



Antisemitism In Our World: An Old Problem in a New Age

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Background

In many ways, we – as American Jewish teenagers of the 21st century – live in two worlds. On the one hand, the democratic governments of the United States and Canada has for the first time in Jewish history afforded Jews full citizenship rights and freedoms. Jews have significant leadership roles in the fields of medicine, law, entertainment, business, and the arts. We have an influential lobbying arm in the United States capitol, the Religious Action Center of Reform Judaism. And although in our “official” North American lives, there is very little danger, it is clear that elements of historic anti-Semitism are on the rise – not only in North American, but in Europe as well.

This program is designed to learn about historic anti-Semitism as well as to examine how antisemitism may affect us personally today.

Goals

- To understand the history of antisemitism in Jewish History.
- To identify and illuminate many forms of antisemitism, some of which are prevalent in our society. To draw upon the experiences, thoughts, and feeling of participants in order to allow our community to discuss the most personal and pertinent dimensions of antisemitism, as to realize that we can, indeed, battle it.

Objectives

- Participants will learn the historical foundations of antisemitism in Jewish history and learn that antisemitism is not new.
- Participants will work toward a working definition of antisemitism.
- Using texts from various media, participants will be urged to reflect upon their own personal experiences.

Timetable

- 1) 0:00 - 0:05 Break into groups/ intro
- 2) 0:05 - 0:10 Study Texts
- 3) 0:10 - 0:55 Discussion
- 4) 0:55 - 1:10 Wrap - up

Detailed Procedure:

- 1) 0:00 - 0:05 Break into groups/ intro

The discussion groups should be small, safe, and intimate, with no more than 7 people if possible. Either before groups break off, or in individual groups, facilitators should mention to the participants that this is going to be a serious program.

2) 0:05 - 0:10 Texts

In small groups, the groupleader should decide on a few texts to study, and can decide to pass around the texts or read them aloud. These texts were chosen to present various themes and theories about antisemitism. They are here to act as a springboard for participants. Rather than these texts becoming the meat of the discussion, they should stir thoughts and emotions about personal experiences. Texts are attached at the program's end. Each set of texts has a series of discussion questions that follow below.

3) 0:10 - 0:55 Discussion

*The times within the discussion are rough guidelines. Use your judgment as to whether you would like to extend a discussion.

- a) **0:10 - 0:20 Facilitators should read the texts with the group, one by one. After each of the texts is read, the facilitator should begin each discussion by soliciting reactions from participants directly regarding the texts** Possible preliminary questions to ask include:
- i) Does any of what you saw/heard/read surprise you?
 - ii) Does any of it scare you?
 - iii) Does any of it sound familiar?

The discussion should carry on from these texts. If the texts read and questions do not inspire discussion, move onto another text.

If this does not spark discussion, here are some questions specific to each text:

Text 1: Do you feel a target of what is called the "higher antisemitism"?

Is this description – one of "higher" and not of physical antisemitism – accurate in describing our situation as American Jews, even 100 years after this was written?

Text 2: Are we aware of antisemitism in our world? The travelers, while probably aware of the Pogroms sweeping Russia, were still, however, shocked to actually confront a town where a Pogrom had occurred. We hear of what is happening, and some forms of it have confronted us in our own lives. Will we be shocked when we see more of it? Are we truly aware of what is happening to our people in our world?

Text 3: As Jews look upon the past, a contentious issue grows out of the study of influential texts. A person such as Shakespeare was living in an antisemitic culture. Is then a text such as *The Merchant of Venice* something which shows us Shakespeare's personal bias, or does it reflect one of the times? Does it invalidate or otherwise harm his greatness as an author? Should we not study him?

Similarly, Voltaire and other enlightenment thinkers wrote viciously against the Jews, in their historically influential works. A more modern example is found in Physics.

Several inventors of Quantum Mechanics were Nazi scientists. Furthermore, Hitler and the Nazi regime discounted Einstein's work as "Jewish Physics," and thus Quantum Mechanics and Relativity (Einstein's work) are incompatible. Where does this leave a Jewish Physicist? Should a Jewish Physicist not study or rely upon the discoveries of the Nazi regime?

Text 4: What is the connection between the State of Israel and the new wave of antisemitism?

Would we not be hated if the State of Israel were not established?

As American Jews, how does the *intifada* affect us?

Text 5: This report is a survey of antisemitism in European Union nations. How does this affect us as Jews? As Americans?

Have we seen a similar rise in America?

Haaretz (a left-leaning Israeli Newspaper) published on 10.12.03, around the time of the EU antisemitism report's publishing, an article quoting a U.S. envoy in Israel as saying that "there is a disturbing linking between phenomena of antisemitism and anti-Americanism as well as anti-globalism in Europe". Is this about Israel?

b) 00:20-00:55 Continuing Discussion

At this point, participants should draw upon personal experience. The question, "have you ever experienced antisemitism, and what does that mean?" should be at the heart of this discussion.

Groups should work towards creating a "working definition" of antisemitism (or a specific type of anti-Semitism).

A working definition is a pragmatic, applicable definition. It is not intended to be all-inclusive, but rather a criteria-based meaning. Consider the following examples:

- An example set forth by Alan Dershowitz: "anti-Semitism is taking a trait or an action that is widespread, if not universal, and blaming *only* the Jews for it."¹
- Another example of a working definition is of "new anti-Semitism," set forth by the Global Forum Against Anti-Semitism: "when criticism of Israeli policies involves the application of gross political and diplomatic double standards against the State of Israel, or invokes demonizing terminology against Israel or Zionism, or denies Israel the fundamental right to exist – that criticism cannot be regarded as legitimate; rather it clearly constitutes anti-Semitism and should be labeled as such."²

Groups should prepare to present this working definition in the conclusion.

Ideas that can be discussed here include:

- Is antisemitism coming from one place, or many?
- Is it in our culture? In our media?
- What does Israel have to do with antisemitism? What does the *intifada* have to do with

¹From the introduction to *The Case for Israel*, Alan Dershowitz.

²From www.antisemitism.org.il

antisemitism beyond Israel?

- We as Jews are responsible for combating antisemitism. Are we, in any way, responsible for its continuation, beyond our own apparent complacency in the situation?

By the end of the discussion, participants should leave having learned about the recent epidemic of antisemitism. Participants should realize that we all have had similar yet unique experiences regarding it. The entire group should (more-or-less) agree on a working definition of antisemitism.

4) 0:55 - 0:110 Wrap Up

As the groups reconvene, a group leader should be ready to facilitate conversation amongst all of the participants. Having heard and seen several different accounts of antisemitism, the group should now share their working definitions of antisemitism. There will be similarities amongst the groups, but there will certainly be differences. Groups should share a bit about their discussions; the other participants should come to an understanding of how the presenters came to their working definition. At the end of the program, the entire group should work towards a definition inclusive of all of the proposed definitions.

Text 1: Reading

“When I used to come home...bleeding and crying from the wounds inflicted upon me by the Christian boys, my father...made me understand that this is only a passing state in history, as we Jews belong to eternity, when God will comfort His people. Thus the pain was only physical, but my real suffering began later in life, when I emigrated from Romania to so-called civilized countries and found there what I might call the Higher Anti-Semitism, which burns the soul though leaves the body unhurt.”

--Solomon Schechter, March 26, 1903

Text 2: Play

Perform a scene from Elie Wiesel’s *Trial of God*. This can be done either by facilitators or participants. This play, set in Russia at the time of the Pogroms, is about a group of traveling performers who come to a town to perform a Purim Spiel, to find out that there is only one Jew left in the town. (Facilitator should pick an appropriate scene. Towards the beginning is the scene where the synopsis written above becomes clear.)**Text**

Text 3: Play II

Perform a scene from Shakespeare’s *The Merchant of Venice*. This can be done either by facilitators or participants. This play, whose main character is Jewish, explores the existing antisemitism in Elizabethan England. There is controversy over whether the play is condemning or endorsing antisemitism; regardless, the play explores its existence. **A recommended scene to read is Act 1, scene 3.** Shylock, the Jewish merchant, is portrayed as hateful of Christianity and overly obsessed with money. The conversation turns to theology, and such notable lines are spoke such as Antonio’s reference to Shylock of “the devil can cite Scripture for his purpose.”

Text 4: Article

From the December 15, 2003 edition of New York Magazine, by Craig Horowitz

Israel has become the flash-point - and the excuse - for a global explosion of an age-old syndrome....The irony here is that Israel, which was supposed to be the solution to centuries of anti-Semitism, is providing a flash point and a kind of cover for p.c. anti-Semitism...

For most Jews, certainly those tied to the common-sense-based, moderate political middle, the momentum change is disorienting. How could this have happened when they believed so strongly in all the right things, like ending the occupation and dismantling the settlements? Fair minded and compassionate, they regularly expressed concern for the Palestinian suffering, and they cheered when Ehud Barak made an offer that appeared to finally clinch a peaceful two-state solution.

But when Yasser Arafat walked away from the peace talks and triggered the incomprehensible wave of suicide bombings, events took a very strange turn...American Jews felt adrift at first, then angry, as if they'd been betray [by Israel's response]. If their hearts were in the right place, why hadn't the results been better?

Text 5: Report

Text taken from the opening of the European Union Anti-Semitism Report, written March 2003, later to be published for the public.

Preface

Although we know - and opinion polls show - that anti-Semitism is permanently present in Europe in a more or less hidden way, many of us have hoped that manifest forms of anti-Semitism will not see any revival in Europe again. At present, Jews are rather well integrated economically, socially and culturally in the Member States of the European Union (EU). But the attacks in New York and Washington on September 11 and the conflict in the Middle East have contributed to an atmosphere in Europe, which gives latent anti-Semitism and hate and incitement a new strength and power of seduction. Even rumours that Israel was responsible for 11 September 2001, for the attacks on the World Trade Centre and the Pentagon, and that Jews bring about a situation in their interest in order to put the blame on somebody else, found a receptive audience in some places. Anti-Semitic conspiracy theories are spreading over the Internet, which provides a cheap vehicle for the distribution of hate ...

The report shows clearly an increase of anti-Semitic activities since the escalation of the Middle East conflict in 2000 with a peak in early spring 2002...

Executive Summary

Alerted early in 2002 by worrying news on anti-Semitic incidents in some Member States the European Monitoring Centre on Racism and Xenophobia (EUMC) decided to commission a report on "Manifestations of Anti-Semitism in the EU Ecovering the first half of 2002. The report is based partly on short-term information provided to the authors by National Focal Points (NFPs) of the EUMC, giving special emphasis to the period between May 15 and June 15. The NFPs are the contact points to national networks in the Member States reporting regularly to the EUMC within its European Information Network RAXEN.

In their reports the National Focal Points were asked to cover the following issues:

- Physical acts of violence towards Jews, their communities, organisations or their property;
- Verbal aggression/hate speech and other, subtler forms of discrimination towards Jews;
- Research studies reporting anti-Semitic violence or opinion polls on changed attitudes towards Jews;
- Good practices for reducing prejudice, violence and aggression by NGOs;
- Reactions by politicians and other opinion leaders including initiatives to reduce polarization and counteract negative national trends.

The following forms of anti-Semitic activities have been experienced:

- Desecration of synagogues, cemeteries, swastika graffiti, threatening and insulting mail as well as the denial of the Holocaust as a theme, particularly on the Internet. These are the forms of action to be primarily assigned to the far-right.
- Physical attacks on Jews and the desecration and destruction of synagogues were acts

often committed by young Muslim perpetrators in the monitoring period. Many of these attacks occurred either during or after pro-Palestinian demonstrations, which were also used by radical Islamists for hurling verbal abuse. In addition, radical Islamist circles were responsible for placing anti-Semitic propaganda on the Internet and in Arab-language media.

- Anti-Semitism on the streets also appears to be expressed by young people without any specific anti-Semitic prejudices, so that “many incidents are committed just for fun.” Other cases where young people were the perpetrators could be classified as “thrill hate crimes,” a well-known type of xenophobic attack.
- In the extreme left-wing scene anti-Semitic remarks were to be found mainly in the context of pro-Palestinian and anti-globalisation rallies and in newspaper articles using anti-Semitic stereotypes in their criticism of Israel. Often this generated a combination of anti-Zionist and anti-American views that formed an important element in the emergence of an anti-Semitic mood in Europe. Israel, seen as a capitalistic, imperialistic power, the “Zionist lobby” and the United States are depicted as the evildoers in the Middle East conflict as well as exerting negative influence on global affairs. The convergence of these motives served both critics of colonialism and globalisation from the extreme left and the traditional anti-Semitic right-wing extremism as well as parts of the radical Islamists in some European countries.
- More difficult to record and to evaluate in its scale than the “street-level violence” against Jews is “salon anti-Semitism” as it is manifested “in the media, university common rooms, and at dinner parties of the chattering classes.”
- In the heated public debate on Israeli politics and the boundary between criticism of Israel and anti-Semitism, individuals who are not politically active and do not belong to one of the ideological camps mentioned above become motivated to voice their latent anti-Semitic attitudes (mostly in the form of telephone calls and insulting letters). Opinion polls prove that in some European countries a large percentage of the population harbours anti-Semitic attitudes and views, but that these usually remain latent.

Media

Some commentators discuss the possible influence of the mass media on an escalation of anti-Semitic incidents. The question at issue is whether this escalation was merely an agenda setting effect of the daily media coverage of the violence in the Middle East or whether the reporting itself had an anti-Semitic bias.

- The Jewish communities regarded the one-sidedness, the aggressive tone of the reporting on Israeli policy in the Middle East conflict and references to old Christian anti-Jewish sentiments as problematic.
- The country reports (Greece, Italy, the Netherlands, and Sweden) list some cases of anti-Semitic arguments or stereotypes (cartoons) in the quality press, but only very few systematic media analyses are available. Anti-Semitic reporting can mainly be found in the far-right spectrum of the European press.
- One study of the German quality press (see country report on Germany) concludes that the reporting concentrated greatly on the violent events and the conflicts and was not free of anti-Semitic clichés; at the same time this negative view also applies to the description

of the Palestinian actors. The report on Austria identified anti-Semitic allusions in the far right press.

- Observers point to an “increasingly blatant anti-Semitic Arab and Muslim media” including audiotapes and sermons, in which the call is not only made to join the struggle against Israel but also against Jews across the world. Although leading Muslim organisations express their opposition to this propaganda, observers assume that calling for the use of violence may influence readers and listeners.

Internet

The Internet reflects a development observable since 2000, namely the networking of the extreme right via links with sections of radical Islamists, some sites from anti-globalisation campaigners and from the anti-American far left. Since the end of the 1990s there has been a dramatic increase in the number of homepages present on the web from far-right groups and parties, which quite often also have ties to radical Islamic fundamentalists. In addition, the Internet provides easy access to music from the far right, which glorifies violence and is often anti-Semitic. Sales and distribution centres for such music are mainly located in Scandinavia. Up till now, state organs have paid too little attention to the Arab language publications which spread anti-Semitic propaganda in European countries, whether through newspapers, audiotapes or the Internet.

For further information on antisemitism is the Simon Wiesenthal Center (<http://www.wiesenthal.com/>), as well as the Israeli Newspaper Haaretz (www.haaretzdaily.com).