

An open letter to President Killeen, Chancellor Jones, and the Board of Trustees:

We are a multigenerational group of Jewish faculty, staff, students, and community members. We come from diverse backgrounds and carry diverse religious and political identities. Our Jewishness is important to all of us. We are reaching out to you because we are deeply troubled and concerned by the University's recent agreement of Mutual Understanding with Hillel International, Illini Hillel, the Jewish United Fund Chicago, the Brandeis Center, and Arnold & Porter LLC.

Before explaining more about our concerns with the agreement, we want to share some information about our group so that you understand our perspective. Our group is united in the beliefs that no life is more valuable than another and that all people deserve freedom, dignity, and the opportunity to participate in democratic processes. Further, we are committed to collaboration and solidarity across religious and cultural lines, and we see these acts along with ongoing dialogue as the roots of lasting justice and peace.

Our work centers on the principle of shared liberation; here and in Israel-Palestine, Jewish and Palestinian liberation are intertwined. We are only safe when all of us are safe. We are only free when all of us are free. We strongly condemn the attack by Hamas on Israeli civilians, and our values also drive us to stand up against Israel's ongoing decimation of Gaza including its endless destruction of countless homes and institutions of health care, learning, and culture. We are horrified by Israel's killing of children, families, and entire communities.

We, as Urbana-Champaign Jews for Ceasefire, firmly agree that the University should be a safe and welcoming environment for all students, including Jewish students. We also believe that Jewish students should be protected from harassment and discrimination based on their Jewish identity, regardless of whether they see Zionism as a part of that identity. We are very aware of and concerned by acts of antisemitism, and we believe that it is the University's responsibility to both prevent and appropriately respond to acts of hatred of all kinds. At the same time, we find several problems and even dangers in the way that the agreement of Mutual Understanding asserts that Zionism is integral to Jewish identity.

First, as a secular public institution of higher education, the University of Illinois should not take a stance on how a diverse, historically complex diasporic population defines itself or its relationship to a biblical homeland. For over 5,000 years, Jews have written, argued, and struggled to collectively define who we are in the places in which we live. There are many Jewish organizations here in the University's community; Hillel, Chabad, Sinai Temple, the Champaign-Urbana Jewish Federation, and UC Jews for Ceasefire collectively are testament to the significant variety in Jewish identities, religiosity, rituals, and politics. Declaring Zionism as central to Jewish identity erases the many Jews across spectra of religious observance who do not define themselves as Zionists, who do not center a Jewish nation state within their Judaism, and who even find Zionism antithetical to Judaism. In this way, the agreement of Mutual Understanding does not reflect the way many Jewish community members define their Jewish identity.

Second, we adamantly support academic freedom, including the freedom to express political and ethical criticisms of the state of Israel. We are deeply concerned that the recent agreement of Mutual Understanding will be used to limit academic freedom and free speech related to the criticism of Zionism as a political ideology or to criticism of actions of the state of Israel. We believe

that students, community members, and indeed our group itself, have the right to speak and protest publicly, without censorship, arrest, or discrimination. To be clear, we see this freedom as just as applicable to students who identify as Zionist as it is for students who do not. This freedom is just as applicable for students who stand for and who stand against actions of the state of Israel or the war on Gaza.

Finally, we fear that the recent agreement of Mutual Understanding which includes Zionism as a defining component of Jewish identity will both embolden and help proliferate false accusations of antisemitism which are already rampant on our campus. Student organizations fighting for the livelihoods of Palestinians have been accused of antisemitism, but it is not antisemitic to support human rights. We firmly believe that it is not antisemitic to protest the crimes against humanity that Israel is committing or to support the United Nations in declaring Israel's actions a violation of international law. It is not antisemitic to critique the bombing of civilians or other policies and practices of the state of Israel. In fact, it is quite the opposite; our Jewish values require us to stand up against what is wrong and fight for a future where Palestinians can live out their hopes and dreams in safety on their homeland.

Additionally, over the past many months we have heard several stories of faculty who were reported or harassed for being "antisemitic" after they expressed support of students' rights to protest against Israel's actions or sympathy with those suffering in Gaza. These are our colleagues and our friends, and it pains us to see them accused of hatred when they are in reality champions of empathy, free speech, and learning. These efforts to report conduct that is actually protected free speech and to erroneously label it antisemitic are not only detrimental to our campus climate, they are nothing less than a danger to our democracy.

To conclude, we believe that the University should take an active role in protecting all students on campus from discrimination and harassment. We support the administration of the University of Illinois in its aims to take serious action against incidents of Islamophobia, antisemitism, and all hate speech. At the same time, we urge the University to be cautious, thoughtful, and thorough in responding to reported incidents and in ensuring that the responses do not stifle academic, intellectual, and expressive freedoms. And further, we urge the University to support our students in learning to make these critical distinctions as well. In doing so, we believe that the University will best protect and support both its Jewish and non-Jewish community members.

Thank you, and we look forward to continuing this conversation with you.

Urbana-Champaign Jews for Ceasefire