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## U.S. Dept of Ed Opens Investigation Into Anti-Semitism at the University of Vermont

### *Jewish Sexual Assault Survivors Shut Out of Another University Support Group*

**Washington, D.C., September 13, 2022:** The Department of Education's Office for Civil Rights (OCR) announced it has opened a formal investigation into a [complaint](#) alleging Jewish students at the University of Vermont (UVM) have been subjected to severe and persistent anti-Semitic harassment and discrimination. Anti-Jewish incidents ranged from the exclusion of Jewish students from a campus sexual assault survivors' group, online harassment against Jewish students by a Teaching Assistant (TA), and the targeting of the UVM Hillel building. OCR evaluates all complaints it receives, but it only pursues investigations in those it determines warrant a more thorough investigation.

The complaint OCR will investigate alleges that UVM has allowed a hostile environment to proliferate on its campus in violation of Title VI of the Civil Rights Act of 1964. According to the complaint, Jewish students have expressed fear about identifying publicly as Jewish, report hiding their Jewish identity and have considered transferring out of UVM due to the hostile environment toward Jews. Numerous personal stories and [testimonials](#) were shared with the [Louis D. Brandeis Center for Human Rights Under Law](#) and [Jewish on Campus](#) (JOC), who filed the complaint, by students who asked that their names be withheld to protect their identities.

According to the complaint, an environment of harassment and intimidation has existed at UVM for years, but it intensified in 2021 when a UVM TA repeatedly instigated hate against Jewish students who express support for Zionism, even threatening to lower their grades, two student groups deliberately excluded Jewish students who expressed support for Zionism from membership, and the Hillel building was pelted for nearly 40 minutes and vandalized.

For many months throughout 2021, a university TA repeatedly sought to marginalize and ostracize Jewish students who demonstrate pride in their shared Jewish ancestry and ethnicity by expressing support for a Jewish homeland. She threatened to lower the grades of Jewish students for whom Zionism is integral to their Jewish identity and encouraged others to cyberbully and ostracize these Jewish students and vandalize the Israeli flag.

On April 5, the TA wrote: "is it unethical for me, a TA, to not give zionists credit for participation???i feel like its good and funny, -5 points for going on birthright in 2018, -10 for posting a pic with a tank in the Golan heights, -2 points just cuz I hate ur vibe in general." On April 15, she tweeted, "i'm trying to be lowkey on social media for ramadan and it's going okay so far but [name redacted] keeps sending me Instagram posts from UVM Zionist Instagram accounts and I get the indelible surge to cyber bully and religion goes out the window. i never learn." On May 11, she tweeted, "serotonin rush of bullying Zionists on the public domain." In a May 11 post, the TA confirmed that her "next step is to make zionism . . . worthy of public condemnation." According to her post, participating in a free [Birthright] trip to Israel, recognizing "both sides" of the Arab Israeli conflict, or merely stating that "my family lives in tel aviv" renders an individual "worthy of private and public condemnation."

According to the complaint, the TA's social media posts go beyond expression. With her posts, she has threatened to treat Jewish students in a discriminatory fashion, and has urged others to join her in bullying and ostracizing students based on their Jewish Zionist identity. The complaint also alleges that as a teaching assistant and representative of UVM, she helped foster the hostile environment on campus that made it possible for student organizations to exclude Jews. Two of these student organizations that banned Zionists were UVM Empowering Survivors and the UVM Revolutionary Socialist Union Book Club.

In spring of 2021 UVM Empowering Survivors, a key sexual assault support group on campus, with more than 4,000 followers, a figure that represents more than one-third of UVM's total student enrollment, announced on its Instagram page that Zionist students were no longer welcome in the group and would be "blocked." UVM Empowering Survivors wrote, "...if you don't support Palestinian liberation you don't support survivors. we follow the same policy with Zionists that we follow with those trolling or harassing others: blocked." When Jewish students reached out to the group to discuss the matter, they were rebuffed. The group added "we will not be engaging in conversation about...Zionism" and they made clear that Empowering Survivors is "an anti-Zionist group..." They followed up by saying that as a support group we must "hold our peers accountable for their pro-Israel or Zionist stances."

“UVM Empowering Survivors thereby shut out and excluded from the largest and most impactful support group on campus those Jewish students who take pride in their Jewish ancestral, ethnic heritage and the Jewish people’s ancient connection to the Land of Israel. They blamed these students for the alleged actions of a foreign government over which the students have no control, and concluded that these students must be held ‘accountable,’” wrote the Brandeis Center and JOC in the complaint.

According to UVM Hillel, during this period more than 150 students contacted Hillel expressing serious concern, some sharing that they felt “they had nowhere else to go.” Hillel posted at the time, “[t]he onslaught of antisemitism” the students “are experiencing online and among their UVM community is unyielding.”

Soon, thereafter, a UVM book club, the UVM Revolutionary Socialist Union (RSU), also posted that Jewish Zionists were not welcome. In its inaugural social media post, the RSU noted: “No racism, racial chauvinism, predatory behavior, homophobia, transphobia, Zionism, or bigotry and hate speech of any kind will be tolerated.” The group’s constitution and bylaws similarly require every RSU member to pledge no to Zionism.

Later that fall, the UVM Hillel building was also targeted. A group of UVM students harassed Hillel residents by pelting students’ windows with small stones and then vandalizing the building with a sticky substance. When one student whose window had been pelted called out asking the perpetrators to stop, one of the students responsible for the rock throwing shouted, “Are you Jewish?”

The complaint notes that historically and legally, Judaism is understood to be both a faith and an ethnicity. Jews share not only religious traditions, but also a deep historical sense of Jewish peoplehood. The Jewish people’s history, theology, and culture are deeply intertwined with the Land of Israel. Zionism is as integral to Judaism as observing the Jewish Sabbath or maintaining a kosher diet. Of course, not all Jews observe the Sabbath or keep kosher, but those who do clearly are expressing important components of their Jewish identity. Similarly, not all Jews are Zionists. But for many Jews, including many Jewish students at UVM, identifying with and expressing support for the Jewish homeland is also a sincere and deeply felt expression of their Jewish ethnic identity. Harassing, marginalizing, demonizing, and excluding these Jewish students on the basis of the Zionist component of their Jewish identity constitutes anti-Semitic discrimination and is just as unlawful and discriminatory as attacking a Jewish student for observing the Sabbath or keeping kosher. Indeed, UNESCO has cautioned that “Jew” and “Zionist” today are often used interchangeably in an attempt by anti-Semites to cloak their hate.

“All of these incidents – the exclusion of Jewish Zionist students from UVM student groups, the targeting of the Hillel building, and the TA’s social media posts - have been reported to the UVM administration. In addition, on information and belief, on multiple occasions, UVM students have met with UVM administrators and shared stories with them of how the students have been personally harassed and harmed by the hostile anti-Semitic environment on campus. To date, however, the university has taken no steps to rectify the situation. The University of Vermont is permitting a hostile environment that marginalizes and excludes Jewish students for whom Zionism is integral to their Jewish identity. In doing so, UVM is denying equal access to educational opportunities and services to Jewish students on the basis of their shared ancestry and ethnicity in violation of Title VI of the Civil Rights Act of 1964,” wrote the Brandeis Center and JOC in the complaint.

Title VI of the Civil Rights Act of 1964 prohibits discrimination on the basis of race, color, and national origin, including discrimination against Jews on the basis of their actual or perceived shared ancestry or ethnic characteristics, in educational institutions that receive federal funding. Title VI protects individuals from exclusionary conduct that denies them the ability to participate in or benefit from university programs and activities, including joining a student club, as well as from harassment that creates a hostile environment. Marginalizing, demonizing and excluding Jewish students on the basis of the Zionist component of their Jewish ethnic and ancestral identity, and discriminating on the basis of national origin identity, violates Title VI.

Last month, the Brandeis Center and JOC filed a similar [complaint](#) with OCR on behalf of two Jewish State University of New York (SUNY) at New Paltz students who were also kicked out of a sexual assault awareness group and then cyberbullied, harassed and threatened, over their Jewish and Israeli identities. Currently OCR is investigating complaints filed by the Brandeis Center against the [University of Illinois, Brooklyn College, and University of Southern California \(USC\)](#). And the U.S. Equal Employment Opportunity Commission is investigating a Brandeis Center employment discrimination complaint of anti-Semitism in the DEI program at [Stanford University](#).

*The Louis D. Brandeis Center is an independent, nonprofit organization established to advance the civil and human rights of the Jewish people and promote justice for all. The Brandeis Center conducts research, education, and advocacy to combat the resurgence of anti-Semitism on college and university campuses. It is not affiliated with the Massachusetts university, the Kentucky law school, or any of the other institutions that share the name and honor the memory of the late U.S. Supreme Court justice.*

*Jewish on Campus is a 501(c)(3) nonprofit organization founded and run by Jewish college students, for Jewish college students. Since its founding in 2020, JOC has collected stories of anti-Semitism from thousands of students around the world and has assisted in creating change on campus.*