# ANTISEMITISM AND BIAS

*a 30-minute activity for grades 9-12*

## Section 1: Introduction

**Antisemitism is a unique form of discrimination.** Generally defined as prejudice against or hatred of Jewish people, perhaps it is more usefully understood as a conspiracy theory about how the world operates. Known as "the longest hatred," antisemitism is based on centuries-old malicious lies and tropes. It is often used as an umbrella explanation for all societal problems, suggesting that Jewish people are the clandestine operators of the world, acting for their malevolent purposes and gain.

**Antisemitism often reflects how society addresses its problems and challenges.** Since every society faces problems and challenges, the *scapegoating* of Jews knows no boundaries. It festers in every country, regardless of whether its Jewish population is large, medium, small, or non-existent. It is beholden to no political party or affiliation and can be found across the political spectrum, though more frequently towards the extremes. It is revealed, often unwittingly, in our workplaces, personal relationships, among friends, and family members.

**Antisemitism is actualized through bias.** Taking the form of harassment, violence, cruelty, and other antisocial behaviors, antisemitic bias is rooted in falsehoods about Jewish people and Jewish beliefs. It flourishes in an environment of discord and mistrust. Antisemitic bias can be propagated by social constructs such as religious institutions, governments, systems of news, colleges and universities, and school systems.

In the last decade, the number of antisemitic incidents (i.e., harassment, vandalism, and assault) in the United States has increased nearly 1,000%—from 942 incidents in 2015 to 9,354 in 2024. These figures included 647 bomb threats in 2024 toward synagogues and other Jewish institutions. More than 27% of antisemitic incidents occurred at K-12 schools.

## Section 1: Critical Conversation Questions

➤ How does it feel when you are blamed for something you had nothing to do with?

➤ Do you believe antisemitism is an issue at your school?

➤ How might antisemitism impact people who are not Jewish?

### How To Use This Guide

A critical conversation requires **critical thinking**, a skill that helps you *think about your thinking*. It means using your brain in an active, inquisitive way rather than just memorizing facts or accepting what you hear.

To use this guide, form a discussion pair or small group of your peers. Read each section of the guide individually. At the end of each section, engage in a critical conversation with your partner or group about what you have read using the discussion questions provided.
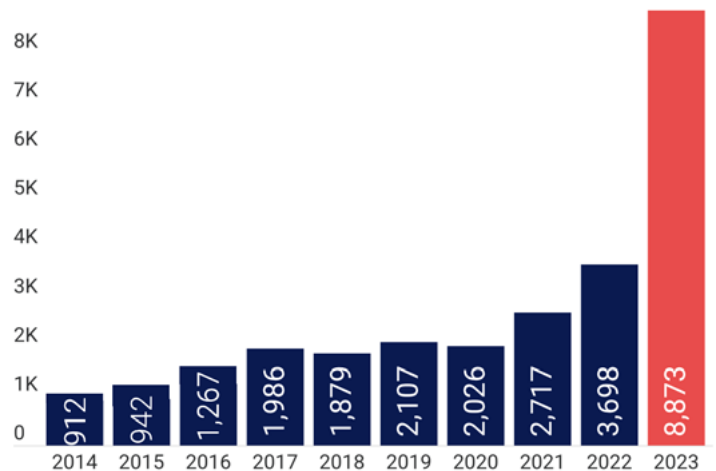


*Antisemitic incidents in the United States, 2014-2023.*
*Source: Anti-Defamation League*

**FOUNDATIONS OF RESISTANCE**

JEWISH PARTISAN EDUCATIONAL FOUNDATION

CALIFORNIA TEACHERS COLLABORATIVE FOR HOLOCAUST AND GENOCIDE EDUCATION

*Foundations of Resistance utilizes the history and life lessons of the Jewish partisans of World War II to teach students why and how to resist antisemitism. Foundations teaches students to act with increased empathy; to recognize and call out antisemitism; to build a positive leadership identity; and to resist antisemitism both systemically and in their everyday lives.*

## Section 2: Antisemitism and Bias

Bias is a tendency to favor or oppose a person, group, or idea based on personal opinion rather than objective reasoning. Bias can lead to decisions and behaviors not based on facts. Various biases drive antisemitic behavior. By understanding these biases, you can better recognize unfair thinking and help challenge antisemitism and other forms of discrimination when you encounter them. The following are examples of specific types of bias and their role in influencing antisemitic behavior:



**Attribution bias** is our tendency to explain events by assigning blame or motive, often without enough evidence. When something bad happens, people might leap to blame a person or group as a simple explanation. This can become *scapegoating*—unfairly blaming someone for problems they didn't cause.

Throughout history, Jews have frequently been scapegoated for complex problems. Rather than understanding real causes (like disease, economic hardship, or political conflict), people with attribution bias look for an easy target. In medieval Europe, Jews were falsely accused of causing disasters like the Black Death. As one account notes, people alleged "*Jews had poisoned their wells*" to spread the plague. There was no truth to this, but blaming Jews became a way to explain a terrifying disease. Similarly, in the 14th century, Jews were accused of causing the Bubonic Plague itself. These baseless accusations led to violence and massacres against Jewish communities.

Fast forward to today, and we, unfortunately, see the same pattern. During the recent COVID-19 pandemic, some conspiracy theories absurdly blamed Jews for the coronavirus, claiming Jews created the virus or were profiting from it. In both cases, attribution bias caused people to pin a disaster on Jews without evidence.
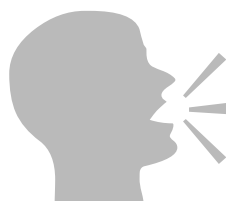


**The halo effect** is a bias where we assume that if a person or organization is good in one area, they must be good in others. This bias can become dangerous when a well-liked or respected figure spreads antisemitic or other hateful rhetoric. Because people trust or admire the source, they may accept the hateful message more readily or fail to criticize it. For instance, if a popular professor or a humanitarian organization says something biased about Jews, their audience might give those statements a free pass instead of questioning the prejudice. The halo effect can make us overlook someone's faults or harmful behavior because we're blinded by our positive impression of them.

A classic historical example is Henry Ford, the famous American automobile pioneer. Ford was admired worldwide for revolutionizing transportation with the Model T car and for his business success. But Ford also held deep antisemitic beliefs, and in the early 1920s, he published a series of hateful articles and pamphlets titled "*The International Jew*," which claimed that Jews were behind many problems in America and the world. Because of Ford's halo (his fame and success), many readers who might otherwise ignore fringe antisemitic pamphlets paid attention to his.

A contemporary example of the halo effect is how some humanitarian or human rights organizations are shielded from criticism, even when they display bias. According to one analyst, because NGOs are prejudged as altruistic and moral, their "*moral failings, including discrimination, racism, and antisemitism, are ignored or explained away.*" In short, the halo effect can make people overlook antisemitism when it comes from a source they usually respect.

**The horn effect** is the opposite of the halo effect. Instead of one positive trait coloring our whole view of someone, one negative trait or impression does. If you've ever had a bad first impression of someone and assumed everything about them must be bad, you've experienced the horn effect. For example, if a teacher hears that a student once cheated on a test, they might (unfairly) view *all* of that student's actions with suspicion thereafter, as if the student wears a permanent "bad" label.

The horn effect takes one negative perception of a person and generalizes it to everyone belonging to that person's ethnic or racial group. For instance, medieval Europeans might point to one example of a Jew charging interest (at a time when Christians were forbidden to lend money) and then insist that "Jews are usurers and exploiters" as a whole. The horn effect turns isolated incidents or stereotypes into a blanket condemnation of Jews, feeding the fires of hate. Rather than seeing Jewish individuals as diverse people, the horn effect paints the entire group with the same "horns" of one perceived sin.

A real-world example occurred after the Bernie Madoff scandal in 2008. Madoff, who was Jewish, ran a vast Ponzi scheme defrauding investors, which was a very high-profile financial crime. His actions had nothing to do with his religion or ethnicity—he was a criminal individual. But antisemites quickly used Madoff as "proof" of their hateful stereotypes about Jews and money. In online discussions, many posted comments smearing all Jews based on this one man's crime. This kind of thinking has fueled antisemitic tropes for ages.
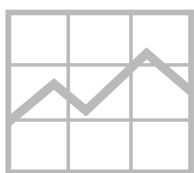
**Academic bias** refers to prejudice or skewed perspectives that occur in educational settings. This can mean that teachers or the curriculum present information in a biased way, researchers allow personal prejudices to influence their findings, or academic institutions enact discriminatory policies.

A striking historical example of academic bias against Jews were the Jewish quotas in many top universities in the early 20th century. In the 1920s and 1930s, elite schools like Harvard, Yale, Columbia, and others in the United States deliberately limited the number of Jewish students admitted. For example, around 1923, Harvard's president publicly proposed a quota because he felt the student body had "too many Jews."

Academic bias can also manifest as unfair treatment of Jewish students or scholars in universities—for example, grading Jewish students more harshly or excluding Jewish voices in historical accounts. In modern times, it might include an anti-Israel slant in Middle East Studies courses that crosses into antisemitic territory or campus climates that tolerate anti-Jewish expression as "academic freedom" while not affording Jewish students the same respect.

**Victim blaming** is when people suggest that those who suffer wrongdoing are responsible for what happened to them. This often happens in cases of bullying, assault, or discrimination—observers or perpetrators claim the victim "brought it on themselves" through their behavior or characteristics.

Victim blaming adds insult to injury: Jews not only suffer the antisemitic act but then are told it's essentially their fault. When Jews are attacked or killed, some will claim "the Jews brought it on themselves." In recent debates, you'll hear things like, "*Anti-Jewish sentiment in some countries today is because of the actions of Israel; if Jews worldwide don't want trouble, Israel should change,*" which blames ordinary Jewish people for what antisemites choose to do to them (as if antisemitism were a natural reaction rather than a hateful choice). It's important to recognize victim blaming as a bias and fallacy. In combating antisemitism, a key step is to place blame where it belongs: on the antisemites, not on Jews.

**Religious bias** is prejudice against people based on their religion or beliefs. It stems from the feeling that one religion is true or superior and that those who follow other religions are wrong, sinful, or even evil.

In history, many conflicts and persecutions have had a religious basis —for example, Catholics vs. Protestants, Muslims vs. Hindus, etc. In the context of antisemitism, religious bias mainly refers to anti-Jewish sentiment arising from Christian or Islamic beliefs/doctrines that view Judaism negatively.

Antisemitism, for many centuries, was essentially a religious phenomenon. For a long time in Europe, Jews were the only non-Christian minority, and they faced hostility because they did not accept Christianity. Some Christian teachings, unfortunately, propagated the idea that Jews were cursed or malevolent for rejecting Jesus as the Messiah. One of the most damaging Christian-origin biases was the accusation of **deicide**—the claim that Jews collectively killed Jesus. Although the Romans crucified Jesus, a narrative took root that blamed the Jewish people (as a whole, eternally) for this act. This made Jews targets of anger among devout Christians.

In Islamic history, while relations between Muslims and Jews have varied widely, there have been instances of religiously fueled antisemitism as well. Some interpreted certain *hadiths* (traditional sayings) to portray Jews as treacherous or cursed, which has been cited by extremist groups in modern times to incite violence (for example, Hamas propaganda sometimes uses such religious references to demonize Jews in Israel).

## Proliferation of Bias

Antisemitism is embedded within many of the institutions of society, shaping people's beliefs and behaviors towards Jewish people.

The Nazis did not invent the antisemitism they unleashed on Jewish people during the Holocaust. Instead, they tapped into the systemic antisemitism already present in European social, religious, and political spheres for centuries and exploited it to motivate the electorate and rise to power in Germany.

The following is a list of social systems that can and have been exploited to promote antisemitism:
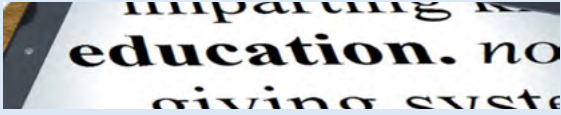


**Education:** Educational systems shape the minds of entire nations. When antisemitism infects educational systems, it can have wide-reaching consequences for both individuals and society.



**Entertainment:** The Nazis used everything from storybooks to films to brainwash a population to abet genocide. Today, TV, film, and music continue to shape how we perceive the world and those with whom we share it, including Jewish people and other minority groups.
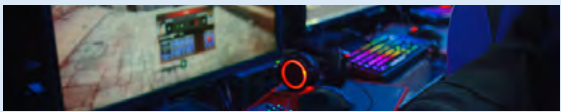


**Gaming:** Video games have become a leading form of entertainment among young people, played by 9 in 10 people in Gen Z. Particularly with the popularity of online multiplayer games, they have also become the latest battleground in the fight against antisemitism.



**News:** Antisemitism in our news media institutions can distort our ability to assess objective reality and lead to mass harm against the Jewish community. 41% of Americans say they encounter antisemitism in News media, according to the Anti-Defamation League



**Politics:** Throughout history, antisemitism has been present within various political systems, utilized by individuals and regimes across the political and ideological spectrum.
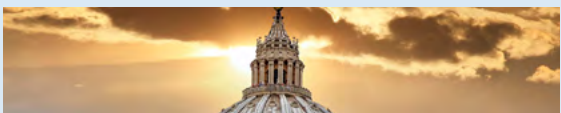


**Religious Institutions:** Religion plays an enormous role in shaping how we understand the world. Historically, religious systems and religious institutions have, at times, played a significant role in propagating and perpetrating antisemitism.
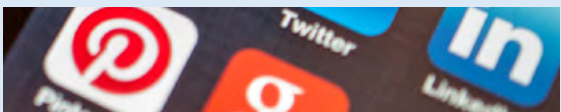


**Social Media:** The advent of social media has enabled individuals and groups to reach people more quickly and cheaply than ever before. Pervasive antisemitism on social media helps propagate antisemitism in society and can lead to offline violence.

## Section 2: Critical Conversation Questions

➤ Can you think of a specific example of biased behavior you have engaged in?

➤ How can bias lead to cruelty or violence?

➤ What can you do to respond to unjust or biased behavior?

# Section 3: Objectivity and Social Action

Social action refers to activities to create change or address social issues. How you engage in social action matters. Making objective, non-biased decisions is essential to positive social action because your behavior will come to define you and, more importantly, your message. Will people see you as someone who will stoop to any level to succeed—cheapening your cause and the power of your voice? Or will they come to see you as a positive and empathetic leader worthy of their support and respect?

The "Rubric of Resistance" framework can help you engage in non-biased social action. Your actions must be appropriate to the scenario; not every action is suitable in every situation. Use the acronym S.E.L.F. (Safe, Effective, Legal, Fair) as follows:

## S  Is my choice SAFE?

It is critical that all resistance be NON-VIOLENT. Unless you are in a military conflict, there is never any reason for you to take violent action. Violence is an unsafe, ineffective, illegal, and unethical means of action. You do not want to engage in any action that could harm yourself or another human being.

## E  Is my choice EFFECTIVE?

Before taking action, it is important to assess how much good will come from our actions. Will I accomplish my goal? Has this action been effective in the past? Will my involvement improve the situation? Not every idea is effective, and not every situation warrants your participation.

## L  Is my choice LEGAL?

Do not break the law. Following the law is critical to maintaining a civil society. The law should guide any action you choose to take unless the law itself is unjust (i.e., Nuremberg laws, Jim Crow laws). Laws that protect lives and affirm human dignity and equality are usually just. Those that denigrate, oppress, or are designed to be inflicted upon one group of people while exempting another are unjust.

## F  Is my choice FAIR?

Your actions should always be just, moral, and ethical. Your resistance to hate will only be credible to others if guided by positive values. If you choose to resist hate and injustice with more hate and injustice, you will devalue your own words and harm your agenda.

## Section 3: Critical Conversation Questions

➤ How would you distinguish between positive and negative social action?

➤ How does bias lead to negative social action?

➤ Why is objectivity critical to engaging in positive social action?



*Spotlight:*
# Walter Marx

Before becoming a Jewish partisan in World War II, Walter Marx was an ordinary kid who lived with his parents, Ludwig and Johanna. He was born in Heilbronn, Germany on February 27, 1926. When the **antisemitic bias** of his classmates became unbearable, 9-year-old Walter moved to Luxembourg to live with relatives.

Soon, Walter's parents were forced to relinquish control of their business, and their home was destroyed, and his father was arrested. The Germans eventually released his father, and both parents joined Walter in Luxembourg.

After the Germans invaded Luxembourg, Walter's family crossed into the unoccupied part of France. His father was arrested by the French police and sent to his death at the Majdanek Concentration Camp in Poland. In September 1943, Walter's family followed the retreating Italian Army through the Alps. They reached a small town in Italy that the German Army quickly absorbed. One night, working as a laborer for the Germans, Walter suffered a severe spinal injury and avoided being sent to a concentration camp with his mother and cousin, who were both killed.

For more about Walter Marx and his experience as a Jewish partisan, visit:
https://www.jewishpartisans.org/partisans/walter-marx.

## Section 4: Critical Thinking

Critical thinking is analyzing information, evaluating ideas, and making logical, well-thought-out decisions. In other words, it's about not taking things at face value – instead, you ask why, how, and what evidence supports this before you form an opinion or make a choice. Critical thinking involves several key skills working together. When you think critically, you are doing things like breaking down problems and checking the truth of information.

### Components of critical thinking include:

- **Analysis:** Examining complex information by breaking it into smaller parts to understand it better. (For example, in science class, you might break a big concept into steps or look at the causes and effects of an event in history.)

- **Evaluation:** Judging the credibility (trustworthiness) and validity of information or arguments. (For example, you might ask, "*Is this website a reliable source? Are the claims backed by facts or evidence?*")

- **Inference:** Making logical conclusions based on the information you have. (For example, if you know A = B and B = C, you infer that A = C. In everyday life, if one friend always cancels plans, you might assume they're unreliable or not interested.)

- **Problem-Solving:** Using reasoning and evidence to find solutions for real-world problems. (For example, approaching a challenging math problem or planning the steps to complete a group project.)

### Why is critical thinking vital to addressing antisemitism?

**Identifying and Challenging Misinformation**
Antisemitism is fueled by falsehoods (misinformation, disinformation, and conspiracy theories). Critical thinking helps you evaluate the veracity of information and reject falsehoods.

**Recognizing and Rejecting Stereotypes**
Antisemitic beliefs are based on centuries-old false and malicious tropes and stereotypes. Critical thinking can enable people to identify and call out antisemitism.

**Encouraging Empathy**
Critical thinking encourages people to consider multiple viewpoints. Using critical thinking to understand historical Jewish experiences can reduce the real-world impact of antisemitism.

**Supporting Objective Decision-Making**
Critical thinking enables people to make informed, rational decisions, reducing biases and the influence of antisemitism.

### Cultivate Your Critical Thinking

- Ask Questions and Stay Curious: Critical thinking begins with curiosity. By asking open-ended questions (questions that can't be answered with "yes" or "no"), you force yourself to think more deeply, helping you move beyond just accepting information.

- Check the Facts: We get information from many places—textbooks, websites, Instagram, TikTok, YouTube, friends, etc. A critical thinker evaluates this information before accepting it. Verify facts and check if sources are trustworthy. If you read something on social media or hear a rumor, pause and ask: "*Where is this information coming from? Is the source reliable, or could it be biased?*"

- Consider Different Perspectives: Another aspect of critical thinking is being open-minded and looking at situations from multiple angles. Considering viewpoints other than yours gives you a fuller picture of the issue. This doesn't mean you must agree with everything; it means you weigh all sides before concluding.

## Section 4: Critical Conversation Questions

➤ Why is critical thinking vital to positive social action?

➤ How is antisemitism a danger to society?

➤ How can you cultivate your critical thinking?

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