



Letter to Randi Weingarten, President - American Federation of Teachers

April 20, 2021

Dear Ms. Weingarten:

We were disappointed by your disturbing remarks made in a recent interview with the Jewish Telegraph Agency (JTA). We add our collective voice to those that have already expressed shock and concern about your comments. By asserting that “American Jews are now part of the ownership class,” you wrongly targeted one ethnic group, invoking an age-old, sinister trope of alleged Jewish wealth and power. And if reducing Jewish Americans to a negative stereotype wasn’t harmful enough, you bizarrely accuse us all, with no supporting evidence, of wanting to deny educational and economic opportunity for struggling communities.

We do not understand why you would level such an incendiary charge, especially when the JTA reporter’s question did not mention Jews. Moreover, even setting aside the unsettling nature of the language you used, we are struck by the incoherence of the argument: how are those who are calling for schools to reopen taking the ladder of education away? As Rabbi Abraham Cooper of the Simon Wiesenthal Center observed to The Algemeiner, “If [these comments] had come from someone who wasn’t Jewish, I would imagine we would be talking about classic antisemitism, about demonizing a community.” He added that your statement risks fueling “more antisemitism, it will justify more separation between communities ... and between economic levels. That’s not what a true leader should do, especially not in the educational realm.”

We agree, emphatically. As a lawyer and former history teacher – and a self-proclaimed, proud Jewish one no less – who now occupies such a high-profile and influential position, you know well that words matter. How should your assessment be received by the many Jewish teachers who are members of your union, let alone by their students? You may be familiar with the writings of journalist and author Bari Weiss. Her primer, “How to Fight Anti-Semitism,” has been the subject of an extended series of book club conversations here in southern New Jersey, and last month she addressed our community at an event that our organization hosted. Your statement that Jews are making “a totally privileged argument” is characteristic of the misguided and pernicious charges that, as Ms. Weiss describes, emanate increasingly often from the political left.

We ask you to thoroughly consider how hurtful, divisive, and dangerous your remarks were. We strongly encourage you to offer an explanation and to make a public apology. We want you – with your background, perspective, and clout – to be part of the solution. If someone of your stature can take a step back and acknowledge this type of mistake, it will show others how to rein in troublesome rhetoric. It can demonstrate how those who utter words of bigotry or prejudice, whether born of intention or ignorance, need not be immediately written off as part of a larger cultural problem, but instead can still contribute to constructive dialogue.

We ask you to help us bring people of all faiths and cultures together on issues that should transcend race, religion, and politics, especially the education of our children.

Sincerely, The Board of Directors of the Jewish Community Relations Council of Southern New Jersey

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