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## Jewish Sexual Assault Victims Expelled from Support Group File Complaint with U.S. Department of Education

**Washington, D.C., August 18, 2022** : Two Jewish State University of New York (SUNY) at New Paltz students kicked out of a sexual assault awareness group and then cyberbullied, harassed and threatened, over their Jewish and Israeli identities, filed a formal complaint with the U.S. Department of Education's Office for Civil Rights.

The [complaint](#), which will be included as a segment in [Dana Bash's CNN Special Report "Rising Hate: Antisemitism in America"](#) to air this Sunday night, alleges the university was fully aware of the situation yet, in violation of Title VI of the Civil Rights Act of 1964, allowed a hostile environment to proliferate on campus for Jewish survivors of sexual assault, to the point where both students felt unsafe to attend class and Jewish and Israeli survivors of sexual assault at SUNY New Paltz feel "shunned," "isolated," and "fearful."

The complaint was filed by the [Louis D. Brandeis Center for Human Rights Under Law](#) on behalf of the students and [Jewish on Campus](#).

These students have been thrice victimized: first, by sexual predators; second, by the anti-Zionist leaders of a support group who expelled the students, including one of its founders, from the organization; and third, by the University which failed to hold accountable those who had discriminated against the students and failed to satisfactorily address the hostile climate on campus for Jewish survivors of sexual assault.

"SUNY [New Paltz]...is permitting a hostile environment that marginalizes and excludes these Jewish...and Israeli sexual assault survivor students. SUNY [New Paltz]...is also denying Jewish and Israeli survivors of sexual assault on campus equal access to the educational opportunities and services they need, on the basis of their shared ancestry, ethnicity and national origin in violation of Title VI," wrote the Brandeis Center in the complaint. "The exclusion of Jewish and Israeli students...on the basis of their ethnic and national origin identities has left survivors of sexual assault without a place at SUNY...[New Paltz] to receive these programs and services while openly expressing their Jewish identity."

The issues began in December, as first reported by [The New Paltz Oracle](#) and later [Algemeiner](#), when Cassandra Blotner posted a message on her personal Instagram that read, "Jews are an ethnic group who come from Israel. This is proven by genealogical, historical and archeological evidence. Israel is not a 'colonial' state and Israelis aren't 'settlers.' You cannot colonize the land your ancestors are from." Members of New Paltz Accountability (NPA), a group Blotner and another student founded to combat sexual assault, denounced the post and demanded Blotner defend her views, arguing her personal post "concerns the organization as a whole."

Noting that no other NPA members were asked to explain or justify their identities or subjected to questioning about core beliefs, Blotner initially declined. As "the only Jew of the group...it seems that I am being held accountable for the actions of a foreign government (which is something that I am not and is antisemitic)," she explained, adding, "I am worried for the future of the group and other survivors who come seeking support. Will they too be made to feel this way due to misperceptions of shared posts, lack of cultural/religious understandings, or general difference of opinions?" After consulting with Jewish leaders on campus, though, Blotner offered to discuss her post, and suggested including representatives from the Jewish Student Union.

The NPA leaders refused the offer to meet and told her that Zionists were not welcome in NPA.

"While I didn't initially think I should be forced to defend my personal beliefs, I realized the opportunity here to educate NPA that as Jews we share a history, theology and culture – we're both a faith and an ethnicity -- and it's all deeply tied to the Land of Israel. Expressing support for the Jewish homeland is core to my Jewish identity, the two are inseparable, and I shouldn't have to shed that piece of my Judaism in order to advocate for survivors of sexual assault," stated Blotner. "To then get cancelled, stalked and harassed, well I can't even put into words what a horrific and frightening experience this all turned into for me."

Ofek Preis, another NPA member who is a Jewish Israeli student, shared on her personal Instagram the same post that Blotner had posted. Soon after, NPA stopped contacting Preis about the organization's activities and blocked her access to shared organizational documents. The NPA then made clear to Preis, and through numerous posts on its Instagram, the group was only open to those who reject Zionism.

NPA went on to publish numerous statements doubling down on its stance that Zionists are not welcome in NPA, extending its exclusionary and discriminatory stance to all Jewish Zionist and Israeli sexual assault survivors at SUNY New Paltz, and advancing the anti-Semitic

narrative that Zionism is a form of racism and white-supremacy. These NPA posts fueled further harassment on social media directed personally towards Blotner. Some posts threatened to spit on her, others stated “cassie needs to go...” and called her a “dumb b\*tch” that supports “mass genocide !!!!!!!”

Blotner and Preis reported to the university that they felt unsafe on campus. The university declined Blotner’s request for a security escort to accompany her to class and advised her not to attend. Unable to attend class safely, Blotner left campus to be with her family. The hostile anti-Semitic atmosphere for Jewish Zionist sexual assault survivors brewing on campus after NPA’s posts caused Preis, publicly identified and spurned by NPA as a Zionist and an Israeli, to feel so anxious about her safety she was also unable to attend class.

NPA’s behavior and the harassment that ensued had a harmful impact and resulted in a hostile environment for the larger community of Jewish and Israeli survivors of sexual assault at SUNY New Paltz. In a letter to the campus community, the Jewish Student Union explained how the university’s “half-measures and empty rhetoric” signaled that anti-Semitism is acceptable on campus and that the university’s values of tolerance and inclusivity don’t apply to Jewish sexual assault survivors.

While New Paltz President Donald Christian issued a statement acknowledging the actions taken by NPA were exclusionary, discriminatory, and motivated by anti-Semitism, the school claimed its ability to intervene was limited because NPA is not a recognized student organization, and it took no further action. Despite NPA’s discriminatory conduct, the school has allowed NPA to operate on campus like any other recognized student group using SUNY resources and providing valuable educational programs and services to student sexual assault survivors and their allies on campus.

“Excommunicating and excluding Jewish and Israeli survivors from NPA denies us of our right to fight against sexual assault on college campuses and hold our universities accountable,” stated Preis. “We were left with nowhere to go, feeling isolated from those who claim to be fighting for us, for our right to an uninterrupted education. The accusations made against me on account of my national origin denied everything I inherently am as a person: a fighter for justice, an anti-racist, a combater of oppression, and most relevantly, a survivor. I should not have been asked to choose between being Israeli or being a survivor. I should not have been asked to align with only survivorship or only Zionism. It is possible and necessary to include intersectional identities in spaces that fight for survivors.”

Title VI of the Civil Rights Act of 1964 prohibits discrimination on the basis of race, color, and national origin, including discrimination against Jews on the basis of their actual or perceived shared ancestry or ethnic characteristics, in educational institutions that receive federal funding. Title VI protects individuals from exclusionary conduct that denies them the ability to participate in or benefit from university programs and activities, including joining a student club and feeling safe enough to attend class, as well as from harassment that creates a hostile environment. Marginalizing, demonizing and excluding Jewish students on the basis of the Zionist component of their Jewish ethnic and ancestral identity, and discriminating on the basis of national origin identity, violates Title VI.

“Jewish students, like all students, deserve a college experience free from discrimination and abuse. In this case, acceptance into a community designed to protect survivors was conditional. These students were subject to a litmus test which forced them to decide: forfeit your commitment to an integral social cause, or forfeit your identity. Beyond the clear example of anti-Semitism and sexism which this case shows, it further demonstrates how normalized xenophobia against Israelis has become on American campuses, with one student being explicitly harassed for their Israeli nationality—an identity they were born into, and one they have the protected right to be proud of. This case is about anti-Semitism, it is about sexism, it is about harassment, and it is about xenophobia. More than anything, though, it is about justice and equality,” stated Julia Jassey, CEO of Jewish on Campus. “And as jarring as this case is, the experience these students have faced is unfortunately not unique. All over the country, Jewish students face unjust treatment due to their identities. It is our duty, as an organization that speaks by and for Jewish students, to ensure that no student is denied the protection they deserve.”

“This case involves a form of anti-Semitic discrimination that is increasingly prevalent on college and university campuses. Students are being marginalized and excluded from campus activities on the basis of their Jewish identity, which in some cases is deeply connected to Israel. At the same time, Israeli students are being targeted by anti-Zionist hatred that invokes classic anti-Semitic tropes about Jewish power and control. Ms. Blotner and Ms. Preis were shunned and isolated by the very people to whom they had turned for support as sexual assault survivors; these women were excluded from a survivor support group merely because they expressed pride in the Jewish people’s ethnic and ancestral connection to Israel,” stated Denise Katz-Prober, Brandeis Center’s director of legal initiatives. “Unfortunately, universities often fail to recognize this form of anti-Semitic harassment and discrimination. When Jewish students, like Ms. Blotner and Ms. Preis, are cast out of social justice spaces and campus activities because they express pride in their ethnic or national identity, that is a form of unlawful discrimination, not political speech. This case is not about the awful things that were said to these women. Rather, it is about the awful things that were done to them. Title VI of the Civil Rights Act requires universities like SUNY New Paltz to ensure that Jewish and Israeli students are not denied educational opportunities due to discriminatory behavior that targets them on the basis of their ethnic and national identities. That’s exactly what was done here when these women were thrown out of their student organization because, as Jews, they feel a strong sense of connection to the Jewish homeland. Unfortunately, universities are misdiagnosing the problem and, as a result, failing to protect their Jewish students, like Ms. Blotner and Ms. Preis, from unlawful discrimination.”

**The Louis D. Brandeis Center** is an independent, nonprofit organization established to advance the civil and human rights of the Jewish people and promote justice for all. The Brandeis Center conducts research, education, and advocacy to combat the resurgence of anti-Semitism on college and university campuses. It is not affiliated with the Massachusetts university, the Kentucky law school, or any of the other institutions that share the name and honor the memory of the late U.S. Supreme Court justice.

**Jewish on Campus** is a 501(c)(3) nonprofit organization founded and run by Jewish college students, for Jewish college students. Since its founding in 2020, JOC has collected stories of anti-Semitism from thousands of students around the world and has assisted in creating change on campus.