

## Looking Forward

### **Calling everything a crisis is bad for the Jews**

When we are always in a defensive crouch about antisemitism on college campuses, nuance and critical thinking become impossible



Pro-Palestinian demonstrators protest outside the gates of Barnard College on Feb. 27, one day after the university expelled two pro-Palestinian students who interrupted a history of Israel lecture. Photo by Timothy A. Clary/AFP via Getty Images

By **Jodi Rudoren** March 7, 2025

*This is an adaptation of our editor-in-chief's weekly newsletter. [Sign up to get it delivered](#) to your inbox on Friday afternoons.*

This morning, like practically every weekday for the last 10 months, I got an email from the Anti-Defamation League with the subject line “[Campus Crisis Alert](#).” It had a little red siren emoji to signal emergency and its lead item said that Barnard College, after a series of recent pro-Palestinian protests, had “toughened security” and its president declared that “the desire of a few to disrupt and threaten cannot outweigh the needs” of the broader school community.

I click open these crisis alerts with a sense of foreboding, bracing myself for whatever new horror has befallen some Jewish college student somewhere. But for months now, more often than not, the missives alert me and their 200,000 other recipients not to a fresh crisis but to some minor development — frequently, ones that actually mark progress on the ADL’s advocacy agenda.

The Columbia University Senate “passed a resolution to combat antisemitism” (Feb. 14). The faculty union at the City University of New York rescinded a resolution supporting boycotts of Israel (Feb. 25). American University canceled a “Debunking Zionist Lies” workshop (Feb. 26). Schools in Santa Ana, California, agreed to stop teaching courses “that contained false and damaging narratives about Israel and the Jewish people” (Feb. 21).

Yet these relatively incremental and mostly constructive items come with the same red siren as the original Campus Crisis Alerts last spring about violent clashes, campus lockdowns and arrests. Too much of the Jewish world seems stuck in a perpetual state of fear, where everything is a “crisis” that requires an

“alert.”



The first day of classes at Columbia University on Sept. 3, 2024. Columbia and its affiliated women’s college, Barnard, have been the focus of many of the ADL’s Campus Crisis alerts. *Photo by Sirin Samman*

At [the ADL’s “Never is Now” conference this week](#), Allison Wu, a 2022 graduate of Harvard and co-founder of a group called the [1636 Forum](#) that advocates for campus security and free speech, said she worries that the relative quiet on campuses this year could make people complacent.

“You don’t have constant headlines about doxxing trucks or encampments or student petitions, but that doesn’t mean that all is well and good on campus — it definitely is not,” Wu told me in a telephone interview afterward.

Jewish undergrads at Harvard, Wu said, appreciate the calm and, especially, the fact that outsiders are “less likely to think” that all Harvard students obsess about the Middle East “from the moment they wake up until the moment they go to bed.” But students also “worry sometimes that people

have forgotten,” Wu said, “that people think everything is good because there isn’t an encampment, that it makes it harder to talk about the deeper systemic issues.”

Wu sees those issues as a politicization of the academy, a drift away from the core mission of open inquiry to a place where certain topics or perspectives are verboten. She pointed to a [Harvard report](#) released last fall showing 45% of students feel uncomfortable discussing controversial issues in class, and 51% of faculty are uncomfortable leading such discussions.

“What you’ve seen across at least the last decade in American higher education,” she said, is “less and less tolerance to difference of opinion or exposure to it.”

I share Wu’s deep concern about the narrowing of debate; diversity of thought is far too often an afterthought in our increasingly polarized world. But the perpetuation of crisis mode is contributing to that narrowing. When you’re in a defensive crouch, it’s hard not to think in “with-us-or-against-us” terms, which by definition erase nuance, complexity and context — critical ingredients to discussions of controversial topics on campus and everywhere else.

I asked [Yehuda Kurtzer](#), president of the Shalom Hartman Institute and host of a podcast called [Identity/Crisis](#), to help me think through this. My daughter, Shayna, is part of Hartman’s teen study program, and had told me about a recent workshop on Jewish power and Jewish vulnerability. The students were shown a series of images — the [Iron Dome](#) intercepting a rocket; the [pro-Israel rally in Washington](#) in November 2023; the front page of the *Pittsburgh Post Gazette* with the [Mourner’s Kaddish in Hebrew after the Tree of Life massacre](#) — and asked whether they depicted Jewish power or vulnerability. Of course the answer is: both.

“We are, objectively, in a less precarious position than most Jews have been, politically, throughout Jewish history,” Kurtzer noted. “People who have acquired power and for a time didn’t have it,” he added, “fear losing it. When

things that are scary happen, we go to apocalyptic thinking. But it's not helping us to catastrophize everything."

Fear wins elections. Fear can also help organizations raise money; the crisis of Oct. 7 and its aftermath certainly brought large audiences and some new donors to the *Forward*.

But 18 months on, the steady barrage of Campus Crisis Alerts are exhausting and confusing, especially as we contemplate an actual Constitutional crisis because of the Trump administration's seizure of powers normally left to the legislative branch. Kurtzer also argued that crisis mode actually prevents people from addressing the "deeper, systemic issues" like the ones Wu was talking about.

"'Crisis' doesn't let you do long-term thinking and long-term work," he explained. "You have to respond in real time with answers to things, which is not the same as interpretation. If you feel that you're in crisis all the time, you don't breathe, you never claim your wins, you don't see progress on your issues."

As a consumer of ADL's Campus Crisis Alerts, I'm not just a journalist running a Jewish news organization; I'm also a Jewish mother of twins heading to college in the fall.

Last week, I joined other parents and students at Shomrei Emunah, the conservative synagogue in my town of Montclair, N.J., to talk about Jewish life on campus. The shul's rabbi, Julie Roth, who previously spent 18 years running the Hillel at Princeton, helped us make a list of things to consider when picking schools: the number and percentage of Jewish students; the vibrancy of the Hillels and Chabads; availability of kosher food; Jewish studies courses; Jew-ish fraternities. The political climate was the literal last thing mentioned.

The ADL sent a "special edition" of its Campus Crisis Alert newsletter on Monday to share its second annual [Campus Antisemitism Report Cards](#). Of the 135 schools reviewed, eight earned As (up from two last year); 41 got Bs

(up from 18); there were 45 Cs (compared to 32 in 2024); 28 Ds (24); and 13 Fs (8). Certainly looks like a crisis if you're used to the grade inflation at top colleges and universities.

Those Ds include the University of Pittsburgh, where my son, Lev, and I attended an admitted students day last week — and where we found a warm and welcoming Hillel, he joined a Shabbat dinner at Chabad and then watched a poker game at the Sigma Alpha Mu frat house (better known as Sammy). Jewish life seems like one of Pitt's selling points, hardly a crisis.

I'm a professional skeptic, not a glass-half-full kind of person. But given the constant barrage of Campus Crisis Alerts, when I saw a [recent survey by the American Jewish Committee](#) in which about a third of Jewish college students and recent graduates said they'd experienced antisemitism on campus, I found myself feeling buoyed by the fact that two-thirds had not.

I asked Todd Gutnick, ADL's spokesperson, whether the group had considered changing the subject line of its campus emails, given how much things had calmed since the newsletter was launched last May. "We believe the title still fits," he said, given the recent hubbub at Barnard, where two students who [disrupted an Israeli professor's class](#) in January were [expelled](#), prompting [protests](#) that included the takeover of a campus building.

Gutnick also told me that the Campus Crisis Alerts have the highest open rate of all ADL newsletters — more than 50% average over the 125 sends since it launched amid the encampment crisis last May. That's 100,000 people clicking on those red siren emojis every day.

Thankfully, the newsletter is slowing down for spring break next week, so there will only be crises on Tuesday and Thursday.

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