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## EDUCATOR RESOURCE

# Antisemitism FAQ

### Context & Background

The Museum of Jewish Heritage – A Living Memorial to the Holocaust is New York’s resource for Holocaust education and the third largest Holocaust museum in the world. The Museum welcomes 60,000 students each year to learn the lessons of the Holocaust. For more than 25 years, the Museum has offered professional development to educators in public, private, and religious schools, in addition to daily guided tours of the Museum’s exhibition led by skilled educators at the institution. In addition to a variety of other programming efforts, the Museum’s recently debuted Holocaust Educator School Partnership, a special partnership with New York City Department of Education middle schools and high schools, will partner with more than fifty public schools in the 2023-2024 academic year, reaching over 12,000 students in their schools as well as at the Museum.

Since October 7th, Museum educators and staff have received numerous comments and questions from educators and students focusing on building understanding about antisemitism, both historical and contemporary. In this working document, the Museum provides helpful answers and background information to some of these questions. We welcome feedback on this ongoing document, which can be submitted to [education@mjhny.org](mailto:education@mjhny.org).

### Museum Statement Regarding Hate

The Museum opposes antisemitism, Islamophobia, and all forms of hatred, including hatred on the basis of ethnicity, religion, nationality, and other shared group identities. While the Museum naturally focuses on antisemitism given its subject matter, as a Museum dedicated to preserving and sharing the rich heritage of Jewish culture, the Museum is committed to promoting peace, tolerance, and understanding among all peoples, toward a vision of a world where different cultures and religions coexist in harmony.

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# Questions Regarding Antisemitism

## What is antisemitism?

Simply put, antisemitism is the hatred of Jewish people on the basis of their identity. In the past and today, the ideology of antisemitism has had a range of causes and presentations.

The International Holocaust Remembrance Alliance (IHRA) created a working definition of antisemitism in 2016 which is used by numerous United Nations member states. The definition is as follows: “Antisemitism is a certain perception of Jews, which may be expressed as hatred toward Jews. Rhetorical and physical manifestations of antisemitism are directed toward Jewish or non-Jewish individuals and/or their property, toward Jewish community institutions and religious facilities.” IHRA’s working definition additionally includes a set of explanatory conditions to distinguish what may constitute examples of antisemitism in a variety of contexts, including political.<sup>1</sup>

## What are the roots of antisemitism?

While antisemitism continues to exist today, this hatred originated thousands of years ago, in antiquity. The term antisemitism today is used to refer to hatred of Jewish people on the basis of both religious and perceived racial distinctions. Historically, the hatred of Jewish people began with a focus on religious difference, constituting something called not antisemitism but *anti-Judaism*.

After the destruction of the biblical kingdom of Israel in 722 BCE and the biblical kingdom of Judah in 586 BCE, the Jews lost their political independence. As a consequence of the latter war, a large Jewish community was exiled to Babylonia (present day Iraq). The Jews enjoyed independence under the Maccabees, but ultimately, they were conquered by the Romans. The Jews led two, perhaps three, major revolts against the Romans. As a result, Jews were carried off as slaves to Rome. Jewish communities formed in Babylon and Rome, in what became known as the “diaspora,” a term that comes from the Greek “diaspeirein,” meaning to scatter or disperse. In each location Jewish communities adapted local traditions while maintaining their Jewish practice and identity. The Jewish religion was one of many religions practiced in the area; many religions existed in the Roman Empire, including Christianity, which was persecuted until

313 CE, with the Edict of Milan. In that Edict, the Christian Emperor Constantine removed religious persecution from Roman law. However, while this led to the accepted rise of Christianity, it had an opposite impact on Judaism.

As Christian tradition spread, Jewish people were systematically discriminated against for their religious beliefs and disparate cultural traditions. This constitutes something called *religious antisemitism*, an antisemitism based on the religious beliefs of Jewish people and their lack of adherence to Christian tradition. Jewish people were condemned for refusing to accept Christian belief, particularly the belief in Christ as the Messiah. The Jewish refusal to accept Christianity led to widespread *anti-Judaism*, hate that served as a key factor in the Crusades of the Middle Ages.

In modern Europe, Jewish communities that had a separate existence for centuries were given opportunities to, legally and culturally, join European society in ways that they had not been allowed in the past. During this time, there was also fierce debate within the Jewish community about assimilation or acculturation, a debate which led to the origination of several forms of modern Judaism, including the Reform and Conservative movements. While the legal and social status of Jewish people differed from country to country, a pattern of Jewish assimilation into society, followed by a hateful backlash and limiting of legal and other rights of Jewish people, can be seen across a variety of historical contexts.

False racial science was common in modern Europe in a variety of contexts, and this was soon adopted into ideas of *antisemitism*. The term antisemitism was coined in late nineteenth century Germany to create a scientific-sounding term for the hatred of Jewish people, to justify that hate on a racial basis, defining Jews by their racial distinction as a Semitic group. The idea of Jews as a separate, inferior racial group, perhaps stemming in part from their status as outsiders in Europe, spread throughout Europe, and was ultimately harnessed by the Nazis.

Despite its contentious history, the term antisemitism is now widely accepted as representing the hatred of Jewish people, including on racial, ethnic, and religious grounds.

1. The full IHRA working definition may be read here: <https://holocaustremembrance.com/resources/working-definition-antisemitism>.

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### **Why were Jews targeted during the Holocaust?**

Antisemitism had existed in Europe for thousands of years. Differences between the Jewish communities and local populations, centered around their traditions as well as separatism that antisemitism itself had created, created space for the growth of false misconceptions and hateful ideas to spread.

Although many German Jews had fought on the German side in World War I, in the economic devastation that followed the end of the War in Germany, the rising Nazi Party and Adolf Hitler blamed the Jews for Germany's loss of World War I as well as the connected economic crisis that the country faced. One piece of this was the idea that Jews had profited from the reparations that Germany owed following the Treaty of Versailles.

Antisemitic ideas met historical circumstance, and Jews were used as a scapegoat.

### **Aren't Jews white? How can antisemitism be a racial form of hate?**

While in the U.S. today, race is determined by the color of one's skin, this was not the case in Europe. In Europe, racial distinctions relied on other definitions, including "ethnic" features. The Nazis focused on the stereotype that Jews had specific physical features which could identify them. This ties to this racial ideology.

Outside of Europe, Jewish communities lived continuously throughout the Middle East and in North Africa, as well as in far reaches such as in China. These Jewish people may not have had light skin or the specific racialized features that the Nazis sought to recognize in Ashkenazi populations.

Today, there are many Jews of color. The Jewish community is not a racial monolith.

In the U.S. today, hateful ideology of neo-Nazi and white supremacist groups continue to separate Jewish people, including those of European descent, by what is seen as racial difference.

### **Why do some deny the Holocaust?**

To avoid accountability for their crimes, the Nazis made attempts to obfuscate their actions against the Jews, going so far as to bomb gas chambers to destroy the evidence of their mass murder by gas in the Final Solution. Even during the events of the Holocaust, the Nazis were cautious about how the world would perceive their actions. The Nazis controlled media that went in and out of Nazi Germany, including having final say over images published by the Associated Press. The Nazi Party manipulated images from sites such as ghettos to reduce public concern over the treatment of the Jewish people. During a Red Cross visit to Theresienstadt, the Nazis created the impression that living in that camp was simply a peaceful resettlement. Some have taken these and other instances as examples that the Holocaust was overblown or simply did not occur.

### **What if anything does the Holocaust have to do with current events?**

The events of the Holocaust led to support by some government entities of the idea of the creation a state for Jewish people. This was an idea that dated back to more than a hundred years prior. The state of Israel was established in 1948, in the direct wake of the Holocaust.

### **Isn't there a reason Jews are always victims? Why do Jews not take accountability for their role in causing these situations?**

Antisemitism doesn't seem to make sense. It adapts to fit a variety of circumstances and always finds blame against Jewish people, typically for living in ways according to their beliefs or for being in the very conditions that antisemitic policies have created. For example, the trope that Jews are wealthy can be traced back to the career of moneylending in Europe, which was seen as "dirty." Jews were only allowed to hold certain, unwanted jobs, and this was one of them. This then mutated into the idea that Jews are greedy, money-obsessed, wealthy, and control the banks and financial systems, all tropes that continue to be seen in antisemitic rhetoric today.

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**What are some common antisemitic tropes?  
How do we identify them?**

***Jews are wealthy/greedy/control financial institutions/  
money-obsessed.***

Catholic and Orthodox churches banned usury (charging interest on loaned money, or moneylending). Jews then took on this necessary task, which was one of few jobs they were allowed. ***This was a symptom of discrimination rather than a cause.***

***Jews control the media.***

Restrictions were made on jobs and tasks that Jews could perform in society often under the guise of “protection” of non-Jewish people from performing undesirable work, dating back centuries. Jews were allowed to engage in unwanted careers including commerce, manufacturing, and the free professions, which included jobs in the arts, music, and journalism. ***The long-standing tradition of participating in cultural areas such as media and journalism is actually based in early racism and prejudice towards Jews.***

***Jews are blood-hungry, seeking to kill and harm non-Jewish people.***

The myth of blood libel began centuries ago, stating that Jews used the blood of Christian children for ritual purposes. Historically, blood libels often took place close to Passover, when Jews were charged with using the blood of Christian children to bake matzahs. The proximity of such charges to Easter was thus also often associated with the continuing belief that Jews were responsible for the Passion and Crucifixion of Jesus. Blood libels, together with allegations of well poisoning, were a major theme in Jewish persecution in Europe throughout the Middle Ages and into the modern period. They were a central component in the development of modern antisemitism in the 19th century. Blood libel accusations often led to pogroms, violent riots launched against Jews and frequently encouraged by government authorities. ***Murder is expressly forbidden in the Torah, as are the blood sacrifices which were practiced by ancient pagan religions. In fact, Jewish dietary laws (kashrut), forbid the consumption of blood in food and require all blood to be drained from slaughtered animals before consumption.***

***Jews are part of a secret cabal with a conspiracy to take over the world.***

This ideology is most commonly seen in the Protocols of the Elders of Zion, which continues to be circulated as truth to this day. First published in Russia in 1905, the text is a work of fiction written and presented as a real document. The text spreads lies about Jewish-led conspiracies to take over the world. The document is written as minutes from a meeting of Elders, which never took place. Topics include plans to rule the world by way of increasing conflict between religions, controlling the media, and manipulating the economy—ideas which we see above are rooted in discrimination. ***The text, despite being thoroughly debunked, is unfortunately still read by many today and taken as fact.***

**Where do these tropes come from?**

As shown above, many of these tropes are rooted in discriminatory practices and laws from centuries ago. The Nazis invoked these tropes and more, which would have been familiar to people living in Europe.

**What is neo-Nazism? What is its relationship to the Nazi party?**

While Neo-Nazism is separate from the Nazi party, neo-Nazi groups are inspired by and believe in Nazi ideology. That ideology never went away and has been adopted by other groups. Even during the rule of the Nazi party, some in America supported their platform. In 1939, approximately 20,000 Americans gathered at Madison Square Garden in New York to show their support for the Nazi party and Nazi ideology. In a contemporary context, neo-Nazis in America have made statements reminiscent of those made by Nazis.

**How many Holocaust survivors live in the New York City area? How many Jews are in New York and the U.S.? What are some other important statistics?**

There are approximately 15,000 survivors in NYC per the Claims Conference. Some of these survivors were instrumental in the founding of the Museum.

A total of 7.6 million people in the United States are Jewish, accounting for 2.4% of the total US population. 21% of Jewish people in the United States live in the state of New York.

***A disproportionate amount of hate is directed toward this small percentage of the population.***

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## General Notes

### **Has antisemitism been present in the United States?**

Yes. Like other forms of hate and discrimination, antisemitism has been and continues to be present in the United States. Many of the tropes addressed above circulate commonly to this day, including by people who may not be aware of the history behind these statements and sentiments.

Historically, continuing through the mid-20th century in the United States, Jewish people faced forms of legal discrimination in the U.S., including restrictions on the ability of Jews to immigrate to the United States (as in the Immigration Act of 1924), quotas and restrictions on the admission of Jewish students to elite colleges and universities, and restrictions against Jewish people purchasing homes in specific areas or neighborhoods, a practice known as red-lining. The impacts of these forms of discrimination are ongoing and generational. In one example, The New York Times found that some seven decades after red-lining laws were passed, financial and racial differences remain apparent in these areas, regardless of whether the laws remained active.<sup>2</sup>

Antisemitic incidents have surged in recent years. The ADL, which tracks such incidents, reported in 2022 that antisemitic incidents in that year had reached an all-time high since recording began in 1979.

### **How can we learn more about the history of antisemitism?**

A collection of videos of talks given at the Museum about the history of antisemitism can be found here: <https://www.youtube.com/playlist?list=PL9NM7b8l78b-WeBvhHMGV70Zav6gT-vfYV>.

The Jewish community is a diverse group, spanning nations and experiences. There is no one singular Jewish experience. A stereotype about all Jewish people is just that.

Like any group, it is important to recognize and stand up against hate toward Jewish people.

2. Times reporter Emily Badger covers this phenomenon in Brooklyn in the Aug. 24, 2017 article “How Redlining’s Racist Effects Lasted for Decades,” <https://www.nytimes.com/2017/08/24/upshot/how-redlinings-racist-effects-lasting-for-decades.html>.



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