

WRITTEN TESTIMONY OF RABBI LEVI SHEMTOV  
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Before the Hearing of  
THE UNITED STATES SENATE  
COMMITTEE ON HEALTH, EDUCATION, LABOR AND PENSIONS

“Antisemitic disruptions on Campus:  
Ensuring safe learning environments for all students”

March 27, 2025

Chairman Cassidy, Ranking Member Sanders, and honorable members of this Committee:

My name is Rabbi Levi Shemtov, and I am the Executive Vice President of American Friends of Lubavitch (Chabad), which directs and organizes the operations in our nation’s capital and the international community on behalf of the international Chabad-Lubavitch movement, currently the largest, most vibrant and fastest growing network of Jewish educational and social service institutions in the world. We are present and active through over 4,000 centers in all 50 states and over 110 countries.

Our work literally spans the gamut of life, with religious, humanitarian and communal programs catering to innumerable individuals and families, from preschool to senior citizens, and helps lift the lives and wellbeing, materially and spiritually, of millions of people from all walks of life – on all strata of social and economic existence, from business and academic leaders, to the poor and homeless, from those at the top of society, to Jewish people serving in all ranks of the military, to those incarcerated or otherwise disadvantaged searching for a better existence and more meaning in their lives.

Included in these are active centers serving hundreds of thousands of Jewish students on 526 campuses in the US. Under my more immediate purview are centers some 10,000 Jewish students in Washington, DC, specifically at the The George Washington, Georgetown, American and Gallaudet Universities, as well the Johns Hopkins and dozens of other Graduate Programs with a presence here.

Personally, in addition to my work in the governmental and international arenas as well as the local community, I have interacted closely with students directly for about thirty years now and have thus seen and shared their experiences first-hand. So I hope you will appreciate that my words today will not be merely theoretical or philosophical. They are practical, gleaned from what I have seen and heard directly from students and colleagues who serve on campuses across the country.

My colleagues and I dedicate ourselves tirelessly every day to our mission inspired and in many cases, personally directed by our mentor, the Lubavitcher Rebbe, Rabbi Menachem M. Schneerson, of sacred memory. Widely regarded as the most influential rabbi in modern times, he infused us all with a deep appreciation for America and the unique opportunity it affords us to proudly practice our faith and inspire others to do the same. Actually, this very body, the United States Congress, unanimously awarded the Rebbe the Congressional Gold Medal in 1994. His teachings and exemplary dedication has reached and improved the lives of millions of men women and children of all ages and affiliations and persuasions, as his sage advice and insight were sought by presidents, prime ministers, governors, mayor, business leaders, teachers, journalists and even perhaps most importantly, the young and common folk.

One very important focus of the Rebbe, perhaps, the sharpest focus, was on education. He taught that education is more than the provision of knowledge, it is the building of character and meaning within a child and then an adult, to help ensure that their life is not merely lived, but lived meaningfully, so that the world will become a better place because one has lived within it for whatever time G-d has allowed them to.

This concept is one of the most famous in the Jewish faith “*letaken olam bemalchut Shadai*” to perfect the world under the sovereignty of G-d. Many merely refer to it as Tikkun Olam, but this is the original mandate.

One can do this in many ways. Reaching someone in need, discipline in expression so as to help and not hurt, offering support to those who need it (everyone, no matter how great, needs support on some level) and generally working to ensure that the world becomes more livable and the great garden of life G-d desired when he created it and all of us within it.

To honor the Rebbe’s work and teachings, the President of the United States has, since 1978, declared his birthday every year as Education and Sharing Day, USA, in an effort to focus society’s actions in this regard. A remarkable concept which has defied any partisan factor, this has been replicated by governors across all 50 states, and even a large number of mayors and civic leader on the local level.

The point of all this is to drive home the notion the Rebbe taught that every individual, no matter how humble or great, has the power to change the world, for better or for worse, by what they say and do, and thus the responsibility to do so positively.

Which leads me to the central point of today's hearing.

I was once discussing with my father a particular public figure who was being labeled an antisemite. We all know great things about this individual and I was troubled by that label for them. My father, who many of you may know through his own work here on the Hill for decades, said something very important to me. "Yes, we are sure they are not antisemitic. But someone like them can and should be more anti-antisemitic and is not, and that is troubling."

Mr. Chairman, Ranking Member and members of this distinguished committee, in my opinion, the mere holding of this hearing is a strong and important statement of anti-antisemitism. You are focusing on this scourge where it lurks the worst and strikes people at a very vulnerable time when, for the first time, they are defining their very personalities and identities on their own.

These students come to explore the marketplace of thought and ideas and determine their own path in the world they will inhabit and one day lead. They will form opinions about faith, family, country – central components of every life. And they will determine who they want to be and how to live that out for themselves, their friends and the families they will build.

So, it is crucial that at this particular junction their essential identities not be attacked and undermined.

We, the Jewish people, find ourselves shortly after the festival of Purim and soon approaching Passover. Anyone wanting to understand the Jewish odyssey and formation of our identity ought to understand these festivals and their meaning.

Purim marks the miraculous deliverance from near annihilation by an evil antisemite named Haman in ancient Persia in the fourth century BCE. His main complaint was there is a nation, the Jews, who are different and have customs unlike those of others in the Persian empire and thus must be annihilated, G-d forbid. Among the figures in the biblical Book of Esther, which recounts the story, are she and a rabbi who led the Jewish people at the time named Mordechai, who would not bend a knee nor bow to this vicious antisemite, Haman, even though he was familiar in the royal court as well.

We don't know as much about other Jewish people who lived in that era, other than that they felt threatened and succumbed to the influences of the times. Mordechai stood up to the powerful Haman and ensured Jewish survival.

One might say he countered that terrible antisemitism with what I like to call informed and Robust Semitism. It will be very difficult for Jewish students on campus to properly counter the latest explosion in antisemitic activity on campuses without a strengthened sense of identity. Sadly, over the past decades, that sense of identity has weakened. And so, when threatened academically, socially, and even as we have seen lately, physically, a Jewish student can be woefully unprepared for the onslaught. Until now, we hope they had a good network of Jewish community back home, but that is too often wishful thinking, I have learned from more students than I wish.

And we will soon celebrate Passover. Almost immediately after the Exodus from Egypt, the nascent Jewish people, then still called Israelites, were attacked, first by the ancient Egyptian army and then later by the first recorded antisemite, Amalek. The Torah commands us, and we are required to read this every year, to “remember to eradicate the memory of Amalek.” Who is Amalek today? Physically, that is a good question. Philosophically, however, it is the pernicious perpetrators of antisemitism.

The Lubavitcher Rebbe taught that Amalek has a similar context to the word “safek”, Hebrew for doubt. When the actual Amalek confronted the Jewish people in ancient times, he attacked the stragglers, the weakest among them. He was not brave and could not beat the Jewish people all, so like any bully, went after the most vulnerable. Today, those seeking to sow doubt among Jewish people about the righteousness of our cause, about our historic rights to the land of Israel, and to the right we enjoy to live fully, proudly and openly as Jews, are the heirs to Amalek.

Their terrible spirit, the intent to make us doubt ourselves (safek) and thus more susceptible to attack, lives on the campuses and streets of America and increasingly elsewhere. They evilly attacked Israel like savages on October 7<sup>th</sup>, and they and their supporters have continued this attack even more since. While there are military and law enforcement ways to eradicate the problem, and they will do their responsibility, every decent human being has a responsibility to eradicate the philosophy the present day Amalekites espouse, since it is will destroy civilization as we know it if we do not counter it effectively.

The government of the United States does not have an obligation to support any particular religion, but it does most certainly have a solemn obligation to protect in every possible way the ability of its citizens to practice and live their own faith. Indeed, there have been many such efforts, whose details might be appropriate in a different hearing.

As it pertains to the campuses, specifically, more must be done to underscore the commitment by our government to do so, not just in theory but in practice and most

importantly, enforcement. The passing of the Antisemitism Awareness Act which is now expected, will do a lot to help the public understand again that we will continue to live by the words of our first President, the heroic founder of the United States, George Washington, who promised, in the first known Presidential correspondence to the Jewish community, that the United States will offer “bigotry no sanction” . There is no doubt a large majority of the Congress, and of the United States, support this endeavor.

I also know there has been some noise about the IHRA definition, and efforts to dilute that. But without it, people will find too many loopholes and continue to undermine, threaten, cancel and gaslight Jewish students and members of our community generally. You might never find language acceptable to all, but the IHRA definition does enjoy the broadest acceptance by Jewish organizations and should be respected as policy of the United States. If our own ambassador to monitor and combat antisemitism is asking other nations and global institutions to adopt it, we should do the same.

(I will point out that while our own organization generally avoids political statements and has not declared an official position on the above, this is what I sense from my own viewpoint.)

As I mentioned, the mere holding of this hearing is in itself a statement of leadership in this regard. And I hope the diligent deliberations herein will result in a strengthened approach to ensuring safety of all students on campuses.

I would like to focus on Jewish students for a moment. Last year, and the year before that, a special high-level meeting was held at the White House to address the issue of antisemitism, generally as well as on campus. I believe all Jewish leaders present were heartened by the senior level of representation by the administration and heartfelt expressions by the principals, some of whom are themselves Jewish.

But somehow, the effort to singularly target and combat antisemitism was weakened, in my opinion, and maybe even undermined, by the introduction of fighting other forms of discrimination at the same time within that effort. I will repeat what I said there, in addition to my obvious gratitude for being present at such a significant effort:

Anyone who flies knows that we are warned at the beginning of the flight that in the event of a sudden change in cabin pressure, one should apply the oxygen mask that drops down to your seat. We are clearly warned to use our own mask first despite our instinct to help others, especially children. For if we stop breathing, we cannot help anyone. And our continued ability to breathe properly will help us to help others.

We, the Jewish community must be very careful to do as above. We must worry and address completely the scourge of antisemitism and its dangers first, and obviously once

that would be under control, we must help to combat other form of discrimination, so every human being, created in the image of the Almighty G-d, can live in dignity and safety.

But if we allow the dilution of our large and pressing matter into a larger pool of perpetrated hatred, as important as that might be, we will not be as effective, if we will be effective at all. I have heard first-hand too many stories of students who thought they could depend on their friends in other minority groups whom they supported to stand by them after October 7th. Sadly, they were disappointed to find the support was just not here, Further, in too many instances, they were slowly squeezed out of affinity groups to which they dedicated so much time and effort and sad to find themselves, despite their best efforts integrate, that they were just an annoyance to be discarded, moral and just considerations thrown to the wind.

So, I believe the Jewish community must stand first and foremost for ourselves, and when we regain our strength, then and only then will we be able to build and rebuild alliances as we are needed.

Perhaps I might add my appreciation that while this hearing is to help ensure safety for all students, you did assert the main focus on antisemitism. Because, as Nobel Laureate Elie Wiesel famously said, we Jews are always the first, but we are never the last. We are a test case, and if they succeed with us, G-d forbid, they are coming for everyone else next. As a matter of fact, he also lamented that after reflection on why the Nazis hated him so much , and what he might have done to earn his terrible fate to see the worst of humanity, he concluded, “there is no valid reason, for they hated me before I was even born.”

Antisemitism is the world’s oldest form of hate, and it has never been totally extinguished. Perhaps it never can be. When it rears its ugly head, we must stand steadfast in countering it, and we must also at the same time work diligently to reinforce a positive Jewish identity, or Robust Semitism, within our own Jewish community.

But this time is different.

My own realization that something ominous was upon us happened about twelve or thirteen years ago. A friend of ours, not Jewish, shared their sadness at having just been to a prestigious dinner party where someone made an antisemitic joke. “No one gagged”, they said, “and some even laughed.” When I asked why they were telling me this, they answered. “I just thought it was important for someone like you to be aware that something like this has happened at this time. Things seem to be changing.”

When I spoke about it in synagogue that week, people were not sure it was that serious. Those who remember it all know now how serious it was.

Hate has a way of starting small and metastasizing quickly. Doubling every day, a penny turns to more than a million dollars within a month. I believe we have seen a doubling in antisemitism every five years or so and then more recently in shorter time frames. When a one turns to two, or two turns to four, you hardly notice. We are now seeing how we are going from eight to sixteen, or even worse, sixteen to thirty-two. It's gotten very serious.

But there is one big difference. This time, the powers that be, in the greatest and most powerful nation on Earth, are **not** supportive of this antisemitic hate. Indeed, the government of the United States is increasingly exerting efforts and resources to counter and destroy this hate. We see this in a bipartisan manner, as political leaders who disagree on major policy issues are almost one and in sync on this one.

I know that there are those who might suggest that first amendment rights are threatened by some of the efforts underway to combat antisemitism. I would say that freedom of expression is about words and ideas, and is not a license to disrupt the lives of people you disagree with and threaten them academically and worse, with their very physical safety.

Last year, on the campus of The George Washington University, this actually happened, and I saw it with my own eyes. I was at the "encampment" there several times to see what was going on, and to help bolster the spirit of the Jewish students who were harmed by it and shocked by the seeming lack of sufficient action by the University's leadership, and the municipal government leaders who should have backed them up, to effectively disperse this disgraceful assembly of hate which physically desecrated the campus, including the violent removal of the American flag which flies as a reminder of the welcome freedom of expression for all. They disrupted the peaceful flow of academic activity, and impaired students who had worked so hard to excel in their exams, which some could not reach because of this violence.

Dozens of university and DC police officers roamed the campus almost as spectators, seemingly unable to restore order among the chaos. The University is not public property. It is governed by its own policies. Students were so dismayed by how literal gangsters were able to operate there with seeming impunity even repeatedly threatening the University's President with physical harm. There were some actions taken by the University's administrators, but hardly enough and too much of it quietly downgraded or reversed. They can and must do better to address breaches of their policies.

And lest you think that these were all well informed individuals, I personally spoke to some students who were convinced that "from the river to the sea" that thinly veiled antisemitic slogan calling for the elimination of Israel, G-d forbid, referred to the Potomac River and the Chesapeake! I wouldn't believe it either, but I heard it with my own ears. When I suggested

they were mistaken and asked why they'd be participating in an encampment whose purpose they weren't fully aware of, one said, and I quote, "I actually don't know. I signed up for Code Pink a while ago, and I just got a text today saying "Come over to GW now. We need you here and they're serving great schwarma' so here I am."

And they weren't just from GW. Many were bussed in from elsewhere. This was a coordinated campaign of hate, not a spontaneous event of freedom of expression. They harassed Jewish students, yelling epithets and even spitting at them. Many Jewish students had second thoughts about the mezuzah on their door, especially after one student had theirs ripped from her doorpost. Others rethought even telling friends or roommates that they are Jewish! And yet others were unsure about attending Jewish events, with one student telling me they feared their unfriendly professor might see them there and downgrade their paper as a result!

These are but a few little snippets from the sad and sorry story of the campus "encampments". There are so many more perpetrated by students and even (and to) professors on a number of campuses across the country. I also listened in on some of the indoctrinating speeches there. While I will respect their right to preach their faith, in too many instances I discerned that within this group were many people who hate not only Israel and the Jewish people. They hate America. We need to wake up and see that they are not just exercising First Amendment rights. They are abusing them. And to help preserve the sanctity of that particular right, we must address and hopefully eliminate its abuse. There are plenty of Muslims we can work with on this, who pine for a more decent life of peace for all and resent what is being done in their name. When we will be able to, we must also help strengthen them to be fearless in the expression of that. They, too, are victims of this most recent spike in hate directed at Jews.

Again, the First Amendment, the bedrock of our society, is sacred, but must not be misused to weaken our required response to this issue. Today's hearing is a very important step in that direction of addressing it forcefully and I hope it will succeed. I am honored to have been invited to participate and look forward to answering any questions you might have.

Thank you very much.



