

# Commentary

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APRIL 2025 ANTI-SEMITISM

## Larry Summers's Lease Hath All Too Short a Date

Jewish Commentary

by **Meir Y. Soloveichik**

**I**N 2023, WEEKS AFTER THE OCTOBER 7 ATTACK, LAWRENCE SUMMERS, THE former president of Harvard and current professor at the very same institution, spoke at a Shabbat gathering in Cambridge. He addressed Jew-hate at Harvard and elsewhere in academia. In his remarks, Summers made use of an analogy to a medical phenomenon to describe what he was seeing:



Since 20 years ago, when I spoke of anti-Semitism in effect if not in intent in response to the Divest Israel movement, I have been alarmed. More recent developments—from *Crimson* endorsements of BDS to testimonials by Israeli students regarding in-class discrimination, to vile social-media posts—only heightened my concern.

Even so, I am shocked and appalled by what I have seen on university campuses, including ours, since October 7. I should have raised my voice louder. It is not a mistake I will make again.

We come together at a moment of danger. Anti-semitism is a cancer—a lethal adversary best addressed as rapidly, thoughtfully, and aggressively as possible. Harvard has not been swift in its response.

“Anti-Semitism is a cancer,” Summers said. This is a comparison whose like we see often; hatred of Jews is frequently described as a disease, a moral malady that afflicts and spreads in societies. Another version of this linguistic maneuver

can be found in the perhaps even more prominent description of anti-Semitism as a virus that changes over time. Thus after the massacre of Jews in Pittsburgh, PBS gave us a documentary titled *Viral: Antisemitism in Four Mutations*.

It is an analogy that is elegant, instinctively appealing—and, unfortunately, inaccurate.

In fact, to utilize such a comparison is problematic. To compare hatred of Jews to a disease that spreads, or metastasizes, is to imply—unintentionally—that anti-Semites lack agency. An individual afflicted with an illness should be a subject of empathy, not opprobrium; and a society suffering a pandemic is to be pitied, not punished. It is better, clearer, and truer to declare that anti-Semitism is an egregious evil, a malevolent ideology embraced and expounded by some of the most wicked men and women to walk the earth. We do ourselves no favors when we compare ideology to biology.

It is with this in mind that we should ponder recent remarks on X by Summers. Almost a year and half after his Shabbat remarks, it seems that Jew-hate at Harvard is as strong as ever; that it can be found even among the deans of the university; and that a “task force” set up by Harvard’s president to address anti-Semitism is essentially a charade. Here are some selections from Summers’s thread:



Harvard continues its failure to effectively address antisemitism. Despite President Garber's clear and strong personal moral commitment, he has lacked the will and/or leverage to effect the necessary large scale change....

... [About] antisemitic statements like Dean Marla Frederick's address at the Divinity School Convocation—where she endorsed the term *Nakba* and drew qualified parallels between Israel's founding and the Holocaust—University leadership has been silent....

... It is by the way shocking and I think outrageous that months after ... Harvard's abject failures after Oct 7, the Task Force hasn't even reached a conclusion. Nor has any accountability for failure been taken anywhere from the [Harvard] Corporation on down.

Nor is there yet a basis for confidence that disruptions will be met with disciplinary consequences, especially in a number of professional schools that are redoubts of the far left.

Summers was crisp and clear: Essentially nothing has been accomplished regarding Jew-hate at Harvard. One can still encounter the public espousal of anti-Semitic tropes there, and its several schools are doing little to discipline those at Harvard who harass Jewish students.

So, given the time that has passed since his own Shabbat address, one would think that Summers would be open to an alternative to counter the evil that lurks in the academy. But in his X posts, Summers suddenly switched gears and turned his withering gaze on the Trump administration's warnings that the continuing toleration of anti-Semitism will impact the federal funding that universities receive:



The Trump administration is off base in its blustering threats to universities, like Harvard. Threatening total cutoffs of funds is wildly unreasonable. But that reality does not justify Harvard's complacent attitude with respect to antisemitism.

The best way to defend institutional academic freedom is to exercise it wisely. I hope Harvard will adjust its approach on a range of issues, including antisemitism.

What?

Given all that Summers has said, written, and reported about Harvard, the question must be asked: Would he express the same sentiments regarding funding if we were speaking of a Harvard rife with white supremacists? If racist pseudo-history were being taught throughout the humanities departments? If Harvard's professional schools were to embrace racial hatred and refused to discipline racist mobs? Would Larry Summers still applaud the sustained supply of the federal spigot? To ask this question is to answer it.

Summers has persuasively made the case that a significant part of the university is sunk in a fetid stew of Jew-hate. Why, then, should taxpayers support such an institution short of a determined effort to eradicate this hatred?

Could it be that Summers sees anti-Semitism as a temporary and unfortunate illness afflicting his beloved institution? Can he not acknowledge the anti-Semitism he describes as an evil, one included in the Civil Rights Act's prohibitions and protections pertaining to all federally funded institutions?

Simply put: Is anti-Semitism a cancer, or is it hate, plain and simple?

Enough is enough. Jew-hatred is not a virus. It is inaccurate to call it a cancer. It is an evil ideology that has been at the heart of some of the worst crimes in human history, one that has been willfully and eagerly embraced by students and significant figures in some of the most important and influential academic institutions in this country. And Harvard professors who are former Harvard presidents should describe it as such.

One of the most famous anecdotes in New York political history concerns the 1976 Senate race between James Buckley and Daniel Patrick Moynihan. Buckley went out of his way to refer to his rival as "Professor Moynihan" and to identify him as "a Harvard professor." When Moynihan was asked why Buckley kept referring to him in this fashion, he reportedly grinned and said: "The mudslinging has begun."

At the time, it seemed funny; now, not so much. And one of the great tests of our time is whether those in academia, and especially those who are proud to claim the title of “Harvard professor,” will call evil by its name.

*Photo: AP Photo/Charles Krupa*

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