The following remarks were delivered by Alyza D. Lewin, President of the Louis D. Brandeis Center for Human Rights Under Law, at the United States Department of Justice Summit on Anti-Semitism held in Washington, D.C. on July 15, 2019.

Thank you very much for inviting me to participate in this Summit. It is truly an honor to be included.

Most people today are able to recognize “traditional” or “classical” anti-Semitism – the anti-Semitism we associate with a swastika or the Nazis. It is more difficult, however, for many to identify the anti-Semitism that Jonathan Tobin just described – the anti-Semitism that targets Zionism and denies the right of Jewish self-determination. I’d like to focus a bit more on that form of anti-Semitism. It is not uncommon to hear people say, “I’m not anti-Jewish, I’m only anti-Zionist.” Is that really possible? Is it possible to support Jews but oppose Zionists?

The answer is no. Why? Because Zionism is an integral part of Jewish identity.

Zionism – the yearning and desire of Jews to exercise their right to self-determination and to re-establish a Jewish homeland in the Land of Israel – is an inherent ancestral and ethnic Jewish characteristic. Zionism as a political movement may have originated in the 19th century. But this “yearning for Zion” – the desire of Jews to return to their ancestral homeland – that is thousands of years old – as old as Abraham and the Bible.

To be a Zionist means to support this right of Jewish self-determination in the ancestral homeland of the Jews. If I celebrate the fact that Jews have returned once again to the Land of Israel, if I celebrate that the Jewish state of Israel exists – then I am a Zionist. Those who oppose Zionism deny Jews this right. Judea Pearl, the father of the late journalist Daniel Pearl, coined a term for this. He calls it “Zionophobia” – an irrational fear or hatred of a homeland for the Jewish people.

The International Holocaust Remembrance Alliance (IHRA) Definition of anti-Semitism includes as an example of anti-Semitism “Denying the Jewish people their right to self-determination, e.g. by claiming that the existence of a State of Israel is a racist endeavor.” The IHRA definition recognizes that “Zionophobia” - denying this fundamental core Jewish belief – is de facto anti-Semitism.

My maternal grandmother was a sixth generation Jerusalemite. Her ancestors came to live in Jerusalem in the early 1800s – not because there was a modern State of Israel but out of a deep sense that as Jews this was their home.

This “yearning for Zion” is the glue that kept Jews together for millennia. For centuries, Jews have not only prayed facing Jerusalem, but they have prayed to return to Jerusalem. “L’Shana Haba’ah Bi’Yerushalayim” “Next Year in Jerusalem” is heard each year at the Passover Seder and again at the conclusion of Yom Kippur, the Day of Atonement. Do you know that over half of the 613 commandments in the Pentateuch are connected to the Land of Israel and can only be fulfilled in the Land of Israel? The Jews’ connection to the land is so strong that for thousands of years, wherever Jews have lived, they have prayed for rain – not for where they reside but for rain in the Land of Israel.

But Zionism – this essential component of Jewish identity – is now under attack. Those who deny Jews the right to self-determination, and who say Jews do not have a right to a Jewish state in any borders in the Land of Israel, their criticism of Israel is anti-Semitic even if it is cloaked in human rights terminology. Because if you do not believe the Jewish state of Israel has a right to exist, then your criticism of Israel is not intended to reform the policies of the Government of Israel. Rather, it is intended to destroy the Jewish State.

To accurately identify anti-Semitism masquerading as anti-Zionism, we must learn to distinguish between the “Zionophobes” – those who oppose a homeland for the Jewish people and seek to destroy the Jewish State – (on the one hand) and those who genuinely seek coexistence between Jew and Arab (on the other). Groups like Students for Justice in Palestine and Jewish Voice for Peace, who believe the Jews have no right to self-determination, no right to a Jewish state, are not interested in dialogue or compromise. Their goal is elimination.

Make no mistake about it. What is happening today on campuses and beyond is part of an organized well-funded strategy to marginalize pro-Israel Zionists and deny them...
a place in society.

When Students for Justice in Palestine, an organization supported by American Muslims for Palestine, held its annual conference last November at UCLA, they posted their “goals” for the conference on their website. One goal described SJF’s attitude toward Zionism. Goal #2, titled “Regearing from Mythos to Action” said: “The aim of this theme is to remind us that Zionism is not an insurmountable force. We know that Zionism is ethnic cleansing, destruction, mass expulsion, apartheid and death.”

The “goal” went on to say that “The reason we can have hope is that Zionism is a human ideology and a set of laws that have been challenged and can be destroyed. This is a reminder that the successful challenges to Zionism have come from direct action.” According to SJF’s stated goal, Zionism “can be broken down and dismantled.” Most importantly, however, SJF explained that at the conference they would not just talk theory but rather would also “focus on developing actionable local and regional campaigns with clear targets.”

If you are a student group that equates Zionism with “ethnic cleansing, destruction, mass expulsion, apartheid and death” and your group’s stated goal is to “destroy” and “dismantle” Zionism, and you plan to develop “actionable local and regional campaigns with clear targets” – I ask you – who are your targets?

Pro-Israel Zionists.

And what do those campaigns look like?

They look like what we saw last year at New York University, when 53 student organizations representing the entire progressive community on campus pledged not only to support BDS and to boycott Israel but to also boycott the pro-Israel student groups on campus – meaning they said they would not engage with or dialogue with or co-sponsor events with the pro-Israel students.

What message does that convey to a pro-Israel student at NYU? It is saying to that student, if you want to join our campus community, if you want to be a full-fledged member and demonstrate with us on climate change, women’s rights or LGBT rights, we’ll accept you on one condition – check your support for Israel at the door. Shed that part of your Jewish identity and you can join us. That is no different than demanding that a student stop observing Shabbat or stop keeping kosher in order to gain admission. It’s comparable to demanding that a Catholic student disavow the Vatican, or a Muslim student shed his/her connection to Mecca. Excluding an individual in this manner, on the basis of his/her identity, is discrimination.

This discriminatory conduct is spreading beyond the college campus. Not long ago, here in Washington, D.C. at the DC Dyke March, organizers of the march informed Jewish participants that they could wear religious paraphernalia, such as a kippah or a tallit, but items that reflected support for Israel, such as the Jewish pride flag – a rainbow flag with a Star of David in the middle – were prohibited. The Dyke March leaders, who controlled access to a march designed to celebrate diversity and inclusion, were demanding that Jewish Zionists hide or shed a key component of their Jewish identity in order to participate. No other group was charged such a high price for admission.

Our laws are designed to protect individuals from harassment and discrimination. The law does not protect you from an opinion you find offensive. In the United States, even hate speech is protected speech.

So if we want to be able to effectively utilize our legal tools, such as Title VI of the Civil Rights Act, we must accurately articulate what is happening as harassment and discrimination. If we fail to do this, we won’t be able to use the tools in our toolbox.

If we permit administrators on university campuses and the general public to perceive the situation as merely a political disagreement where each side takes offense at the other side’s position then we disable our most potent weapon.

Ostracizing, marginalizing and excluding pro-Israel Zionists on the basis of their identity is not a “speech” issue. It is racist and unlawful conduct and must be confronted as such.

Students must understand that what they are experiencing is anti-Semitism and that the law can protect them. We have to teach students and parents how to utilize the law to effectively combat Zionophobia and anti-Semitism. We must educate our children so that they don’t ally themselves with groups that deny Jews the right to self-determination or deny Jews the right to express the Zionist part of their Jewish identity. It is imperative that the public understand that this denial is racist, discriminatory and anti-Semitic whether it comes from non-Jews or Jews.

During our panel conversation, I hope to share with you steps that the Brandeis Center is taking to address these issues and change the climate on campus and beyond.

If we want to ensure that history does not repeat itself, we must recognize that if you isolate and dehumanize Zionists and claim they represent society’s greatest evil, you are branding Jews with a virtual “yellow Star of David.” And then, what comes next?