

Vassar College Press Release

This week, the Brandeis Center sent a letter to Vassar College President Catharine Bond Hill, urging Vassar to condemn recent anti-Semitic statements made by visiting Rutgers Professor Jasbir Puar. LDB is a national, non-profit civil rights organization that works to combat anti-Semitism in higher education through research, education, and legal advocacy.

On February 3, 2015, Jasbir Puar, an associate professor of Women's and Gender Studies at Rutgers University, was invited to give a lecture sponsored by eight academic programs at Vassar, including the Jewish Studies department, on the topic of "Inhumanist Biopolitics: How Palestine Matters." Professor Puar claimed, without citing sources, that there were "more than 120 deaths by field assassinations of young Palestinian men, largely between the ages of 12 to 16, by IDF soldiers" and that some "speculate that the bodies were mined for organs for scientific research." Professor Puar's statements revive hateful anti-Semitic tropes (http://brandeiscenter.com/practices/practices_full/fact_sheet_on_the_elements_of_anti_semitic_discourse), specifically the historic blood libel against Jews.

Nearly three weeks have passed, and Vassar's administration has not condemned these hateful statements. "Without strong condemnation and action from the Vassar College administration, the statements made by Professor Puar could contribute to a hostile environment for Jewish Students at Vassar," said LDB President & General Counsel Kenneth L. Marcus. "Such statements reflect not only unfounded biased views about Israel but also ancient defamations about the Jewish people as a whole."

The Brandeis Center's letter, dated February 22, admonishes that "allowing these unfounded claims to be made, that isolate and disparage Israelis, without strong condemnation from the University administration, will signal that Vassar takes a disparaging view of Jewish students and students of Israeli national origin. Such messages are incompatible with Vassar's values - and U.S. law."

More specifically, the Brandeis Center explained: "When lecturing professors conjure the blood libel against Israelis, and Jews by association, this can create a hostile environment for Israeli and Jewish students on campus in violation of federal civil rights law."

The Brandeis Center emphasized the importance of free speech but cautioned that hate speech must not be allowed to fester: "While we respect the right of all members of the university community to express their opinions, such hateful and bigoted speech should be strongly condemned by Vassar University's administration."

In particular, the Brandeis Center warned Vassar's administration that, "As a federally funded institution, Vassar has a legal obligation under Title VI to ensure that Jewish students are not subjected to harassment, intimidation, or discrimination."

This is not the first time the Brandeis Center has called for action by Vassar College's administration. In May of 2014 When Nazi propaganda (http://brandeiscenter.com/?/news/news_short/nazi_propaganda_by_members_of_the_vassar_chapter_of_students_for_justice_in) was posted online by members of the Vassar chapter of Students for Justice in Palestine (SJP), LDB sent President Bond Hill a letter, urging her to take action in response. In that instance, President Bond Hill responded by "investigating the SJP's online posting" and later would "request [that] SJP Vassar membership take responsibility for its actions and cease representing itself as an official Vassar group." The Brandeis Center hopes to see strong actions taken with the current incident with Professor Puar.

The full text of the letter can be found below:

February 22, 2016

President Catharine Bond Hill

Office of the President

Vassar College

124 Raymond Ave., Box 0001

Poughkeepsie, NY 12604

Via Electronic Mail (presidentsoffice@vassar.edu)

Dear President Bond Hill:

We write on behalf of the Louis D. Brandeis Center for Human Rights Under Law (LDB), a public interest advocacy organization that combats anti-Semitism in higher education. We urge you today to condemn

in the strongest terms the statements made at Vassar on February 3, 2016 by visiting Rutgers Professor Jasbir Puar, especially statements in which Professor Puar contended, without citing sources, that there were “more than 120 deaths by field assassinations of young Palestinian men, largely between the ages of 12 to 16, by IDF soldiers,” and that some “speculate that the bodies were mined for organs for scientific research.” Professor Puar’s statements revive hateful anti-Semitic tropes, specifically the historic blood libel against Jews.

We are concerned that Professor Puar’s claims, and similar claims, could create an environment that Israeli and Jewish students will reasonably perceive to be hostile. Allowing these unfounded claims to be made, that isolate and disparage Israelis, without strong condemnation from the University administration, will signal that Vassar takes a disparaging view of Jewish students and students of Israeli national origin. Such messages are incompatible with Vassar’s values - and U.S. law.

This incident raises serious issues concerning federal civil rights law. Title VI of the Civil Rights Act of 1964 prohibits discrimination on the basis of race, color, or national origin in programs that receive federal funds. The U.S. Department of Education’s Office for Civil Rights (OCR) has announced that Title VI applies to discrimination on the basis of Jewish ethnicity or ancestry in guidance issued in 2004 (see attached Kenneth L. Marcus, Dear Colleague Letter (Sep. 13, 2004)). In 2010, OCR clarified that unlawful harassment need not include intent to harm, be directed at a specific target, or involve repeated incidents (see attached Russlynn Ali, Dear Colleague Letter (Oct. 26, 2010)).

When lecturing professors conjure the blood libel against Israelis, and Jews by association, this can create a hostile environment for Israeli and Jewish students on campus in violation of federal civil rights law.

Additionally, according to Vassar’s own Policy Against Discrimination and Harassment, “Vassar is committed to providing a working and learning environment where all members feel valued and are fully empowered to claim a place in, and responsibility for, our shared working, living, and learning community. Members of the Vassar College community, guests, and visitors have a right to be free from discrimination and harassment and to be treated with respect. For this reason, Vassar does not discriminate on the basis of an individual’s actual or perceived race, color, religion or religious belief, citizenship status, . . . national origin. . . and does not tolerate such discrimination or harassment of its faculty, administration, staff, students, or visitors.” (Vassar Student Handbook, POLICY AGAINST DISCRIMINATION AND HARASSMENT, A. Policy Statement, <http://deanofthecollege.vassar.edu/documents/student-handbook/VassarStudentHandbook.pdf>).

While we respect the right of all members of the university community to express their opinions, such hateful and bigoted speech should be strongly condemned by Vassar University’s administration.

Since ancient times, Jews have been falsely accused of killing gentiles for ritual purposes. In Medieval Europe, beginning in the Twelfth Century, it was often accompanied by accusations that Jews used their victim's blood to bake ritual bread for the Jewish holi-day of Passover. Historically, these false allegations have frequently been followed by anti-Jewish riots and mass-murders. Today, echoes of this blood libel can be heard in allegations that Jews, especially in Israel, kill young gentile children for military or political purposes or in service of genocide. In one contemporary variation, Israelis are accused of kidnapping Palestinian children at night, murder-ing them, and selling their organs for profit. Professor Puar's statements fit exactly this reiteration of the ancient blood libel against Jews and Israelis in an extremely hateful way. We discuss this in our Fact Sheet on the Elements of Anti-Semitic Discourse (see attached).

On May 20, 2014, the Louis D. Brandeis Center sent you a letter, urging you to take strong disciplinary action in response to the posting of Nazi propaganda by members of the Vassar chapter of Students for Justice in Palestine (SJP). We applaud that you said, in response to our letter, that Vassar would "investigat[e] the SJP's online posting as a bias incident under college regulations," would "request SJP Vassar membership take responsibility for its actions and cease representing itself as an official Vassar group," and that "we condemn racist, hateful speech."

We hope that you will again seize this as a teachable moment to educate your students about the evils of anti-Semitism and racism and the need to take a firm stand against them.

This past December, outgoing U.S. Secretary of Education Arne Duncan reminded us that "we must be vigilant about maintaining safe, respectful, and nondiscriminatory learning environments for all students in our schools and institutions," noting that Jewish students are among those who are "especially at risk of harassment," and urging educators like yourself to "anticipate the potential challenges" that they may face (see attached Sec. Arne Duncan, Dear Colleague Letter (Dec. 31, 2015)). As a federally funded institution, Vassar has a legal obligation under Title VI to ensure that Jewish students are not subjected to harassment, intimidation, or discrimination. Furthermore, in accordance with the directive of the U.S. Commission on Civil Rights, we ask you to exercise your "ethical moral obligation to act as leaders, and promote the values of respect, tolerance, and inclusiveness on campus," and to educate your students and visiting and permanent faculty "that with freedom of speech comes responsibility."