

U.S. COLLEGE STUDENTS  
AND THE WAR IN ISRAEL:  
JEWISH ENGAGEMENT AND  
SOCIAL TENSION ON CAMPUS

# **THE SOCIAL COSTS OF BEING JEWISH AND SUPPORTING ISRAEL ON CAMPUS:**

**What a Before/After  
Survey Can Tell Us**

# INTRODUCTION

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Do Jewish students on college campuses face a hostile environment? Particularly since the October 7, 2023 attack in Israel and subsequent tensions at universities around the United States, the Jewish community has been trying to answer this question.

But for at least two reasons, it's a hard question to answer. For one, people disagree on definitions of what amounts to a "hostile environment" and on the threshold for discomfort they expect students to be able to endure. The other reason is that it is genuinely difficult to make sense of the reality on the ground based on anecdotes in the news or social media feeds. Viral videos showing confrontations on campuses are not necessarily indicative of the experience of most students.

That's why surveys, which gather responses from a wide spectrum of individuals, provide a crucial tool to measure reality. In this article, as well as two other articles that I will write in this series, I report on a unique study that surveyed both Jewish and non-Jewish students in the spring of 2022, two school-years ago, and again after the October 7 attacks.

In this first essay, I will share findings about social tensions from the perspective of Jewish and non-Jewish students. In the next essays, I am going to focus on student learning, mental health, and activism in the aftermath of October 7th, as well as on attitudes about Israel.

# METHODOLOGY

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Before jumping into the results, here is some background on the study. The study was funded by the [Jim Joseph Foundation](#), a national funder of Jewish education initiatives. The survey itself was administered by [College Pulse](#), a survey and analytics firm specializing in the college student population. I am a social scientist and professor who has conducted a number of studies on civic engagement, young adults, and antisemitism. I worked with the Jim Joseph Foundation and College Pulse to organize this research project and analyze the results.

Back in the Spring of 2022, our team surveyed approximately 2,000 Jewish students and 1,000 non-Jewish students across the country who were attending 4-year colleges. I published a [report](#) in 2022 that details the methodology and results. That report analyzed several questions related to Israel and antisemitism that have become especially relevant in light of the recent turmoil on campuses.

Because there are no official benchmarks of what the true population of Jewish American students looks like in terms of demographics or attitudes, it's hard to know whether a sample of this kind is truly representative.<sup>1</sup> However, as explained in my 2022 report, the basic demographics of the students who were sampled look similar to other studies, such as the young adults surveyed in [Pew's 2020 study of Jewish Americans](#), which gives us some confidence in the sample.

Between November 16 and December 21, 2023 – 40-75 days following the October 7<sup>th</sup> attack – we fielded a second survey. This survey was completed by about 1,000 Jewish students and 1,500 non-Jewish students. The Jewish students include those who consider themselves ethnically or culturally Jewish even if not Jewish by religion.

155 of the Jewish students surveyed in 2023 were among the students who were surveyed back in 2022. Back then, they were freshmen and sophomores. Now, they're juniors and seniors. This is called a panel design, and I'll refer to the students surveyed both years as "the panel." The full set of respondents in each year I'll refer to as the "cross-sections."

The panel of students surveyed both years provides a link between pre-October 7 Jewish life on campus and post-October 7 Jewish life on campus. If we observe attitudinal changes in the panel, we know it's not because of sampling variation but because students felt differently in 2023 than 2022. It turns out that the changes we measure are so big that they are highly statistically significant, even with a relatively modest sample size of 155 students in the panel.

One last note on the methodology. In the 2022 survey, the sample of non-Jewish students was designed to be representative of four-year college students across the country. In the 2023 survey, we made an adjustment. We focused the non-Jewish sample on schools that have substantial Jewish populations. To really understand social tensions and the campus climate as experienced by Jewish students, we didn't need to survey non-Jewish students in schools that have very few Jewish students. Instead, the 2023 survey pulls non-Jewish students mainly from 21 specific campuses. Those campuses are quite diverse. They include public schools (e.g., Binghamton, University of Michigan) and private schools (e.g., Columbia, Tulane); they are in northeast (e.g., Dartmouth, Northeastern), the south (e.g., Emory, University of Central Florida); the midwest (e.g., Washington University-St. Louis, Ohio State), and the west (e.g., University of California, San Diego, University of Arizona). But they are all campuses with sizeable Jewish populations.

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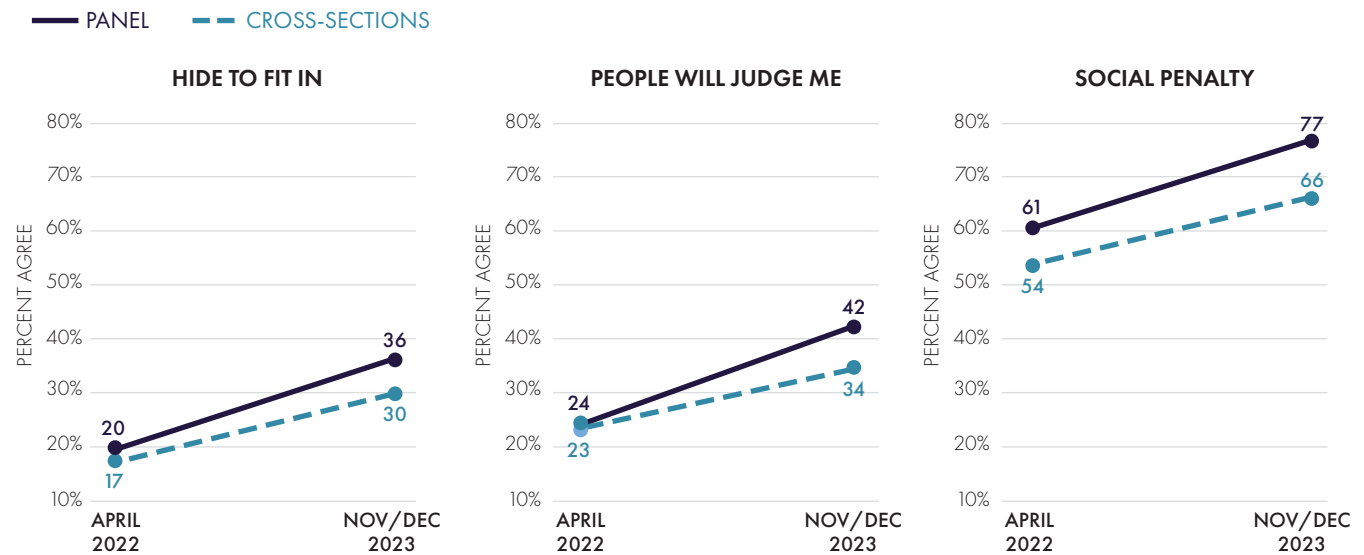
1. In typical representative surveys, researchers are able to use the United States Census and other official records to gauge the true population characteristics of a community. A survey sample is considered representative when it matches the true population on these characteristics. The typical sources used to gauge representativeness (such as Census information about the age, race, gender, and location of Americans, or election returns gauging the political views of communities) do not measure Jewish identity.

# SOCIAL TENSION: THE VIEW FROM JEWISH STUDENTS

Both in 2022 and in 2023, we asked Jewish students these three agree/disagree questions that gauge whether they perceive a social cost for either being Jewish or for supporting Israel.

- ◆ *In order to fit in on my campus, I feel the need to hide that I am Jewish.*
- ◆ *People will judge me negatively if I participate in Jewish activities on campus.*
- ◆ *On my campus, Jewish students pay a social penalty for supporting the existence of Israel as a Jewish state.*

Notice that only the third question here has anything explicitly to do with Israel. And this question is purposefully worded so that it doesn't reference support for the current government in Israel or for any particular political view other than the right of a Jewish state to exist in the land. The first two questions speak to social costs that may be indirectly related to Israel, but these social costs do not necessarily come from the students holding any view at all.



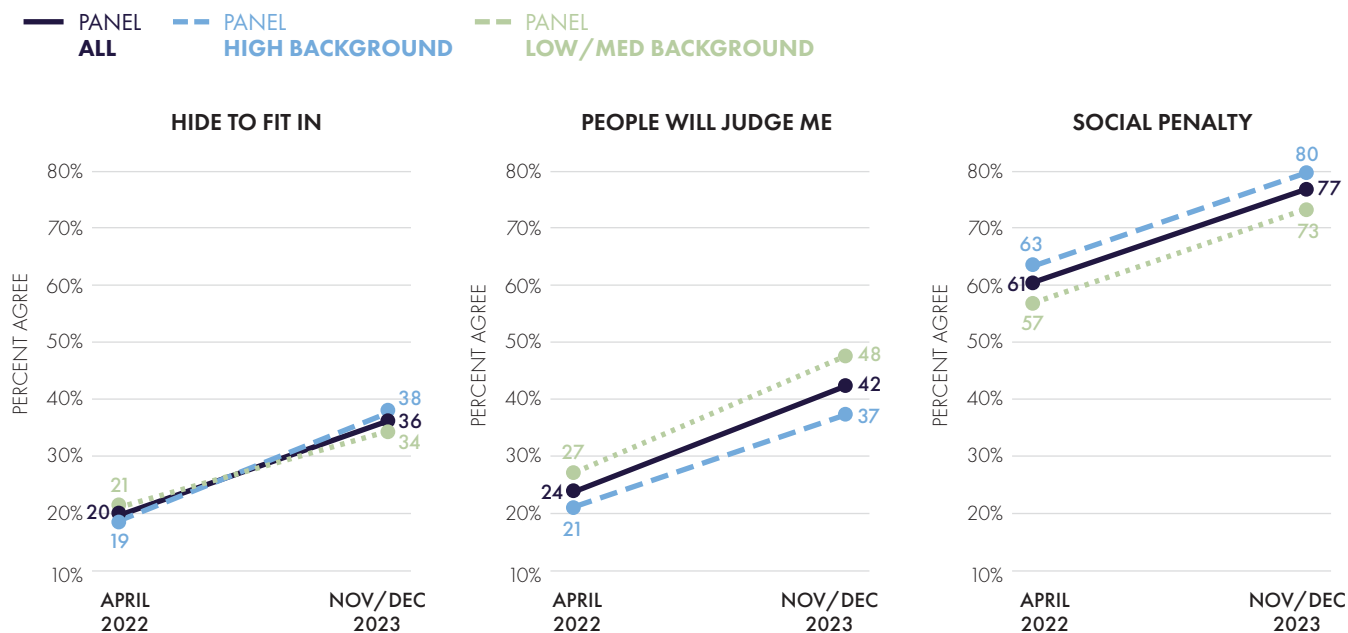
AGREE/DISAGREE...

1. *In order to fit in on my campus, I feel the need to hide that I am Jewish.*
2. *People will judge me negatively if I participate in Jewish activities on campus.*
3. *On my campus, Jewish students pay a social penalty for supporting the existence of Israel as a Jewish state.*

In the first figure, I show the change in how Jewish students answered this question between April 2022 and Nov/Dec 2023. The dashed line shows the full sample of Jewish students surveyed in each year. The solid line shows just the panel of 155 students. The pattern is similar whether we observe just the panel or the full samples: we see a massive increase in students agreeing with all of these statements. A third or more of Jewish students in 2023 said they must hide their Jewish identity in order to fit in and that they are judged if they participate in Jewish activities. That's about double what it was when we asked this in 2022. And this school year, two-thirds to three-quarters of Jewish students agree that they pay a social penalty if they support the existence of Israel as a Jewish state.

Jewish students are not a monolith. Some Jewish students come from backgrounds where they are very engaged in Jewish life and others have almost no background in Jewish education, culture, or religion. Do both kinds of students experience these feelings of social isolation or just one or the other? One might reasonably think that the students from more robust Jewish backgrounds (who also tend to be more positively predisposed toward the state of Israel) might have felt an increase in social isolation following October 7 whereas students from other backgrounds felt no difference.

But that isn't the case.



AGREE/DISAGREE...

1. In order to fit in on my campus, I feel the need to hide that I am Jewish.
2. People will judge me negatively if I participate in Jewish activities on campus.
3. On my campus, Jewish students pay a social penalty for supporting the existence of Israel as a Jewish state.

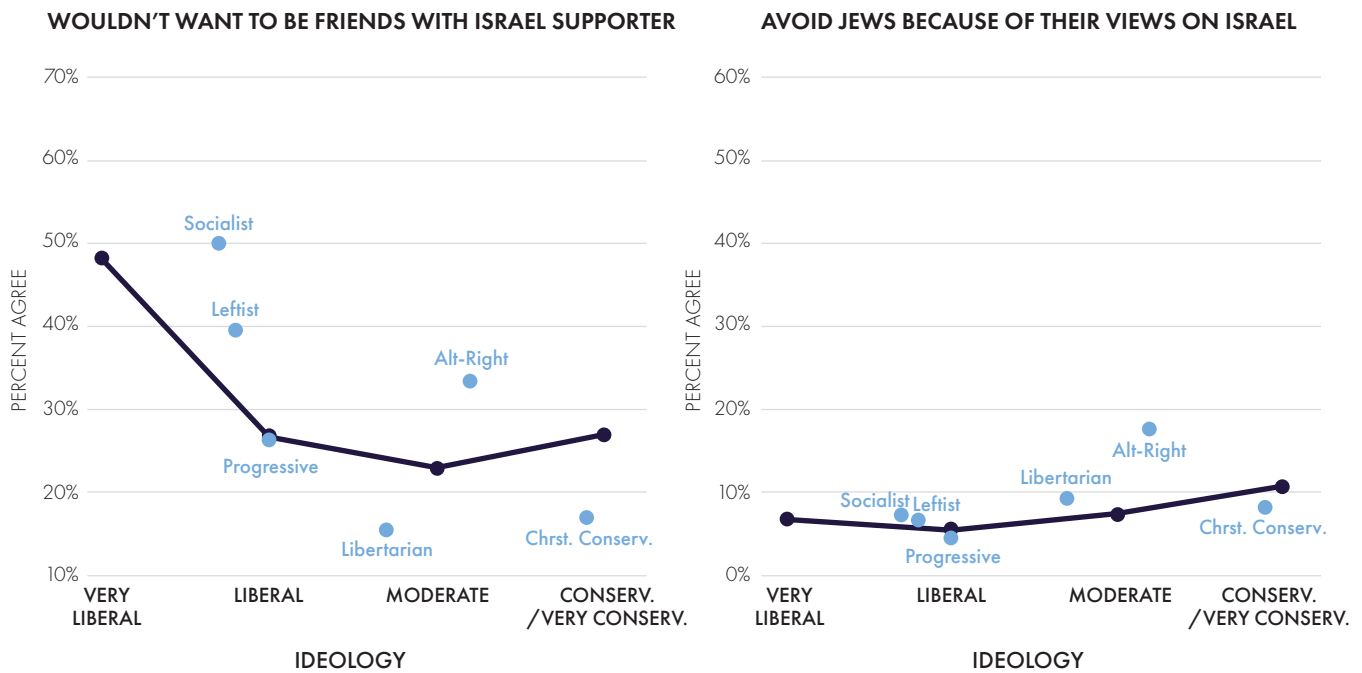
The second figure addresses this nuance by dividing the panel survey into two groups. I divided the sample by creating a statistical model that takes in information about how much “Jewish stuff” the students did growing up, like attending a synagogue, having a bar mitzvah, etc. Dividing the sample based on those from more or less robust Jewish backgrounds, we see that the increase in feelings of social penalties is present for both kinds of students.

# THE VIEW FROM NON-JEWISH STUDENTS

Do non-Jewish students corroborate that Jewish students and Israel-supporting students are socially stigmatized? To answer this question, consider these two agree/disagree questions that were asked of the non-Jewish students both in 2022 and 2023.

- ◆ *I wouldn't want to be friends with someone who supports the existence of Israel as a Jewish state.*
- ◆ *I avoid socializing with Jews because of their views about Israel.*

Recall that the non-Jewish samples from 2022 and 2023 are not directly comparable because the first was representative of all college students whereas the second is focused on campuses where there is a sizeable Jewish community present. The caveat aside, of those who agreed or disagreed (i.e., they did not answer, "I don't know"), 13% of students agreed with the first statement in 2022, which more than doubled to 29% in 2023. Similarly, 2% of students agreed with the second statement in 2022. That more than tripled to 7% in 2023.



FROM THE NON-JEWISH PERSPECTIVE: AGREE/DISAGREE...

1. I wouldn't want to be friends with someone who supports the existence of Israel as a Jewish state.
2. I avoid socializing with Jews because of their views about Israel.

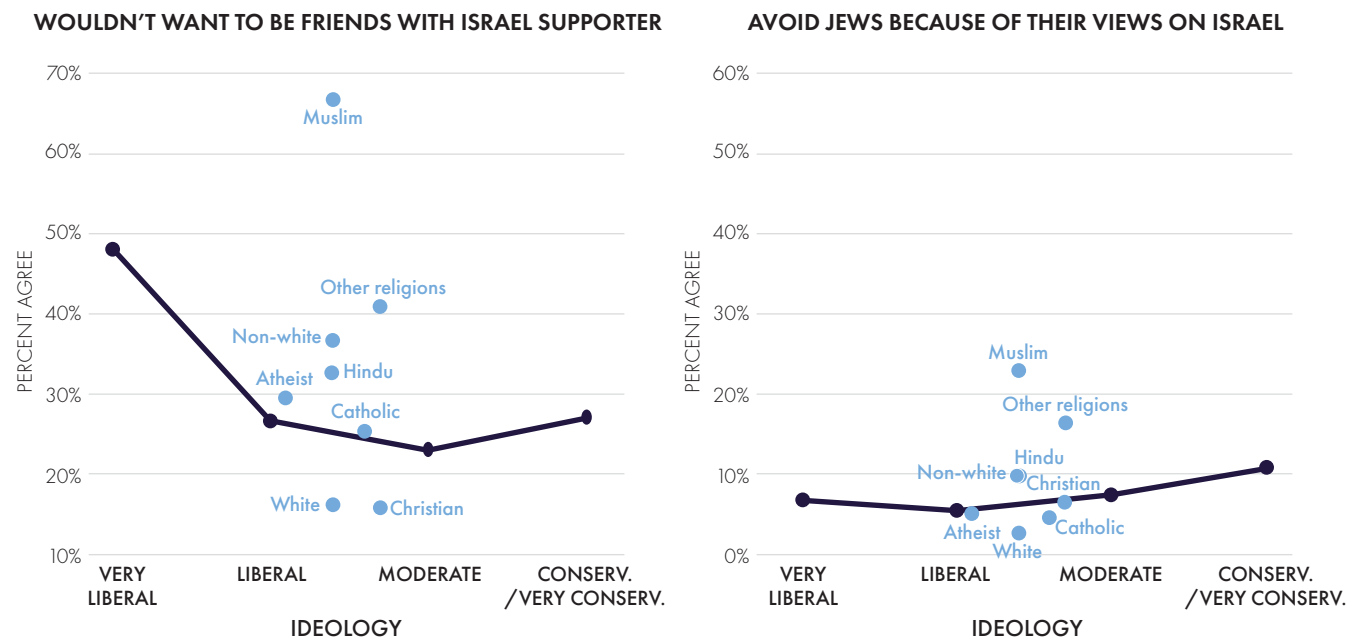
Digging into the 2023 data reveals some interesting nuances. In the next figure, I measure agreement with these two statements on the vertical axis by political ideology on the horizontal axis. Students were asked to identify their ideology from very liberal to very conservative on a 5-point scale. The plurality of non-Jewish students identify as liberal (43%), 16% say they are very liberal, 28% say they are moderate, 9% identify as conservative and 3% as very conservative. Because the number of very conservatives is small, I combine them with the conservatives in the graph.

The survey also asked students to describe their ideology in different terms. Do they consider themselves leftists, socialists, progressives, and so forth? Students could identify with more than one of these terms, or with none of them. The rate of agreement with the statements for each ideological group is also depicted in the graph. The identities are positioned on the horizontal axis according to how the average student with that identity rates their ideology. For instance, the average student who considers themselves a progressive marks themselves as liberal on a five-point ideology scale, whereas the average student who identifies as alt-right marks themselves as a little to the right of moderate on the ideology scale.

Note, the two side-by-side plots are on the same 60-percentage-point scale, but one runs from 0-60 and one from 10-70 to help “zoom in” on the patterns in the data.

Which kind of students say they wouldn’t want to be friends with someone who supports the existence of Israel as a Jewish state? The highest agreement comes from those on the far left or who identify as socialist. Among those students, about 50% agree with the statement. There isn’t much of a difference in how progressives, moderates, or conservatives answer; about 25% of each agree with the statement. On the center and right, we see that agreement is lowest among libertarians and Christian conservatives and higher among the students who identify as alt-right (a total of 43 respondents, or 3% of the sample, identifies as alt-right).

To the second agree/disagree question, about avoiding Jews, agreement is slightly higher on the right than the left, with alt-right identifiers most likely to agree. The relationship between ideology and this second survey item is borderline statistically significant. For the first survey item, it’s highly significant.



FROM THE NON-JEWISH PERSPECTIVE: AGREE/DISAGREE...  
 1. I wouldn’t want to be friends with someone who supports the existence of Israel as a Jewish state.  
 2. I avoid socializing with Jews because of their views about Israel.

The next graph swaps out the ideological identities for race and religion categories. The categories are placed on the horizontal axis according to where the average student with that identity places themselves ideologically. For instance, white students and non-white students have about the same ideological position (somewhere between liberal and moderate), but the non-white students are more than twice as likely to say they wouldn't want to be friends with an Israel supporter and that they avoid socializing with Jews. Among non-white students with sufficiently large sample sizes, it is African-American students who are particularly likely to agree that they avoid socializing with Jews. Among white students, 1 in 40 (2.5%) say they avoid socializing with Jews. Among black students, 1 in 7 (14%) agree.

By religion, Muslim students are by far the religious group that wouldn't want to be friends with someone who supports the existence of Israel as a Jewish state. A total of sixty-four Muslim students took the survey. Two-thirds wouldn't want to be friends with someone who supports the existence of Israel as a Jewish state and a quarter say they avoid socializing with Jews. The study did not ask a parallel question of Jewish students – would Jewish students avoid socializing with Muslims because of their views on Israel or Palestine? – but that would make for a useful comparison in a future study.

Race, religion, and ideology are among the strongest predictors of opinions on these questions, but other factors are strongly predictive as well. Namely, controlling for the other factors (e.g., race, religion, ideology), gender and sexual orientation are highly predictive of agreement with the statement about not wanting to be friends with someone who supports the existence of Israel. Students who are LGBT and especially those who are non-binary are most likely to agree with this statement.

## CAN PRO-ISRAEL AND PRO-PALESTINE STUDENTS BE FRIENDS?

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One final survey item to discuss here. The questionnaire asked the non-Jewish students:

*Thinking about the atmosphere on your campus, how difficult do you think it would be for pro-Israel and pro-Palestine students to be friends?*

The students could answer: not at all difficult, not so difficult, somewhat difficult, and very difficult. It's worth pointing out that this question wording, though common, lacks nuance: people can be both pro-Israel and pro-Palestine, but the question uses these over-simplified terms to proxy for students' general dispositions. The majority of students (77%) chose one of those latter two categories, with 28% saying it'd be very hard. Students on the far left – the socialists, the very liberals – as well as Muslim students, non-white students, LGBT and non-binary students are most likely to say it'd be very hard for pro-Israel and pro-Palestine students to be friends.



## WHAT DOES IT ALL MEAN?

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The Jewish students on four-year campuses perceived a major change after October 7. More than a third of Jewish students, including students from different kinds of Jewish backgrounds, are reporting they are hiding their identity in order to fit in and are being judged if they participate in Jewish activities. Those numbers have doubled from before the conflict. Will they stay elevated? We don't know, but we are planning on surveying students again in the spring to find out.

Jewish students overwhelmingly perceive a social penalty for supporting the right of Israel to exist. And the non-Jewish students corroborate this. Particularly on the far left and among specific identity groups (Muslims, LGBT, non-white students), a large share of students say they don't want to be friends with anyone who supports the right of Israel to exist as a Jewish state. This isn't a fringe position on campus. About a third of non-Jewish students do not want to be friends with students who support the existence of Israel as a Jewish state. As we'll see in a future essay in this series, over 80% of Jewish students support the existence of a Jewish state. That's quite a large share of the Jewish population that other students intend to ostracize.

Let's return to the original question of this essay: are campuses hostile environments for Jewish students? Again, people may disagree about whether social isolation amounts to a hostile environment. People may also disagree about what share of the Jewish students would have to feel burdened in order for it to be considered a serious problem. But a panel survey like this one gives us a much clearer picture beyond anecdotal evidence that a substantial share of the Jewish population feels they incur a social penalty for being Jewish, for attending Jewish programs, and for supporting the right of Israel to exist as a Jewish country. A substantial share of the non-Jewish population endorses that social penalty.