

COMPLETE TRANSCRIPT WITH SPEAKER IDENTIFICATION

Event: Sounding the Shofar - Jewish Leadership, Antisemitism, and Democratic Renewal

Hosted by: ICJS (Institute for Islamic Christian and Jewish Studies)

Speakers: Molly Silverstein (Moderator), Amy Spitalnick (JCPA CEO), Kevin Racklin (Nexus Project VP)

MOLLY SILVERSTEIN

(Moderator)

Good afternoon, everyone and welcome to today's event sounding the shofar Jewish leadership antisemitism and democratic renewal sponsored by ICJS the institute for Islamic Christian and Jewish studies in Baltimore Maryland. I'm Molly Silverstein, the program director for nonprofit and civic professionals at ICJS. ICJS is an independent educational interreligious nonprofit. We were founded in 1987, and we've worked for nearly four decades to build an interreligious society in which dialogue replaces division, friendship overcomes fear, and education eradicates ignorance. We do this by creating communities of learning in the greater Baltimore area. Through our public facing scholarship and relationship focused educational programs, we create interreligious learning opportunities where people who believe differently can connect with one another. For more information about us, please visit our website at icjs.org.

We will be taking questions during this program. So please enter all of your questions into the chat, send them directly to submit questions here. one of our colleagues has renamed themselves as submit questions here. So, send those messages to that handle. We'll be collecting them throughout the presentation, and we'll try to get to as many questions as possible. We'll also be sharing a number of resources throughout the presentation, and all of those resources along with a recording will be sent to everyone who registered for the event. So, I just want to start by grounding us in the moment that we're currently in, which unfortunately is a moment of heightened extremism and division. So, across the country, we're witnessing attacks on our freedoms with universities, nonprofits, and citizens facing new forms of government scrutiny and intimidation.

And at the same time, we've seen antisemitic incidents have risen sharply. which has left Jewish communities frightened and seeking protection. and into this mix comes a troubling dynamic which is that some of the forces undermining democratic institutions are doing so in the name of protecting Jews from antisemitism. Meanwhile, debates about how to address antisemitism have become polarized with real consequences for Jewish communities, universities, civil society organizations, and

democracy itself. So, I'm really excited to be joined here today by two speakers who are working to really chart a different path forward, one that takes seriously both the reality of rising antisemitism and the imperative to strengthen rather than erode democratic norms and civil liberties. So, Amy Spitalnick is the CEO of the Jewish Council for Public Affairs, the JCPA, which is the National Coordinating Body for Jewish Communal Relations organizations across North America.

She's a leading voice on the intersection of antisemitism, extremism, and threats to democracy. And she previously served as executive director of Integrity First for America, where she led the successful lawsuit against the organizers of the deadly Unite the Right rally in Charlottesville. Her work has focused on building broad coalitions to confront hate and strengthen democratic institutions. And our other wonderful guest is Kevin Racklin, the vice president of government relations for the Nexus Project, where he leads research initiatives examining contemporary antisemitism and develops policy recommendations for Jewish communal organizations. Kevin has over a decade of experience in US focused advocacy and nonprofit leadership. and he previously served as vice president of public affairs at J Street and as the US director for Alliance for Middle East peace, a coalition of 150 plus Israeli and Palestinian peacebuilding organizations.

He's the lead author of the Shofar Report, which we're going to be talking about today, which analyzes threats to American democracy and offers strategic guidance for Jewish communities seeking to combat antisemitism while defending civil liberties and democratic norms. So, welcome Amy and Kevin and thank you both so much for being here today. Thank you for having me. Thank you so much.

MOLLY SILVERSTEIN

(Moderator)

So, I want to start by continuing to take stock of this broader moment that we're in. And I want to ask you Amy because you've done so much work and spoken and written extensively about this connection between antisemitism and threats to democracy. can you just talk a little bit generally ground us in this moment and share what you observe about the way these forces are fueling one another in this moment.

AMY SPITALNICK

(CEO, Jewish Council for Public Affairs)

absolutely. So, to understand this moment, I think we need to understand how antisemitism has always worked. Of course, it's this general form of prejudice hating Jews because of who we are, what we look like, how we pray, what we eat or don't eat. The same way that so many other forms of prejudice operate. What's unique about antisemitism is it also works as this insidious pernicious conspiracy theory rooted in tropes and lies around Jewish control and power. And that's what makes it such a

salient wedge across the ideological spectrum and frankly even removed from the ideological spectrum. It's intended to pit communities against one another, to sow distrust and division, to make people doubt that our institutions and our government are working for them because there has to be some shadowy controlling entity responsible for what's happening.

And we see this manifest in a variety of ways. You mentioned that before joining JCPA, I led the organization where we brought a lawsuit against the Nazis that violently attacked Charlottesville. I think many of us remember the visceral feelings of seeing and hearing Nazis chanting Jews will not replace us. At the time it was a confusing chant and image. I think now we all know exactly what it means. This idea that there is a Jewish effort, a Jewish conspiracy to replace the white race through support for immigrants, refugees, black and brown communities, and others who don't fit into the white nationalist's narrow view of what they want this country to be to be. And it of course leads to not just the violence we've seen in places like Charlottesville or Pittsburgh, the deadliest attack on the Jewish community in US history, El Paso targeting the Latino community, Buffalo targeting the black community, and more.

We also see how this underpins direct dehumanizing policies from the very draconian immigrant immigration policies we're now seeing, including in the State of the Union last night, where the president yet again echoed some of these conspiracy theories and rhetoric to conspiracies around stolen elections, echoes of it we heard on January 6th, and so much more. And so, we've seen how this has become increasingly normalized and is used to undermine our democracy and attack a variety of communities, not just Jews on the right. On the other end of the political spectrum, especially since October 7th, it might be a little hard to understand how some of these same conspiracy theories can manifest, but we've seen it become increasingly prevalent and also sadly increasingly violent.

this idea that there's Jewish or quote unquote Zionist control of our government, our foreign policy, our finances, our institutions and of course as part of that the conflation of the Jewish people and the government of Israel resulting in everything from holding Jews here accountable for the actions of the Israeli government, my own synagogue targeted in the weeks after October 7th, the celebration of a terror attack which was the deadliest attack deadliest day for the Jewish community since the Holocaust on October 7th. or as we've seen, increasingly violent acts of hate. From the firebombing of Governor Josh Shapiro's home in Pennsylvania to the attack outside the Capitol Jewish Museum to the attack in Boulder, Colorado on a gathering supporting the hostages and more.

And what this form of antisemitism seeks to do is rooted in some of these very same tropes and conspiracy theories also seek to again target Jews because of the belief that they are responsible for something bad happening in the world. In this case, the war in

Gaza, the humanitarian crisis, the situ the plight of the Palestinian people. and what we're seeing is that in all of these cases, not only are these conspiracy theories and tropes becoming more pervasive and normalized, but and under undercutting our democracy in that way, fueling attacks on immigrants and voting rights and so much more, pitting communities against one another, dividing the very coalitions in progressive spaces we need to protect our democracy right now.

But we're also being offered these false choices. On the right. The administration and others are telling us we can't protect Jewish safety and protect our democracy, academic freedom, the rule of law, due process, all of the norms and values that have been so inherent to our safety and advancement as Jews for generations. And on the far left, we're being told by some that we can't be proudly Jewish or that we can't have a relationship to Israel even if we disagree with its government and still believe in humanitarian and small D democratic values. And so, these false choices on both ends are creating a situation in which communities continue to be pitted against one another. We're not actually doing anything to advance the fight against antisemitism, but rather further divide and polarize.

And the majority of us, I would say the majority of Jews and the majority of Americans are in this middle, this complicated middle where we know we can do two things at the same time. We can actively and directly confront real and rising antisemitism and not be gaslit into thinking that it isn't a real problem. And we can reject efforts to use and exploit our very legitimate fears to undermine our democracy, our academic institutions, and the basic norms and values that have been so inherent to all of our community safety for so long. And so, I think it's incumbent on all of us to understand these false choices and the ways in which antisemitism is being used to reinforce them when in fact we need to reject them to effectively both confront antisemitism and protect our democracy right now.

MOLLY SILVERSTEIN

(Moderator)

Thank you so much, Amy. yeah, that's such a comprehensive overview of the difficulty of this moment. And I appreciate you talking about this complicated middle or this place where we're straddling these two desperate aspects of this moment. Kevin, I want to turn to you because you've talked a little a lot about this idea of what the Nexus Project calls the dual threat of rising antisemitism on the one hand and then the weapon weaponization of antisemitism claims on the other hand, which seems to feed into sort of, where Amy was going with the great replacement theory and the ways that antisemitism can be used to wedge communities against each other. Can you talk a little bit about what you mean by this dual threat?

KEVIN RACKLIN

Yeah, absolutely. And I really appreciate you inviting us and giving us an opportunity to speak. In our eyes, the dual threat related to antisemitism is pretty straightforward. Amy really laid out where we are right now in the United States that this is a once in a life once in a generation spike in antisemitism that's been going on for several years even before 107 and this is only escalated since then. So, it is a real threat that students me others, our temples our community centers were all feeling this. It's real. It's dangerous. and it's really, really scary. and it demands a real response by not just, the federal government, but also from all of society that, we see this as, an attack on, when you're trading in antisemitic tropes, you're actually, funneling others type of hate as well.

The same things feed into each other. So, it's real and it's really important to hold that truth to yourself that this is a real threat. But at the same time, what's for lack of a better word, disturbing more than anything else and frankly in many ways sad is that we're seeing politicians, institutions, even sometimes leaders, slap this the label of antisemitism on anything and everything that makes people feel uncomfortable or just, basic things in terms of like criticizing the government of Israel, talking about a ceasefire, not and a lot of it is not being done in the name of Jewish safety. but a lot of it is being done in a way to just shut down debate.

and prevent, a real expression of how we talk about different things. And it goes beyond that. And I'm later in the in the conversation, I'm sure we'll talk on, project and things like that. but the real sad thing is that because they are in many ways there's this overuse of the term it actually cheapens the word itself and it makes it harder to actually identify what is real antisemitism and what's not. And what actually happens is then rather than treating antisemitism with the seriousness that it deserves, that all forms of hate deserve when we're confronting them. It turns it into a partisan football where people kick around and try to score points on. And we've seen it over the last year and a half.

that this has just been the MO that has been happening in Washington, u to try to score points, be it Republican or Democrat, on the other side on this issue, and it's really, really dangerous. and what the thing that people tend to miss is that this dual threat, this rise of antisemitism and this increase in weaponization actually feed into each other. we when you actually cry antisemitism every time somebody questions a policy or every time, someone advocates for Palestinian rights, you really do get this in sense this, boy who cried wolf scenario where, as I said earlier, it cheapens the term when there are real true incidents that are happening out there. Swastika's calling into door, people getting punched in the face for just being how they look.

Jewish institutions being tagged in one way, shape, or forms another. Amy and I were on a panel last week where we heard a student talk about how her mezuzah was ripped off of her door and there was no response by the university for it. And it was heartbreaking to hear these things. And for people like that, this and when those incidents happen, that's real. and the when you're constantly calling antisemitism when you're constantly weaponizing the term it diminishes what actually hurts and what actually is something that we need to confront. That's one of the reasons why we exist and why Nexus is out here. We exist to provide clarity in that space to actually allow for a conversation about what is and what isn't.

how to actually be intellectual about what is anti-Semitic, what makes us feel uncomfortable, and then even more so, how does this actually impact law when this does move into discrimination and things like that. So, that dual threat mentality is very real and it's actually in many ways very scary right now. Thank you. Yeah, I really appreciate the line that you both I think are straddling between, validating the reality of the incidents that are very troubling and that like you said, Kevin, are real and then also questioning and pointing to the moments where this term has been and can be weaponized and used in more nefarious ways.

MOLLY SILVERSTEIN

(Moderator)

I want to stick with you just for a second, Kevin, because I want to, I want to bring Project Esther into the mix. And so, I would love it if you would be willing to share for those who might not be familiar with a little bit of what Project Esther is, who created it and what it claims to do. And hopefully this ask isn't too outside your purview, but if you could also just touch Yeah, definitely not outside your preview. Not outside the preview, that's for sure. Yeah. I would love for you to also just touch a little bit on the imagery of Esther just as we're approaching Porum and because we are a religious nonprofit. yes,

KEVIN RACKLIN

(VP of Government Relations, Nexus Project)

I appreciate the question and I'll get to the religious language in a second, but I think it's important, when we're talking about weaponization and when people are looking for like what's a concrete example of the weaponization of Jewish fear and Jewish and antisemitism, there is no better example in my brain than Project Esther. So, I'm going to go into a little spiel, forgive me everyone, about what it is, what is not Project Esther, where it came from, and all things like that. So, I'm sure back in 2023, 2024, I would say the vast majority of the people on this call had heard of an organization called the Heritage Foundation. this was the group that came out with the blueprint strategy for the Trump administration under an idea called Project 2025.

It was this 500page plus report on what a new Republican administration should do, particularly a new Trump administration should do at the one-year mark of 107 with some fan very little. They released what I'm just dubbing an addendum to it that was named Project Esther. And the idea was that they were going to create a national strategy to combat antisemitism that fit into the project 2025 framework. Here's the interesting thing about, let me just say at the front, a national strategy to combat antisemitism is not a bad thing. I know Nexus, JCPA, and almost every other major Jewish organization out there supported the 2023 national strategy to combat antisemitism. that was, bipartisan by, supported across the board and had over a thousand different stakeholders involved, including folks from, the super, the right side of the Jewish community like the Zionist Organization of America to the super left side of the or community, folks that, may support a different other definitions.

That's really important when you're talking about a whole society effort to combat antisemitism to get the broad spectrum of what we as Jews think should be done in this moment. This doesn't do that. In fact, it does the exact opposite. It didn't even really talk to the Jewish community. It only spent most of its time with the Christian Zionist evangelical community. with virtually no Jewish involvement at all and was not, brought in, brought forward or heralded by any other Jewish organization out there. Which one is incredibly telling and it's because of this. This document was designed to use Jewish fear as a cover to enact an authoritarian policy and to and to whittle down democratic institutions whittle, go after higher education, civil liberties organizations and really the infrastructure that makes this country safe for all minorities, Jews included.

And they do it in a few different ways. The first is they call this, that anybody that is, quote unquote not as a a part of this organization or part of the somewhat even any mainstream is part of a quote Hamas support network. They specifically use language to invoke fear about other institutions be its philanthropies, universities, civil society that is a very important flag that they are using language that is coded to incite fear. and really what it ends up coming down to is that it's about people who are protesting either Israel or work for a progressive nonprofit or any of those types of things. But the main playbook itself is really straightforward. Defund universities, deport immigrants, revoke visas, target faculty that are not quote unquote in line with the Heritage Project or Project Esther's points of view, engage in surveillance of students and use law enforcement to really crack down on civil society and protests.

And what I'm saying to you sounds eerily familiar or in any way, hey, that sounds like what's happening right now, it's because it is. and what this administration has done is, they will never say it outright, and they've alluded to it, and there's New York Times pieces about it already, but they are taking key components of Project Esser and actually putting into policy practice. that I would, the best one that I like to talk about

is deportation. there was we found out mid last year, April, top of yeah the beginning of April, late March last year that the administration had started to use digital surveillance to go to look at immigrants people that were applying for visas, students that had visas that they were util that they were using surveillance techniques and utilizing def a definition of antisemitism to scrub those profiles, identify people who were quote unquote not western or not American or not pro-Israel and deporting them or revoking their visas or doing or doing more than that.

And I will say that it doesn't protect us. That actually does nothing to protect the Jews. And then taking it even a step further that we're seeing, these massive investigations into campuses where before the even the investigation is even over or even really begun, the administration implements financial penalties onto that institution, which is a whole another ball of wax that I know Amy and I could jump into about how, technically that's illegal, but like in, removing key federal dollars that really have nothing to do with the Middle East program, with antisemitism, things that like we're talking about like cancer research or climate change research. These are very going after these types of things is does not protect Jews.

And that I think it is really important to understand there is that this project again just to reiterate the point was not designed to keep us safe. It was designed to really erode American democracy. That is the biggest thing that it was designed to do and it's being still used even after the heritage foundation had this big rush over antisemitism that the administration has still not backed away from a lot of the things that they have done last year which are directly in line with project Esther. And then to your other point, Molly, on the religious aspect of this, and I'm going to say at the front, not a rabbi. I'm on the board of my temple, and I'd like to pretend that I am sometimes, but I think it's very interesting that the Heritage Foundation chose Esther for this.

And one, just to put this out there for any of you who know Jewish text, es the book of Esther is not part of the Torah. It's part of a different thing called writing. And at the front of projects, they even say that is part of the Torah. So, just put aside their complete inability to actually understand our traditions. What's really telling is that the story of Esther is so close to our tradition. I know we're coming up to it right now, but this is a story about a Jewish woman who conceals her identity in the Persian court and then reveals herself to protect her people from a genocidal plot by a man named Haman, the king's adviser.

If I had a gragger, I'd be shaking it right now. It's one of the most important traditions about standing up to power and actually understanding that one person can make a difference, and one person can actually save a person. This does the exact opposite of that. and rather than, standing to power, embracing these values that Jews hold so dear, it instead uses the machinery of government to suppress speech, make people scared, target dissent, and punish people for actually using their rights. Frankly, if Queen

Esther were alive today, I think she would be appalled, as I know I am, and many other people are, that of their appropriation of her name for this piece. It's actually really gross in so many ways.

MOLLY SILVERSTEIN

(Moderator)

Thank you, Kevin. yeah, thank you for that overview and like a little bit of religious literacy at the end there. and I want to turn to you Amy because your organization, you're building coalitions with real world Jewish communities, civil society organizations. From your vantage point, what have you observed about how Project Esther is being implemented? like what are the real and Kevin touched on this a little bit, but what are the real world consequences you're seeing for Jewish communities, universities, all of these different organizations and communities?

AMY SPITALNICK

(CEO, Jewish Council for Public Affairs)

Yeah, there's so much to say on this that it's almost hard to figure out where to start. And so I think I'll share some top lines and I think I'll go back to this idea of the false choice, right, that we started with, which is that we know that none of these measures that are being taken in the name of countering antisemitism, again recognizing the very real and legitimate fears our community has, none of these measures actually keep Jews safe. I would argue in fact they keep Jews far less safe and not only undermine our democracy which has been so inherent to Jewish safety in this country for generations but lead us leave us even more open to scapegoating and targeting because we're also then being perceived as responsible for the attacks on universities research and more.

So, I, we can look back at a variety of examples going back to the very early days of the second Trump administration. Certainly, as Kevin said, deportations and visa revocations are among the most high-profile incidents. I think of my own alma mater, Tus University in Boston, where a graduate student, many of us probably remember these images, was quite literally surrounded on the street in Somerville, Massachusetts by masked ICE agents because she wrote an op-ed critical of the Israeli government. And that case was eventually dismissed in court, but not after she was detained and faced a really horrific situation. and she is just an example of the sorts of deportations or attempted deportations, visa revocations, and other immigration enforcement we've seen done ostensibly in the name of protecting Jewish safety, but in fact really just violating the basic rights and freedoms of so many.

Of course, there is legitimate immigration enforcement within the bounds of the law that should happen if someone, for example, breaks the terms of their visas, but that's an entirely different question than what we're seeing here, right? We're seeing

someone being targeted, for example, in that case, simply because they wrote an op-ed that the government didn't like. I wrote extensively for the TUS Daily when I was a student there. I probably wouldn't want any of my writings to blast across the front page of anything anymore, but certainly none of that is grounded for targeting. Of course, we've seen this spiral. Folks probably saw the news about the administration's recent lawsuit, a most recent lawsuit against university I believe against UCLA billion dollars.

We've seen how the university has gone after a variety of universities from Harvard to UCLA to many others going after billions of dollars in funding for these universities including cancer, Alzheimer's research, other things that are have nothing to do with the safety of Jewish students and in fact are using the safety of Jewish students as an attempt to undermine academic freedom and research funding. In fact, one of the witnesses who testified at this hearing Kevin and I both spoke at last week is a science student and she is the one who had the mezuzah ripped from her door and specifically at Harvard and specifically testified that as someone who's been targeted by antisemitism. Not only is that harmful, but she's also harmed by attacks on the very research and science funding that are that are underpinning her own academic and professional careers.

And so, we're seeing the real world consequences of this certainly for the students who are being targeted, certainly for the universities and the programs that are being targeted. But we should be very clear that all of this has a direct boomerang effect on the Jewish students. It's ostensibly intended to protect it as well. both because they rely on the research programs and other funding, both because thriving Jewish life on campus requires strong universities and because Jews are ultimately being scapegoat for and will continue to be scapegoat for what the attacks on these freedoms and these dollars and so much more. And so again, none of this actually keeps juicy. There's so much more to talk about in terms of the specific policies.

You can go on and on in the ways that we've seen attacks on academic freedom. We've seen attacks on nonprofit the nonprofit killer bill last year that a number of us actively opposed and thankfully beat back. But I'm sure I will continue to rear its ugly head in various ways. the broader threats to civil liberty. And I would say so much of this is being done again not just in the name of countering antisemitism, but as the administration and its allies actually normalized some of the very antisemitic tropes, including the xenophobic, racist, antisemitic replacement and invasion rhetoric that has fueled direct violence against Jews and so much others. So, the ways in which the rubber is meeting the road on project Esther is not just dangerous and wrong for all of the reasons that our values tell us to it actually fundamentally makes Jews and so many others far less safe.

MOLLY SILVERSTEIN

(Moderator)

Thank you, Amy. Yeah, I'm glad you said so many things you said, but I particular I'm glad you brought up that student from Harvard who had her Mezuzah torn down because I also watched that I'm hearing and I thought her story was so moving and she was so disturbed by the fact that this happened to her and she had become, all of these policies had been put in place because of her ostensibly, but she had never been no one had ever asked her about her experience or talked to her. I want to move now. I want to talk a little bit about the shofar report which Kevin you are the lead on and Amy has written a piece for and I think the link to that report should be in the chat and would really encourage folks to read it as a powerful response of Jewish leaders to Project Esther.

But Kevin, can you just talk a little bit about what you saw in Project Esther that prompted you to create the shofar report as a response? and just a little bit more religious literacy in case anyone doesn't know, can you touch on the name of the report and speak a little bit to what shofar means in the Jewish community as well?

KEVIN RACKLIN

(VP of Government Relations, Nexus Project)

Absolutely. And just to clarify, this was a broad report written by many people including Amy. I wrote a major piece of it and the recommendations component, but I for Nexus this was something that after Esther came out and we saw the writing on the wall that the new the next administration would not be so favorable or may not use the national strategy that many people supported. We decided that it was time to put down a marker of where we believe and where the community believes we should go as it relates to combating antisemitism. the phrase shofar and we'll start there because I think it's important was very deliberately chosen Esther a story about a woman in the case of projects basically perverted and completely turned into something that it's not in Jewish tradition the shofar for those who don't know it's a rams horn and it's used traditionally during major events or high holidays so it's blown on Rosh Hashanah It's blown on Yom Kippur and it's a communal call.

It's a call to action. It brings people together. and particularly for Yom Kippur, it's blown, at the end of Yama pour after we've had a day of fasting, reflection, accountability to God. and so in many ways you can say the phrase shofar in this version in the way that we use it is meant as a wakeup call as a as a as an alarm to the Jewish community and to the world and to the rest of the diaspora and the Jewish community around the world that this is this issue related to antisemitism this rise of antisemitism and particularly the abuse of antisemitism and how that actually impacts democracy is very scary and it's something that we as Jews need to call out and that's where we evoke that name the shofar report and in reality what it does and what we talk about in the shofar report is almost the polar opposite of how project Esther does and so in the beginning when you look at this there are key recommendations that we

put forward about how do we strengthen the system that protects Jews and the basic question that we asked is when we are engaging in a response on antisemitism, does this protect us or hurt us? And then even more so, does this in reinforce the guard rails that not just protects Jews but protects all other minority communities in the United States? And that's the key component of it is that when Jews are safe, other minorities in this country are safe.

Very fortunate that we've lived in this in a country that has robust civil rights and a robust democracy that has kept us safe for so many years, and the show report builds on that. It talks about investing in education, which is very important when you're actually combating antisemitism. Most people think that you can, I wouldn't say most people that's the wrong word. there is a presumption that you can beat the antisemitism out of people in many ways that you can expel them isolate them from society make them not a welcome part unfortunately as Amy spoke earlier and as we've seen time and time again antisemitism has in many ways become normalized because of this administration the traditional phraseologies and tropes that have been used in the past that normally would make people ashamed that would send people into public exile are celebrated in many ways in some parts of the internet and in some political parties and in some with among sub some politicians and that is wrong.

And so, it's imperative that we understand what is being said, how it's being said and educate people on what those tropes and how they can be used. It's important to invest in that being Holocaust education training, antisemitism training. and then take it a step further. We have a very robust civil rights system here in the United States, particularly as it relates to discrimination. and it talks about enforcing existing harassment and anti-discrimination laws, not tearing them down, not raising one form of hate above another. And that is critical. because in so many ways what it's being done when we're talking about the weaponization of antisemitism is that it's being used as a wedge to divide Jews from other traditional allies that we've had out there.

and part of that effort is to raise Jews above other forms of hate, raise antisemitism above other forms of hate. And that just does not work, and in fact does it tear alliances apart and really at the ceding. And so, part of that is also; we want to build more alliances that are facing hate. We've got to strengthen the ecosystem that does that. And I think, what we really, took a step on is we wanted to build on what the Biden strategy was doing, what that 2023 strategy was doing. How do we actually invoke this whole society to attack antisemitism? How do we actually go after that in a real keyway? And I think that's really important about this.

And then chauffeur itself, we can get into recommendations and whatnot that it says, but it talks about fully funding the Office for Civil Rights at the Department of Education. For those of you who don't know, this administration has shut down over half of the offices out there that are specifically tasked with keeping minorities safe on

college campuses, not just Jews, all minorities. And I'm just going to say the word died over half the staff at in these institutions. So, I would, when you're looking at, a very small office of the Department of Education that has a very large task, it's very difficult to take an administration seriously when they are undercutting it and destroying the very institution that's designed to protect students.

so that's the one big thing that we highlight in there like OCR it is important. We also talked a lot about title six coordinators. We want to be ensuring that all college campuses and that all students in fact have an opportunity to understand discrimination law in the United States and how that could apply to them. Be them Jewish, Muslim, Sheikh, Christian, it doesn't matter. What's important is that every university should have a dedicated person there to raise up and for students to go to who actually understand this on the very core level. and the big other thing that I would bring into about project esto the shofar report getting me confused is the cross coalition building that we have in there we really believe that antisemitism doesn't exist in a vacuum it works in tandem with all other forms of hate racism xenophobia islamophobia and it's important that when Jews are looking to fight antisemitism that we can't do this alone that we have to be in coalition with other groups that are out there and so we talked a lot about in the shofar strengthening those coalitions up.

In addition to Amy, who wrote a fantastic piece that I recommend everyone read in the Shofar Report, we also have other people like white extremist Eric expert Eric Ward, J Street President Jeremy Bonami, all of these individuals lending their expertise on how antisemitism impacts various different things inside American society and even foreign policy itself.

MOLLY SILVERSTEIN

(Moderator)

Great. Thank you so much, Kevin. Yeah, I'm glad that you began to touch on some of like the really concrete recommendations that are included in the shofar report because I think alongside the really important essays in it that the recommendations are so powerful and so helpful to turn to and say, "Okay, this is an alternative response." Amy, I want to bring up a little bit about your essay in the report. and you've talked about it already on this call but in the essay, you really highlight this false binary that appears on both ends of the political spectrum. On the right leaders are exploiting Jewish fears to undermine norms. On the left there are extreme voices who are exploiting very real concerns about Palestinian human rights to isolate and marginalized Jews.

So what should in your opinion what should Jewish communities how should they navigate this when they are seemingly being pulled in two different directions and for building coalitions and really staying at the table like in your experience and from what you've seen what does that look like in practice and if you could talk also a little bit

about at ICJS one of our values is dialogue and we talk about dialogue a lot but what does what is the role of dialogue and hard conversations in this experience of staying at the table for American Jews.

AMY SPITALNICK

(CEO, Jewish Council for Public Affairs)

absolutely. Look, this is really at the core of what JCPA has been doing for nearly 83 years. We were founded in 1944 at a dark time in Jewish history, recognizing that as Jews here were quite literally trying to bang down the White House door to get the administration to pay attention to what was happening in Europe to Jews. we required strong cross community coalitions for Jewish safety and for the safety of all. And so, we co-founded with the NAACP, the Leadership Conference on Civil Rights, whose board I proudly sit on today, mobilized Jews, to, march alongside MLK and in Selma and beyond, because we know that coalition building is so inherent to not just Jewish values, but Jewish safety.

And as we've been talking about, we're in this feedback loop, right? Whereas antisemitism, these conspiracy theories are normalized. They're used to undermine our democratic institutions, voting rights, and immigration. and it leads to not just violence against so many communities, Jewish, black, immigrant, Muslim, and Latino, and so on. but also, policies that fundamentally threaten our democracy. And as our democratic norms erode, it only creates the conditions for antisemitism to further flourish because we're looking for scapegoats. We're looking for someone to blame for things that are going wrong. And so, we're in this feedback loop that we need to break. and the only way we can break that is to stay at the table, to build the broad coalitions that reject these binaries, the zero sum approach that so often dominates these conversations, the conversation on antisemitism, the binary approach the project Esther takes that seeks to pit us against others, the binary framework that so often dominates the Israeli Palestinian conversation, and I think frankly the broader polarization that has become so entrenched in our politics and our society.

And so, we have to do this in a variety of ways. for example, at JCPA I talked about the leadership conference which is the pre-eminent national civil rights coalition. Our work there both publicly and behind the scenes has been among some of the most I think personally meaningful not only working in the aftermath of October 7th to convene Jewish, Muslim, Arab American and other partners to figure out how we can keep our coalition together in this moment because we should remember that a key goal of extremists is to divide the very coalitions we need to protect democracy at a time when it's under threat but also to make sure that the coalition could stayed true to its values and to the safety of all of its members.

So, for example, when we saw the campus protests spike about two years ago almost at this point, we worked very closely to with the leadership conference to put out a statement that both fiercely defended the civil liberties of protesters, students, the right to speech and protest and made clear that the reality of antisemitism on certain campuses for students and educators was real. and that needed there was an obligation by administrators by schools to enforce title six and make sure the civil rights of all students including Jewish students were protected. Similarly, in the aftermath of the Boulder and Capital Jewish Museum attacks, it was incredibly heartening to work in that coalition to put out a statement from 65 groups, Muslim, Arab, progressive, Latino, LGBTQ, across broad diverse coalition making clear that when Jews are targeted over the actions of the Israeli government, that is antisemitism period.

But it needs to be a holistic approach, right? For example, in the aftermath of the Bondi Beach attack in Sydney, Australia, the this horrible anti-Semitic attack on Hanukkah, we also saw these really vile and atrocious Islamophobic comments made by members of Congress, including Randy Fine, who continues to just say truly the most outrageous, vile, bigoted things you could imagine about Muslims. and we had we had an event on Capitol Hill in partnership with the Muslim Public Affairs Council, EMPAC. and it was this sadly perfectly timed event in which Salam El Mariati, who runs EMPAC, was up there speaking about the horrors of the Bondi beach attack and the solidarity that the Muslim community had with the Jewish community, the importance of calling out antisemitism when it masquerades as anti-Israel activism.

and us, me and others specifically speaking to the vile Islamophobic response we've seen and the targeting of Muslims here under the guise of fighting antisemitism. And we all have an obligation to recognize how these again these binaries are being used to pit us against one another, and we stay at the table by rejecting those binaries and by doing the hard work across lines of disagreement on whether it be foreign policy or anything else. You know, we do this work in a variety of spaces. I mentioned the leadership conference at EMPAC. We have national partnerships with the two national teachers' unions, AFT and NEA, where so many of these issues are playing out in really fraught ways as well.

And engaging with nuance and care and constructive dialogue is the only path forward. and we continue to build out these sorts of coalitions both within the Jewish community because we should be under no illusion that the Jewish community itself is a monolith. and across diverse communities because that, as our friend Eric Ward likes to say, that's how you build the muscle. We need to build the muscle to stay at the table because that's the only way we can truly have the coalitions we need to fight back against rising authoritarianism, hate, and extremism in this moment. And we can't let it fracture us because that's the precise goal of the extremists.

MOLLY SILVERSTEIN

(Moderator)

Thank you. Yeah, this is the work that you are all doing. I think it can give me hope in very moments of difficulty. finding that hope and seeing where these coalitions are happening and this hard work is happening. I want to turn to we had a few audience questions come in. so someone is asking what is the reason that the Trump administration is hiding behind or using antisemitism in its actions, anti-democracy actions. but meanwhile so many of their supporters are clearly antisemitic. Can you speak that irony?

AMY SPITALNICK

(CEO, Jewish Council for Public Affairs)

I'm happy to start and Kevin jumps in. Go ahead. You go first. I'm sure we both have many thoughts about this.

KEVIN RACKLIN

(VP of Government Relations, Nexus Project)

Yeah. I look like there's no logical explanation for this other than political cynicism and hypocrisy I would argue. Right. We know that if this administration were truly serious about confronting antisemitism, it would not be normalizing these conspiracy theories and rhetoric from, the State of the Union last night to so much more that it is impossible to list here. It wouldn't be appointing people with real extremist antisemitic histories to senior roles in our government from the Department of Defense to the infamous Pauling Gracia who stated he had a Nazi streak to Jeremy Carl who's up for confirmation and so much more. And it certainly wouldn't be gutting the very programs that are intended to keep Jews and so many other communities safe, including Title Six and the Office of Civil Rights, as Kevin described, hate crimes prevention grants, our the core domestic infrastructure we have to identify and counter domestic extremism, and in particular right now, a very cynical attempt to weave terms and conditions into the nonprofit security grant program, which quite lit literally provides synagogues, JCC's, and all other religious sorts of nonprofits with funding for like security cameras and fences and other physical security.

They're trying to weave in terms and conditions requiring immigration enforcement and banning quote unquote illegal DEI so that these institutions have to choose between their values and their security. None of that is about keeping Jews safe. That's about political cynicism. in fact, JCPA is putting out a report this week. I believe it's in the chat that details all of the ways in which this administration under the guise of countering antisemitism has actually emboldened and normalized antisemitism in the form of these appointments this these rhetoric and conspiracy theories and these policies. and so, we just need to name that, and it can't be considered partisan to name that, right? There's this idea in corners of the Jewish communal landscape or more

broadly that somehow naming when the administration is doing something that threatens Jewish safety or any other community's safety is political.

That's never been our approach in the Jewish community. We've always been a proudly outspoken community. anytime any administration of any party attacks our core values and our safety, and it's never been more important, and we can't let this be perceived as quote unquote too political or partisan when in fact it's really existential to our own safety right now. I'm just going to plus one everything Amy just said like it's really you said it better than I could ever. I think cynicism is the right way to use this. It is that is nothing about protecting Jews. It's only about scoring cheap political points or pushing a different agenda. That's what it comes down to. And I think you can see that, just beyond, just look at who our secretary of defense is.

Just look at who is running the task force to combat anti-mutism. These people trade in antisemitic rhetoric all the time prior to being appointed their position. So, I find it very hard to take seriously any administration that promotes and lifts frankly, people who train in antisemitism or normalize it. It's just that it just comes down to cities, and it comes down to scoring political points.

MOLLY SILVERSTEIN

(Moderator)

Thank you both. I think we probably have time for one more question. We'll see. But I want to loop these two questions together. We have some questions about asking you both to share your perspective on the IH definition of antisemitism. and then a question specifically directed at you Kevin, but I think you can both speak to this of when does a critique of Israel and its policies become antisemitic? Where is that line? maybe as Nexus sees it, but more broadly you I think you can both speak to how your organizations perceive that.

AMY SPITALNICK

(CEO, Jewish Council for Public Affairs)

I can go first quickly because I suspect Kevin is going to have a much more comprehensive answer on this because it is really, JCPA's approach to the IRA or IH definition is that it's a valuable tool and resource. That's always been a long-standing policy. Even when JCPA used to quite literally make policy by vote across 145 Jewish communal organizations, which we don't do anymore because two Jews, three opinions, 145 Jews, I don't even know how many opinions. but it's a crucial resource for educators, government, law enforcement, and others. And it shouldn't be legally binding. It shouldn't be codified into law because we don't codify any definition of hate into law. and it raises specific civil liberties concerns that I'm sure Kevin will go into.

I also think it's important to note that the fight over definitions too often is used as a red herring to distract from holding our leaders accountable for the actual policies we need to keep Jews and all communities safe. And so rather than fighting over definitions, we should be investing in a whole of government, whole of society approach that actually advances so much of what we're talking about here, whether it's Title Six and civil rights enforcement, hate crimes prevention, extremism prevention, media and digital literacy, broader democratic resiliency, all of the things that we know are proven methods of keeping Jews and all communities safe rather than allowing these definitional fights to be red herrings. because again that lets our leaders off the hook at a time when there is so much more, we need to see from them. But I'll leave it to Kevin to go into the weeds of the definitional fights.

KEVIN RACKLIN

(VP of Government Relations, Nexus Project)

Totally. I'm happy, too. So, I'm going to first just again plus one everything Amy said. The definition of fighting is exhausting. It is a red herring. It wastes energy. It wastes time and it wastes resources from our community. and in my eyes, it's very specifically out there to divide the community in many ways. so, with one Nexus having its own definition. and there's another definition of the Jerusalem definition. There's also a Trouan definition and there's also some people call the Biden definition. So, there's multiple definitions of antisemitisms out there. and that's good. It's not a bad thing. Actually, definitions as Amy just said are educational resources.

They're designed to help inform people when they're looking to identify what is and what is not antisemitism. They are not direct laws and in fact there is a lot of ambiguity to all the definitions and there's a lot of and that is a problem in itself. The biggest thing I would say though when it comes to IRA is this is that IRA was designed not for an American context. It was designed originally for the Europeans. there's a much larger sense of hate of Jews in Europe for, just flip a textbook if you still have history textbooks. you'll see it's it goes back thousands of years at this point. and that's not to say it doesn't exist here.

But because of that, Europe has a very unique way of dealing with antisemitism. And in that way, there are hate speech codes inside Europe. And that to do to understand what antisemitism was, Europeans needed a a definition to identify for tracking purposes. This was the definition itself was created for, I like to say, bean counters. and even the author of the definition, Ken Stern, who is a former AJC council and now works at the Bard School, has said the exact same thing that this definition was never made to be put into law. And the reason is because of the ambiguity related to antisemitism, anti-Zionism and Israel. And therein lies the biggest issues that we see nowadays when it comes to the definition of wars is when does criticism of Israel when does criticism of Zionism broach into antisemitism? When does that transition over?

And for many of those, when we look at IRA, seven of those 11 examples that it that it illustrates are directly related to Israel only.

And that is a little troubling particularly because it also doesn't raise other major forms of antisemitism like blood labels or things like that are out there. That is actually a little concerning for the people that are writing it. But as Annie stated, putting aside the civil rights concerns on anti- on IRA, and I can talk about that a little bit right now, there is a broad push in this country and around the world in fact to move this definition from an educational tool into a law to codify it in a way that allows a Department of Justice or the Department of education to use it for punitive measures rather than educational enforcement rather than educational work.

That is incredibly dangerous. one as I said earlier and I think this is the structure of it. The definition itself is insanely ambiguous as it relates to what is and what is not antisemitic as it relates to Israel. That leads into a question of when enforced into law, does that mean that criticism of Israel, does being an anti-Zionist, does being pro-Palestinian, is that antisemitic? And what has happened and what we've seen is that every time that it's been used, it chills speech related to these different things. And in this country, like it or like it or leave it, we have the first amendment. You can say and think about terrible things, and I don't support those things, but when those things cross into discrimination, that is when we trigger the law.

and we've seen time and time again in over three to four court cases in federal courts. The most prominent one happened in Texas where the governor implemented IRA, and it was immediately thrown out because it directly violated the First Amendment. and so that is a real concern there. And then there is this larger idea of we need to define this to fight it. And I would say no, you don't. We know as Jews what is and what is antisemitic. Impact matters as well as intent matters. It matters what the person says as well as how it is interpreted by the individual is being said to. Those things need to be taken into consideration as well.

Nexus has developed thank you for putting in the chat the Nexus document which is our own definition of how to do this. But what we are really and one of the things I'm really proud of that we put together was this campus stat, and I just put that in the chat as well. And this was designed specifically for college campuses and for individuals to understand when something transitions into anti-Semitic drugs. And it uses three basic screening questions to do this. does the phrase, blend into traditional tropes, Jews control the world, conspiracy theories, bloodline, Holocaust imagery, things like that. Really, the traditional things that when you think about antisemitism in a different way, that is what the traditional antepast looks like.

And then does it or does it discriminate advocate violence or hostility to Jews? You know, does it do it say does someone writing burn the Jews that is clearly antisemitic

obviously, but does it promote does it defend that? And then the big thing that we all talk about nowadays does it conflate Jews with the state of Israel? Is it being something trying to hold Jews collectively responsible for the actions of the government of Israel? Is it does the act assume that nonIsraeli Jews or Jews in the diaspora or Jews in general are loyal to the state of Israel or that they are immediately assumed to be pro- Israel? Does it assume that all Jews are Zionists? and these are real questions that you have to consider when facing different languages.

And then obviously the guide itself talks about various different things by enemies' effort genocide from the river to the sea in settler colonialism. and it really does touch on each one and how it can be used and when it's used and when do these things transition over into traditional into antisemitic tropes. I will say I have found that when we're breaking the definitions down, and I would say there's three big ones out there. There's Ira, there's Nexus, and there's the Jerusalem that they, in at face value, at word value; they're all very similar. Which is good? The main definitions are they are similar, but they where they are different as it relates to Israel and anti-Zionism.

And so, I've developed a little for it just because it's easier for people to understand the different definitions and how they actually relate to anti-Zionism. So, in the broad sense of the terms for IRA anti-Zionism is antisemitism full stop for them. That is how that definition promotes itself. For nexus, it is more anti-Zionism can be antisemitism, but not all of it is. And in the Jerusalem definition it is some anti-Zionism can be but most of it is not and BDS is not as well and it's very specific about that. Those are the three main buckets of how you distinguish between the different ones. And I think as Amy said in her comments, Jews have a lot of opinions.

and you will never get all of us to sit down and agree on anything. I can I worked on Israel Palestine for almost 15 years, and I can tell you that our community still is not aligned on how that conflict should end. And so, this word itself is much similar to that. And so, it's important to use these definitions as they're intended to teach, to educate, to help law enforcement understand when something can be antisemitic and then to whether determine whether or not a discrimination component is in there.

MOLLY SILVERSTEIN

(Moderator)

Thank you so much, Kevin. I'm realizing we are so transfixed that we are now over time. So, I'm going to wrap us up. Thank you so much to Amy and Kevin for all that you're doing and for joining us in this conversation.

There's so much more to talk about. A survey will show up after you log out of today's event. Please take a few minutes to answer the questions. It'll help us measure and improve our future work. Your responses are confidential. If you want to participate in more programs like this, please visit our website at icjs.org. ICJS is nonsectarian and

independent, unaffiliated with any academic or religious organization. We are supported by people like you. So, while we strive to make all our programming available at no cost, we ask for your support in making our work possible. and thank you so much to our wonderful panelists.