



Interview with a New Research Fellow of the Center for Law and Antisemitism – Prof. Rona Kaufman



We are pleased to introduce the Center for Law and Antisemitism's new Research Fellow - Prof. Rona Kaufman, a scholar at Duquesne University in the United States. Her work explores the intersections of law, feminism, Zionism, and Jewish identity, and she is now one of the leading voices in understanding how contemporary antisemitism manifests in legal discourse, academia, and feminist theory.

In our interview with her, Prof. Kaufman - who will later this year teach an English-language course at the faculty on gender and antisemitism - discusses the moment she realized she



needed to intervene in the intellectual arena, the ways anti-Zionist discourse has been absorbed into academia, the challenges facing the Jewish world after October 7, and what she hopes to offer her students in her courses.

Could you start by telling us a bit about your academic background and what led you to the intersection of law, gender, and Jewish identity?

I have spent my academic career as a feminist legal theorist, focusing on the intersections of law, gender, motherhood, and violence against women and girls. Over the last several years, I became increasingly concerned by claims within feminist legal theory that feminism and Zionism are incompatible, and that Zionism itself is inherently patriarchal or anti-feminist.

After October 7th, these arguments intensified dramatically. I saw that the same rhetorical tools historically used to erase Jewish history and undermine Jewish peoplehood were now resurfacing in legal and feminist academic discourse. In response, I shifted my scholarship to examine the intersections of law, feminism, Jewish identity, and the academic manifestations of contemporary Jew-hatred. It is, in many ways, a natural extension of my lifelong work on gendered oppression.

Your scholarship brings together antisemitism, Zionism, and feminism. How did these fields converge for you? Was there a specific moment that pushed you in this direction?

Even before October 7th, Zionist-identifying scholars in feminist legal theory were treated with increasing suspicion. The backlash accelerated once Israel declared war on Hamas. Feminist



theorists accused Israel of “weaponizing sexual assault,” dismissing or distorting the atrocities of October 7th in ways that made clear to me that something deeper was at play.

There was - and remains - a glaring absence of scholarship grounded in a Zionist-centered Jewish feminist perspective. My article “[Never Again: Zionism and the Jewess](#)” (*FIU Law Review* 19, issue 3, 2025, 737-770), was my first formal intervention into this conversation. Since then, I have been writing, speaking, and organizing to expose the erasure and demonization of Jewish history and peoplehood within legal academia. This work is now culminating in the creation of the Center for Jewish Legal Studies, which will protect Jewish civil rights through legal scholarship, education, and meaningful Israel engagement.

From your perspective, what unique insights does a feminist framework offer for understanding Zionism and Jewish identity?

I approach this through a Jewish feminist lens, and that shift in orientation is crucial. First, Zionism is fundamentally the Jewish women’s liberation movement. Early Zionist thinkers understood that pogroms - and the gendered violence that accompanied them - made Jewish life in exile untenable. Hayim Nachman Bialik’s *City of Slaughter* played a pivotal role in exposing the brutal sexual violence inflicted on Jewish women during the Kishinev pogrom. His poem served as a rallying cry, reminding Jews of their lineage as descendants of the Maccabees and demanding that they reclaim sovereignty in their ancestral homeland.

Second, women and girls who survived pogroms often could not return to the sites of their trauma. Zionism offered - in both ideology and practice - an escape from gendered persecution and



a path toward dignity, safety, and self-determination. The feminist nature of Zionism is also evident in the contemporary Middle East. Israel is the most egalitarian society in the region, and the only place where Jewish and Arab women alike enjoy full civil, political, and economic rights. Arab women in Israel outperform women in neighboring countries across education, earnings, and health metrics.

The claim that Zionism is anti-feminist is therefore historically false. In fact, Zionism is among the significant feminist revolutions of the twentieth century.

As a legal scholar, what do you see as the main legal challenges in addressing contemporary forms of antisemitism?

One of the largest challenges is the normalization of antizionism within academia and public institutions. Antizionist ideology is often presented as a legitimate scholarly position, yet its foundations lie in anti-Jewish Soviet political strategy and Islamist ideological frameworks. Since the 1960s, this ideology has been intentionally embedded in Western academic and cultural institutions.

This creates enormous legal complexity. We must distinguish between protected political speech and discriminatory conduct, develop frameworks for recognizing antizionism as a form of Jew-hatred, and confront the unique ways that anti-Jewish hostility now masquerades as a legitimate political movement. The law has been slow to respond, in part because the phenomenon itself is evolving so rapidly.



In your view, did the post–October 7 surge in antisemitism introduce new expressions of the phenomenon, or did it mostly intensify existing patterns?

The surge did not create new forms of antisemitism; it exposed those already firmly in place. What we witnessed after October 7th was the abrupt public unveiling of an ideological framework that has been cultivated in academia and embedded within social and cultural institutions for decades. Since that day, the explosion of antizionist and antisemitic rhetoric - and its rapid adoption within global social justice movements - has been astonishing. The movement is expanding at a pace that feels unprecedented. In many ways, we are now seeing what happens when a modern iteration of Jew-hatred activates long-standing prejudices and is then amplified exponentially by social media, AI, and other emerging technologies.

Today, Jew-hatred is starting to look more like a theology than an ideology. I use the term “theology” intentionally. This worldview is not grounded in evidence or historical understanding but in dogmatic belief. After October 8th, that dogma erupted into a highly coordinated global campaign aimed at demonizing Israel and dehumanizing Jews. The speed and force with which it spread reveal just how deeply entrenched it already was beneath the surface.

Based on your experience, do Israelis and American Jews understand antisemitism in similar ways - or are they talking about fundamentally different things?

There is widespread misunderstanding about antisemitism among Jews and non-Jews alike. While Israelis and American Jews have different lived experiences, I’m not sure their misunderstandings map neatly onto geography.



Diaspora Jews outside the United States have long understood that classical antisemitism - violence, exclusion, political marginalization—can reawaken quickly. American Jews, by contrast, have experienced an unusually stable period of integration and sometimes conceptualize antisemitism as largely symbolic. Israelis, of course, understand antisemitism primarily as an existential threat.

But today, these distinctions matter far less. We are witnessing a fusion of old and new forms of Jew-hatred that affects Jews everywhere and exposes vulnerabilities across all our communities.

You are part of President Isaac Herzog's Voice of the People global cohort. How has this experience shaped your thinking about the major challenges facing world Jewry today?

The Voice of the People cohort has been profoundly meaningful. It has brought together Jewish leaders from across the world who represent a wide range of communities, experiences, and perspectives. Despite our differences, we share a deep concern for the future of global Jewry.

What has become clear is that we face a crisis of cohesion at the very moment unity is most urgently needed. We are contending simultaneously with the rise of violent antisemitism, the erosion of Jewish literacy, the delegitimization of Jewish peoplehood, and the widening distance between diaspora communities and Israel.

This experience has reinforced for me the necessity of strong intellectual, legal, and educational institutions capable of articulating the Jewish story clearly and unapologetically. It has



strengthened my conviction that courage - intellectual, moral, and communal - must guide our response to this moment.

On a personal note, what do you hope your students take away from your teaching, especially during a time of polarization and heightened tension around questions of Jewish identity and Israel?

More than anything, I hope my students learn to think with integrity, curiosity, confidence and humility, and intellectual bravery. In moments of polarization, there is great pressure to retreat into dogma or to silence oneself. I want my students to approach complex issues—including those involving Jewish identity, Israel, and antisemitism—with nuance, empathy, and a commitment to truth. I hope they resist simplistic narratives, ask difficult questions, and recognize the humanity of those whose histories and identities they encounter.

And for my Jewish students in particular, I hope they leave my classroom with a deeper understanding of Jewish history and peoplehood, and with the confidence to inhabit their identities fully and without apology.