

Eric Nathanson
Scarborough, ME
LD 1351

Good morning,

I am writing to you this morning regarding bill LD1351. My name is Eric Nathanson, I am a resident of Scarborough, Maine, and I am a proud Jew. I urge you in no uncertain terms to vote against this bill, which I feel, whether through ignorance or intention, scapegoats the Jewish people and attempts to use a particular form of bigotry, anti-semitism, as an excuse for wide spread political oppression.

Anti-semitism is an important and serious issue. It is not something I take lightly. My great-grandparents came to Maine from the Pale of Settlement in the Russian Empire, fleeing anti-Semitic economic and legal oppression, as well as violent pogroms. Growing up I heard stories from my grandfather of the organized violence of the KKK in his hometown of Auburn, and the disorganized violence of French-Canadian catholic school boys who would harass my grandfather and his friends on the street where they later moved in Biddeford. As a side note, after WWII made anti-semitism a little less in vogue, my grandfather would go on to be friends and fellow members of the Saco-Biddeford small business community with many of those catholic boys, now grown men and fellow veterans of the war. On my grandmother's side, who first settled in Florida, I remember well the story of a lynch mob, an American pogrom, forcing her family off of their dairy farm after anti-Semitic conspiracies began to circulate. In my own lifetime I have experienced genuine anti-semitism, ranging from "innocuous" jokes about big noses and loving money, to genuine harassment and threats of violence from neo-Nazi's, all here in the state of Maine. All this is to say, anti-semitism is an issue which I neither take lightly nor with which I am unfamiliar.

Anti-semitism is at once universal and particular. It is universal in the ways in which it mirrors other forms of bigotry, and the ways in which it often supports those already in political, social, and economic power. Like every bigotry, anti-immigrant, anti-black, anti-indigenous, and so on, it paints a picture of its subjects as at once less than others, weak, stupid, or lazy for example, yet somehow also contradictorily threatening, wealthy, manipulative, or 'stealing' jobs.

Anti-semitism is particular in the specific ways in which it caricatures Jews, such as by relying on blood libel conspiracies, over-exaggerations of ashkenazi features, and other unfortunately well worn tropes.

In our current moment much has been said about the threat of "rising antisemitism". Unfortunately, much of that concern has been deeply misguided. We live in a time where the wealthiest and most politically powerful individuals in our country regularly, publicly, and in no uncertain terms praise neo-Nazi and kkk members here at home, make Nazi salutes on stage, support openly anti-Semitic political parties in France and Germany, and use the power of the nation's police and armed forces to disappear peaceful opposition. Meanwhile, acts of individual malice are emboldened, such as the numerous incidents right here in portland, maine of swastikas being graffitied on school buildings, and of Jews being labeled as Kapos, Judenrat, anti-American, and other anti-Semitic denigrations in the streets. This is the anti-semitism with which we should be concerned.

And yet, despite the obvious evidence to the contrary, those in power have tried to convince us that there is "anti-semitism" lurking in the peaceful protest, especially by students, against a foreign power's human rights abuses and various American institutions funding, directly or indirectly, of those abuses. Protests which, I'll remind you, have large numbers of participants and leaders who are themselves Jews. Protests which are no different in character than America's long history of protest against our own government's wrong doings, such as during the civil rights movement and the anti-Vietnam war movement, or other examples of foreign misbehavior, such as protests against apartheid South Africa or Chinese oppression of

the uigher and Tibetans.

Though I believe strongly that anti-semitism is a serious issue, I am skeptical of the necessity of this bill at all, as Jews are already protected under state and federal anti-discrimination laws as a religion and an ethnicity. I am also even more skeptical of the federal administration's interest in actually protecting Jews from anti-Semitic violence, and of the State's ability to protect us when the perpetrators are likely to have federal backing. I am also deeply concerned that this is merely another attempt to weaponize supposed anti-semitism as a cover for political repression of dissent, another example in the long line of Jews being scapegoated by those in power.

I will, for a moment however, assume both good intentions and efficacy. In this framework, the bill still falls grossly short of providing a useful tool for protecting Jews from harm. The definition which the bill hopes to use is extremely vague in several key places, commits the arguably anti-Semitic act of conflating all Jews with the state of Israel, and has been widely criticized by Jews around the world, including in the US and Israel, as well as by leading experts on the subject of anti-semitism and Jewish studies. One of the definition's own leading authors has even stated that he is deeply concerned by its wide spread adoption, it's use in contexts which it was never intended for, and it's blatant misuse as a tool for shutting down criticism of the Israeli government's actions.

If the legislature would like to formalize a definition of anti-semitism into state law, and genuinely feels that to do so would protect Jews from harm, all Jews, regardless of political opinions, I recommend they begin with the Jerusalem Declaration linked below. It is both more nuanced and more specific, has been carefully crafted to minimize the chances of its political misuse, and is more in line with the general understanding of anti-semitism which Jews and their allies have held for centuries.

To reiterate, I urge you in no uncertain terms to vote Ought Not To Pass on this bill. Thank you for your time.

<https://jerusalemdeclaration.org>