



Driving Change

Jmore talks to Robin Pick, of the Institute for Jewish Civil Rights, about antisemitism.

By Caryn R. Sagal



Robin Pick: “When nothing else worked, legal action drove change.” (Provided photo)

Robin Pick did not set out to be a lawyer for Jewish civil rights. But in recent years, she has been leading the charge against antisemitism and anti-Israeli discrimination by municipalities, universities and other institutions.

Pick is founder and CEO of the Institute for Jewish Civil Rights, and her cases have been covered by the *New York Times*, *CNN*, and many other mainstream and Jewish media outlets.

Jmore recently spoke with Pick, a Baltimore native, who recently spoke at Pikesville’s Beth El Congregation about her life and career.

What drew you to fighting antisemitism? After law school, I moved to Manhattan to work at one of the largest corporate law firms in the world. I quickly realized I wanted to spend my days doing more meaningful work.

I started working at a civil rights firm to protect the rights of all marginalized peoples. But most of the discrimination I was encountering was against Jews for being Jewish. So I found myself working full-time to combat antisemitism.

What were some of the results? Jews who were blocked from building

synagogues due to antisemitic hostility and discriminatory zoning practices have been able to build synagogues and exercise their constitutional rights to the free exercise of religion.

Jews who were subjected to vicious antisemitic harassment on college campuses have been able to compel their universities to undertake comprehensive systemic reform to create a campus climate safe for Jewish students.

When nothing else worked, legal action drove change.

When did you start addressing college campus antisemitism? After Oct. 7 [2023], it was clear that antisemitism on college campuses was out of control and it was where I needed to focus my efforts. The failure of university administrators to take meaningful action to address antisemitism on their campuses normalized antisemitism and allowed Jew-hatred to spread.

I’ve heard countless gut-wrenching stories from students and professors about the antisemitism they experienced on their campuses. Depending on the specifics of each situation, I might file a lawsuit in federal court, file a complaint with the Department of Education’s Office for Civil Rights, counsel students or professors behind the scenes or communicate directly with the university leadership.

“Antisemitism has seeped into every area of American life — education, land use, housing, health care, employment and beyond.”

The goal of any legal action is to create systemic change on the campus so Jewish and Israeli students are protected to the same degree as any other minority group.

I also speak before diverse audiences and educate the public about classic and contemporary forms of antisemitism and the legal frameworks in place to combat antisemitism.

What advice do you have for students? Do not let antisemites on your campus intimidate you from expressing your

Jewish or Israeli identity and living Jewishly in a way that is authentic to you. You have legal protections, and you are entitled to the same protections as any other protected group.

If you experience antisemitism on your campus, you can email the Institute for Jewish Civil Rights at info@JCivilRights.org.

Why did you establish the Institute?

Jews are facing a dire situation, and I knew it was time to create a powerful vehicle for change that's equipped to use all civil rights laws to meet the current moment.

Antisemitism has seeped into every area of American life — education, land use, housing, health care, employment and beyond — and there needs to be an intelligent, coordinated strategy to address this threat.

The Institute uses the legal system, advocacy, training, education, thought leadership and innovation to reshape the legal and cultural landscape into one in which Jews worldwide can live freely, safely and unapologetically as Jews.

What keeps you motivated?

It is incredibly rewarding to see the impact my work has had on Jewish communities and Jews around the country. When a synagogue is built in a town that tried to keep out Jews or when an antisemitic campus becomes a safer place for Jews, I am reminded of why I do this work.

Understanding how serious the challenges are that the Jewish people are facing and knowing that civil rights laws are powerful tools to protect Jews and Jewish communities keeps me motivated to fight this fight.

What else would you like people to know?

Although antisemitism is poisoning our society, I do not believe that focusing exclusively on antisemitism is the answer. Antisemitism is a type of hatred, a lie, a conspiracy theory, but it is not my primary focus. My primary focus is on protecting the civil rights of the Jewish people.

When Jewish civil rights are protected — when Jews are free to live, learn, work, worship and express their Jewish identity in its totality — I believe there will be no oxygen for antisemitism to spread. 📌

Caryn R. Sagal is a Baltimore-based public relations consultant and freelance writer.



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