

Testimony in Opposition to HB 2299
By Rabbi Moti Rieber
House Committee on Education, Rep. Susan Estes, Chair
February 11, 2025

Mme. Chair, Members of the Committee:

I am a resident of Overland Park and an ordained rabbi. I am speaking on my own behalf and not for any organization I might be a part of. I rise in opposition to HB 2299.

I think of myself as a knowledgeable and dedicated Jew. I grew up supportive of Israel and actually lived in Israel from 1995-1999 - and in fact met my wife there. I'm a longtime peace activist and have supported organizations promoting the two-state solution since I was young, and have also supported coexistence initiatives since then. I believe that the only way that Israelis and Palestinians can live together in peace is through a political settlement.

I have to say that I have lost a great deal of faith in Israel over the past 20 or so years. I think the evidence is clear that the government of Israel has decided to take over all the land between the river and the sea, and is in the process of making living conditions there so unpleasant as to force the Palestinian population to leave, or die. This I cannot support.

Israel rules over nearly 5 million Palestinians without statehood, without the ability to vote for their leadership, and without the right to self-determination. Just this weekend Israeli police raided a Palestinian bookstore in Jerusalem, and since January 40,000 West Bank Palestinians have been displaced - and this is not Gaza so cannot be argued to be in response to Hamas' attack.

It's hard for me to explain the ins and outs of Jewish communal politics in 2 minutes, but I will say that although Israel is an important part of Jewish identity and many Jews live there and we want them to be safe and protected, this does not mean that we are not allowed to criticize Israel when it deserves criticism - as I believe it does. Polling shows at least 30% of Jews are critical of Israel's actions in the current war.

People are criticizing Israel's actions because they are worthy of criticism. It is *not* per se antisemitic to criticize Israel. It is not singling it out - I have criticized many countries for similar actions, including this one. This bill criminalizes political speech, and as someone who still believes in the first amendment, this is extremely dangerous and also, if I may say, un-American. Worse, it allows our current crusading Attorney General to decide what appropriate speech is, and that's frightening.

There is real antisemitism arising in this country. Any viewing of X (formally Twitter) will reveal a level of antisemitic conspiracism that when I was younger would have only been found in small newspapers of White Supremacists. People who deny the Holocaust or think that Jews rule the world — actual antisemitic theories — are welcomed into public life - I can give many examples. Jewish people, and this country, have far more to fear from unleashed white supremacy than we do people living in tents on college campuses peacefully protesting the destruction of their people.

If the Kansas legislature wants to weigh in on antisemitism it should focus on that, and not criminalize legitimate protest against a real injustice.

Thank you for your attention.