting specific actions, they called out entire organizations claiming that they have blood on their hands, invoking stereotypes about Jews like the blood libel, which is a form of antisemitism used since the Middle Ages. And I think, what makes this a concrete example of antisemitism, was the broad accusations made toward all the Jewish organizations on campus and the students associated with them. They targeted many of the Jewish or Israel affiliated organizations on campus to make the point that being associated with Israel, whether it's leading birthright trips or offering educational programming or hosting events which helped Jewish students connect with Israeli culture, is a problem to the students who did the chalkings because of the political climate in Israel, particularly in relationship to the Israel-Palestine conflict. I think that there is an intention here, which is to sort of incite fear in Jewish students. That by being associated with those organizations, makes them a target. And I think doing that right on the first day of school, sets that tone right away so that Jewish students have to have this hesitation about being involved in Jewish organizations on campus.

ABIGAIL HANDEL: After seeing this surge in antisemitism across college campuses, it appears that attacks against Jews are at an unprecedented high and becoming normalized. But Samuel mentioned that it might not be this simple.

SAMUEL CROSS: It is hard to say that antisemitism has become more normalized because it is already so ingrained in Western society. It has been prevalent throughout the diasporic era. So, often when people find themselves being antisemitic, you will see that they don't necessarily mean it. Especially from a position like mine, growing up in the deep South where you have a very religious community that isn't Jewish, sometimes they slip into these old antisemitic tropes without realizing they are doing it. And then often, when that means they start getting engaged in their campus environment, they're getting engaged in these movements, especially when a very, very important political topic right now revolves around Jewish identity. They start slipping back into those old tendencies, relying on what they learned when they were younger and those inherited biases of Western society that existed long before they were ever engaged in that discussion. I think there are a ton of reasons as to why antisemitism is increasing, but I think the thing that connects all of them is social media. We live in a society that loves free speech and open expression, and especially on college campuses, you want all ideas to be out there. The issue is that not all ideas are good ideas, and you have to draw a line. And it's hard to figure out where that line is drawn, but we're seeing that conversation right now with groups like X, formerly known as Twitter or Meta, that's going through and identifying what is hate speech. And often, antisemitism is not making that list. Antisemitism has a frequency of going under the radar and being permitted by a lot of these social media organizations. Whereas other forms of racism would not. And it becomes especially important because it allows figures, whether they be political or cultural or religious, to spread these ideas widely, and especially as younger generations are using social media and being engaged to them, they're getting these ideas much younger before they're really challenging them. And by the time they reach the ability to challenge them, they're so ingrained in their tradition, they're already all over their feed because it's selecting their interest. So, it's curating this antisemitic commentary for them and not really challenging that. And we see that in our data too. While antisemitism on campuses has gone up about 40% in this last year, it's gone up closer to 50% in K through 12 schools. So, we see people are being introduced to this type of thinking younger, and I think that is attributed to the prevalence of social media, introducing those ideas to them.

ABIGAIL HANDEL: When Jewish students finally get into the university setting, a lot of them are frightened to get involved in Jewish life. They may really care about their Jewish identity, but they feel hesitant about who else knows about their Jewish identity. I grew up in a suburb outside of Los Angeles, and I had never felt affected by antisemitic rhetoric or demonstrations, in real life or on social media. That's why I didn't know how to handle these chalkings on the first day of school, and it prevented me from getting involved in Jewish organizations. Universities are

supposed to encourage inclusion and progression, so I asked Samuel why universities were not taking stronger stances to combat hate happening on campus.

SAMUEL CROSS: I think the issue universities are having is this idea of not every thought is a good thought, and campus environments are built around the idea of shared thinking. So, when universities look at these issues, they want to have as many opinions as possible. The issue is: bigotry is not a fair opinion. And often when you see these antisemitic events on campus, they will resort to it's free speech, it's free thought, and the reality is it's not. It's coming at the cost of your other students. And that is when it crosses a line beyond academic conversation into a realm of attack against other freethinkers. And that is where universities need to be stepping in and saying it is not appropriate. You can't have students speaking in a way that you wouldn't be willing to publish. You can't be bringing in speakers who will espouse views that you wouldn't be willing to espouse yourself. A lot of people are coming to academic institutions and meeting a ton of people that they wouldn't otherwise. People from a different religion, people from a different side of the world, entirely different ethnicities, and people don't know how to handle that. And I think a step that academia has to make is teaching these students specifically how to understand uncomfot. You're going to meet these people you don't understand, and that's going to make you feel a little uncomfortable. And they need to help you navigate that by teaching you about the tradition of racism, of antisemitism, of Islamophobia, and any other real major bias, and how to identify those underlying sentiments. So that when you end up in that environment with these communities, you understand where some of this resentment may be coming from, that you are feeling from social media or whatnot, and so that you know how to interact in a better way than you do without training. I don't think I've seen any university do any antisemitism training. They may do some racism training, they may do some homophobia training, but antisemitism especially has to be in the list given the prevalence of it in America and how ingrained in society it is. The Anti-Defamation League and Hillel have partnered to create a resource that does train in what antisemitism looks like in communities, especially tailored for a college audience that only takes a few hours to do and would be incredibly accessible for many of these communities to implement. And I've even worked on implementing it on my own campus. And it is helpful for not just Jews to understand what other people are thinking, but also non-Jews to understand their biases and understand where a lot of this is coming from.

ABIGAIL HANDEL: Back in Madison, the chalkings left many Jewish students in fear. As a response, the university released a statement to the study body. The university said that even though these antisemitic statements violate the school's norms, targeting students or student groups is not against the law or campus policy. If a deeply hateful demonstration is not against campus policy, what is? The statement also claimed that although they acknowledge the harm of the attack, it was ultimately free speech which is highly valued at UW Madison. As a Jewish student, it felt as though the University sided with free speech over the student's well-being.

SAVANNAH LIPINSKI: I think the university did a good job of responding to the incident. I appreciated that they explained that the chalkings were antisemitic and why, which I think is a good step in educating people on why it isn't okay to do those things. That being said, I think responding simply isn't enough. The university needs to do more to be proactive at combating hate on campus. And I think that they need to do more to follow up after things like that happen to see whether what they said is actually starting to make a difference. My hope would be that the university administration can do more to break down the culture of hate and division on campus and build a culture of empowerment, inclusion, and communication so that incidents like this don't happen again. And students have the skills to have deep and impactful conversations about identity, politics, and conflict. But it takes when things like this happen, calling them out, calling them antisemitism, explaining why that's not okay, and then continuing that process of following up and pushing for that culture of inclusion. I think just like university administrators have to be able to call out acts of antisemitism and acts of hate on campus and strive for a culture of inclusion, students also have to take an active role in calling out acts of hate when they see it and working to build that culture of inclusion. It's worth taking time to truly get to know the people on your campus, especially those who are different from you. I think in a place like Wisconsin that's a particularly relevant issue that people are coming to campus from places that are not as diverse as the campus that they're coming to. A lot of opinions and actions are based off of information on the internet or on social media, and it takes actually building personal relationships to break down some of those stereotypes and assumptions. I think open-mindedness and cultural sensitivity can go a long way in helping students break down those barriers between each other and start to combat hate. Calling out antisemitism when it happens and using the word antisemitism, can help people understand that it is happening and that it's a problem. I also think taking the time to educate others on what antisemitism is, why it happens, and why it's a problem will go a long way in helping to build momentum for a large-scale movement to combat antisemitism. People have to understand that antisemitism is just like all other forms of hate, and we have to fight it just like we fight all other forms of hate. And just like anything else, it's all about starting with education and awareness.

ABIGAIL HANDEL: Universities should be taking strong initiatives to combat the increasing antisemitism happening around the country, because single attacks affect entire communities. But universities don't have to be the only ones trying to create a safe and inclusive environment on campuses. The student body of a university, with the help of its institution, can mobilize and stand up against hateful incidents when they happen. Last May, on UW Madison's campus, there were various protests led by black students calling for a more inclusive environment. *audio from UW Madison protests* This was in the aftermath of a racist incident that took place on campus which caused a lot of mobilization around combating hate. It was really inspiring to see movements like this happening on campus. It sparked discussions and debate about what universities can do and should be doing when harmful incidents happen on campus.

Unfortunately, the university's response to the racist incident was once again to say that free speech prohibited them from taking concrete action and many students of color were appalled that the university did not do more. What I want to see going back to campus in the fall for my second year, is that students fight against all kinds of hate, even the more silent forms like antisemitism. I want to see universities be courageous in their proactivity, denormalize antisemitism and all kinds of bigotry through education, and equip us all as students with the training we need to battle for multiracial democracy.

Thank you for listening to Beyond The Holocaust: Modern Antisemitism And The American University. This podcast was produced by Abigail Handel in partnership with The Laura Flanders Show. Thank you to Savannah Lipinski and Samuel Cross for their insights on antisemitism. Thank you to Janet Hernandez, Sabrina Artel, Laura Flanders, Mateus Ferrer, and Alison Handel for helping make this podcast happen.