



May 27, 2024

Standing Committee on Justice and Human Rights  
House of Commons

Dear Committee Members:

As a Jewish faculty member at the University of Toronto (U of T), I write to share my deep reservations about the university's inadequate response to the growing problem of antisemitism on our campus, which has become even more marked since the establishment of the so-called encampment by anti-Israel protesters. I also call for significant policy changes to counter antisemitism more effectively.

As you know, along with other university heads, U of T's president, Professor Meric Gertler, has engaged in an exchange regarding antisemitism problem with MPs Housefather, Lametti, Carr, Mendicino, and Gainey, which referenced the university's Anti-Semitism Working Group (ASWG), whose final report was accepted in December 2021.<sup>1</sup> Many concerns of Jews at U of T involve the extent to which the university's commitments to action undertaken in response to the ASWG Report have truly been implemented. I note several significant areas where the university's response remains deficient:

1. *Inadequate or tardy remedies for exclusion, harassment, and bullying of Jewish U of T affiliates, particularly those who express support for Israel (or simply fail to distance themselves from Israel).* For example, student unions at all three campuses have demonstrated hostility toward Jewish groups and endorsed anti-Israel statements, despite collecting mandatory fees from all students. At our Scarborough campus, the student union will not book room space or provide funding to student groups that "normalize Israeli apartheid." At our Mississauga campus, all student groups are expected by the student union to support Palestine, and efforts to encourage the student unions to be more inclusive are opposed by campus unions and the faculty association. Yet while there is a university grievance procedure for such concerns, it unduly burdens student complainants by first requiring them to go through a dispute resolution process with the student union itself before the university will take action. In addition, some faculty members stigmatize supporters of Israel, often eliciting only a highly inadequate university response. For example, an official course outline in the Centre for Diaspora and Transnational Studies (DTS2002H1) stated, "This classroom is a space free of sexism, racism, Zionism, homophobia, and all other forms of social violence." The university did not sanction the instructor, but merely requested the removal of "Zionism." In the same vein, a class at the Ontario Institute for Studies in Education (OISE) visited the current encampment as part of class, and the instructor compiled a set of letters in support of the encampment that was shared publicly on social media and is still available as of today.<sup>2</sup>

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<sup>1</sup> <https://people.utoronto.ca/inclusion/anti-racism-strategic-tables/anti-semitism-working-group/>.

<sup>2</sup> <https://drive.google.com/file/d/1go3WJnp3idzzPvocsoWQQ15PmR4uaOtK/view;>  
[https://www.instagram.com/p/C7b07\\_RNm4/?img\\_index=1](https://www.instagram.com/p/C7b07_RNm4/?img_index=1).

2. *Failing to prevent academic units from taking stands on political controversies, thus infringing the academic freedom of their faculty members and learners to formulate their own positions without fear of retaliation or exclusion.* Some university departments now declare themselves officially anti-Zionist or take positions in favour of the current encampment. While the university recently issued a policy discouraging such statements, they are not prohibited and units continue to issue them; see for example the recent “HCS Statement of Solidarity with the People's Circle for Palestine, University of Toronto,” issued by the Department of Historical and Cultural Studies at the University of Toronto Scarborough.<sup>3</sup>
3. *Superficial or pro forma compliance with its own commitments to change policies and embed measures against antisemitism into equity offices.* There is a pattern of claiming to fulfill such commitments by adding a brief reference to antisemitism to a given policy and, in some cases, holding a few workshops, rather than undertaking more substantive changes. For example, the recently appointed “Assistant Director, Faith and Anti-Racism,” who happens to be Jewish, has a broad mandate and in practice has devoted far more attention to combatting other forms of prejudice than combatting antisemitism or engaging with the Jewish community.

In turn, I believe that these deficiencies in implementing the ASWG Report reflect certain underlying problems with the way that the U of T leadership treats antisemitism as a problem on our campuses.

1. First, there remains a continuing reluctance to engage with antisemitism as a distinct problem, rather than as a subset of broader problems of bigotry or in conjunction with other forms of prejudice, such as Islamophobia. In particular, the Diversity, Equity, and Inclusivity (DEI) staff who are responsible for administering policies against antisemitism show a persistent unwillingness to deal with antisemitism as a serious problem in its own right.
2. Second, the University has allowed statements or policies to be effectively immunized from allegations of antisemitism simply by being presented as “anti-Zionist,” without regard to their exclusionary or hateful implications. While all Canadian citizens, including Jews, have the right to formulate their own views about the State of Israel, the overwhelming majority of Jews in Canada and around the world support Israel’s continuing existence. Thus, policies or statements condemning Zionism tend to exclude and marginalize Jewish U of T affiliates and especially Israelis, who as persons defined by a “national origin,” are protected under the Ontario Human Rights Code. I personally have worked with both graduate and undergraduate Israeli students who have been targeted for vicious mistreatment as a result of their national origin, in addition to their faith. As a scholar of the post-Soviet region, I see disturbing parallels with the pejorative references to “Zionists” and the official policy of “anti-Zionism” in the Soviet Union that were meant to marginalize all Jews. While some anti-Zionist Jewish individuals are prominent in the pro-Palestinian movement at Canadian universities, the fact that all Jews are under pressure to distance themselves from Zionism or face suspicion or hostility is itself a form of antisemitism.
3. Third, the University continues to display a troubling pattern of expecting Jews to tolerate antisemitism over the long term rather than taking prompt and firm action against people or entities that are engaged in antisemitism.

All these problems are strikingly apparent in the current anti-Israel encampment. The senior U of T administrators who have addressed the subject in communications to the campus community and the public have rarely if ever acknowledged the specific problem of antisemitism there, although many Jewish visitors have been subject to vicious antisemitic hate speech (such as being called “kikes” or “evil Jews”), denied entry to the encampment if they were visibly Jewish (e.g., men wearing traditional Jewish

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<sup>3</sup> <https://www.utsc.utoronto.ca/hcs>.

skullcaps known as kippas), or even assaulted.<sup>4</sup> Indeed, *all* visitors are denied access to the encampment if they fail to agree to the occupiers' political statements endorsing Palestinian demands. I personally experienced this treatment when I visited the encampment recently, and it appears to be a consistent pattern.<sup>5</sup> This conduct is an egregious violation of freedom of movement and free speech that should concern all U of T affiliates. In addition, campus security officers are clearly overwhelmed and not capable of preventing violence. Yet, except on a few occasions, the University has generally refused to call in the Toronto Police Service for backup. As this situation has continued for weeks, it appears the university is tacitly acquiescing in the victimization of most of its Jewish affiliates (those who are not anti-Zionist) as well as non-Jewish pro-Israel individuals to pursue negotiations with the occupiers.

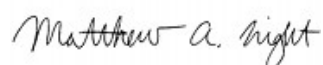
Yet the encampment is only the latest instantiation of the broader problem of antisemitism at our university, not the cause of those problems. A fundamental change of direction is needed, whereby the university addresses relevant policies, procedures, and personnel specifically to antisemitism, as follows:

1. First, it needs to ensure that at least some DEI staff are designated to deal with specifically Jewish concerns, and they need to be individuals who will be viewed as safe contact people who will engage with the mainstream Jewish community and are trusted by most Jews on campus. At present, the reluctance of Jewish U of T affiliates to report antisemitism stems in part from the generally unhelpful, if not hostile, attitude of DEI staff.
2. Second, as a corollary, the university needs to accept that anti-Zionist views are not mainstream within the Canadian Jewish community and should not be accorded equal status when designing policies to protect Jews against antisemitism on campus or Israelis from discrimination or a hostile work environment or selecting Jewish interlocutors for this purpose. An example would be the anti-Zionist organization that disingenuously terms itself the "Jewish Faculty Network," although it clearly represents only a small minority of Jewish faculty.
3. Third, the university needs to respond more promptly and decisively against individuals or groups engaged in antisemitism, rather than asking Jewish victims of antisemitism to tolerate their activities for a prolonged period or go through an unduly lengthy process to seek redress. When such actors are not behaving in good faith, the university needs to prioritize protecting Jews against antisemitism, if necessary, by taking disciplinary action against victimizers or changing grievance procedures to make them more effective. Classes on antisemitism, Israeli society, and the Israeli-Palestinian conflict should not assume that one side of the conflict has no legitimacy.

In closing, despite its commitments following the ASWG Report, the university's response to antisemitism still fails to grapple seriously with the problem or take substantive measures to rectify it, showing a preference for cosmetic or performative changes that have not changed the reality of an increasingly hostile environment for Jewish students, staff, and faculty.

I appreciate the interest of this committee in antisemitism at Canadian universities and would be happy to communicate further with your members if my input would be helpful.

Sincerely,



Matthew A. Light  
Associate Professor

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<sup>4</sup> as in this horrifying incident; see <https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=J8XoYMQ7iKM>.

<sup>5</sup> <https://x.com/Ranting4Canada/status/1794910952317436199>.