

From the CEO'S Desk – A Time for Action to Guide Our College Campuses

Zachary Benjamin | Chief Executive Officer, Jewish Long Beach



Zachary Benjamin

A common thread of responsibility runs through the varied but complimentary missions of all Jewish agencies, institutions and congregations. Though our objectives as organizations are diverse, we all share the obligation to educate our broader communities about

antisemitism, to identify and define it, and to oppose it with the utmost fervor and resolution.

In 2016, the International Holocaust Remembrance Alliance (IHRA) authored its official definition of antisemitism, a valuable tool with which organizations such as Jewish Long Beach can educate our broader communities against anti-Jewish bias. The definition identifies various forms of antisemitism, including, “making mendacious, dehumanizing, or stereotypical allegations about Jews or the power of Jews as collective,” “holding Jews collectively responsible for actions of the State of Israel,” “denying the Jewish people their right to self-determination...by claiming that the existence of the State of Israel is a racist endeavor,” and “applying double standards [to Israel] by requiring of it a behavior not expected or demanded of any other democratic nation.” Since the creation of the IHRA definition, it has been adopted not only by the United States Departments of State and Education, but also by 29 United Nations member states, as well as by various humanitarian agencies around the globe.

Colleges and universities, perhaps more urgently than any other type of institution, must seek means such as adoption of the IHRA definition of antisemitism to stem the tide of anti-Jewish bias on their campuses. False narratives on Israel and Jews, cloaked in the language of geopolitical debate and human rights, have found fertile soil in campus environments that fancy themselves intellectually enlightened, yet challenged to draw distinctions between discourse and discrimination – a distinction that the IHRA

definition deftly and eloquently provides.

Jewish students at American colleges and universities find themselves increasingly isolated, with many reporting that they would rather conceal their Jewish identities than face demands from student groups and faculty that they renounce the Jewish state and reject the right of the Jewish people to self-determination.

Examples abound of organized efforts to intimidate Jewish students, faculty, and staff. For instance, at Emory, Vassar, NYU, and other universities, vandals have repeatedly defaced Jewish students’ dorm room doors with “eviction notices” designed to mimic notices that groups such as Students for Justice in Palestine falsely claim are arbitrarily assigned by the Israel Defense Forces to Arab homes in Israel and the Palestinian territories. Meanwhile, student governments across the country, including, most recently, at UC Irvine, have called upon their college and university administrations to divest not only from Israeli companies and organizations, but from any entity that conducts business in or with Israel. These calls have, thankfully, been largely ignored or rejected by these institutions’ presidents and boards of trustees. However, no such calls to divest from arguably far more insidious and destructive regimes are commonplace, and the activities of these student governments fall squarely within the IHRA’s definition of antisemitism.

Jewish communities on campuses are under intellectual and, at times, even physical assault. Colleges and universities must, with purpose, intentionality, and urgency, take measures to protect their Jewish students, faculty, and staff, as well as to educate broadly against the subversive and dangerous brand of antisemitism that has permeated so many campus communities.

Jewish Long Beach and other local Jewish institutions were encouraged when, late in 2020, a resolution was proposed to the Long Beach Community College District (LBCC) Board of Trustees calling for the district to adopt the IHRA definition.

However, consideration of the resolution by the board has been postponed indefinitely while it undergoes review by the Academic Senate and legal personnel.

I met in mid-February via Zoom with LBCC board president Uduak-Joe Ntuk and Long Beach City College interim superintendent-president Lou Anne Bynum to offer the support of our Jewish communal institutions in helping identify and combat antisemitism on LBCC District campuses. I also reiterated our belief that the IHRA definition is among the most effective resources available to help stem the tide of bias against Jews, and that its adoption by colleges and universities is an important step in the process of addressing this increasingly urgent issue.

President Ntuk and Ms. Bynum appeared thoughtful, concerned, and committed to the welfare of vulnerable LBCC community members, including Jewish ones. Ultimately, the actions of any publicly elected deliberative body, including the LBCC District Board of Trustees, should be informed by the needs and concerns of those they represent. Thus, it is imperative that our Jewish community actively encourage the board to demonstrate leadership in combating antisemitism and assuring that LBCC District campuses remain safe spaces for Jewish students, faculty, and staff.

We at Jewish Long Beach ask that you take a moment to encourage the LBCC District Board of Trustees to adopt the IHRA definition of antisemitism. You can do so by submitting a public comment to boardcomments@lbcc.edu, or leaving a recorded statement with the board’s voice mailbox for public commentary, which can be reached at 562.938.4700.

As a convener of Jewish community in our area, it is critically important that Jewish Long Beach continue to engage in advocacy on behalf of the Jewish people. Only through active promotion of Jewish welfare can we and our partner agencies ensure that Long Beach and West Orange County remain environments in which Jewish life thrives and advances, throughout the life cycle, l’dor v’dor: from generation to generation. 