



University of Florida Honor for Antisemitic Law  
Student Betrays our Values  
Rabbi Jonathan Katz, Alliance Member

Last year a coveted book award was presented to a self-acknowledged white supremacist, antisemitic University of Florida law student who wrote a paper that:

- Claimed the Constitution only pertains to Caucasians.
- Called for the cancellation of voting rights for non-White individuals (who should also be required to leave the country within 10 years).
- Advocated for border violators to be subjected to shoot-to-kill orders.

The controversy, predictably, has occasioned another round of heated debate regarding the lengths to which insidiously prejudiced free speech should be permitted in academia.

The book award distinguished Preston Damsky as the top student in a class taught by a federal judge who was appointed by President Donald Trump.

In the teeth of criticism precipitated by Damsky's selection, Merritt McAlister – the interim dean of the University of Florida's Levin College of Law – expressed support for his right to free speech and maintained that professors should not pursue "viewpoint discrimination."

According to an article in The New York Times, McAlister also invoked

“institutional neutrality,” an increasingly popular stance in higher education circles which calls for colleges and universities to refrain from taking public positions on controversial issues.

However, when an emboldened Damsky subsequently declared on social media that Jews should be “abolished by any means necessary” he was suspended and barred from campus for three years by the University of Florida (a ruling that Damsky is contesting). Though emails – obtained by the Times – from university officials to Damsky indicated that several students feared for their safety, Damsky downplayed such concerns and suggested he was being unfairly targeted for sharing his ideas.

I’m sure that Damsky’s added assertion that he is “not, like, a psychopathic ax murderer” is a source of substantial consolation in Gainesville.

In my view, this is not as much a free speech issue as it is a question of institutional integrity. A law degree should confer a measure of ethical obligation; it should not merely serve as testament to the passing of a set of required courses.

Under the cover of a seemingly high-minded term like “institutional neutrality,” the University of Florida is abdicating its role in defending clearly enshrined constitutional laws. But it is also, as evidenced by Damsky’s award, actually condoning the revocation of implied inalienable rights.

To paraphrase Alexander Hamilton, if you don’t stand for something, you’ll stand for anything.

Of course, fundamental values can be manifestly imperiled in a current era when extortionate government actors can readily demand universities adopt sweeping, politically motivated policies in order to retain their educational funding.

This is not a matter of Republicans vs. Democrats – nor is it about the inclusion of more conservative voices, alongside progressive ones, on college campuses. This is about constitutional principle and viability

versus unreserved bigotry and the contamination of American promise.

A student should not be given a license to advocate for stripping away voting rights for non- White individuals – and requiring them to subsequently leave the United States – at a public university law school under the guise of free speech.

This is beyond the pale of acceptable debate, and it is tantamount to inviting sedition. How can the law be taught when students seeking to subvert its foundations are receiving prizes?

Damsky should be free to stand on an off-campus soapbox and share his vile notions. He should not be entitled to do so under the auspices, much less imprimatur, of the University of Florida.

Day by day, our country continues to go deeper and deeper into the rabbit hole.

Extremism flourishes in darkness – and especially so when, in the absence of opposition, the rabbit hole narrows and increasingly constricts.

*Rabbi Jonathan Katz is a retired, longtime member of Sarasota's faith community. This article is reprinted with permission. Rabbi Katz recently founded LearningLites.com.*