

ANTISEMITISM AND INDIFFERENCE

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.

Indifference plays a critical role in allowing antisemitism to spread. Antisemitism grows not only because some people promote it, but also because others fail to challenge it. Indifference often begins in ordinary moments—when someone laughs at a hateful joke, reads misinformation and scrolls on without challenging it, or refrains from speaking up because it is uncomfortable. Over time, silence normalizes prejudice.

Holocaust scholar Yehuda Bauer wrote:

“Thou shalt not be a victim, thou shalt not be a perpetrator, but, above all, thou shalt not be a bystander.”

His words remind us that awareness alone is not enough—it must lead to responsibility and action.

In 2025, ADL tracked 6,274 antisemitic incidents (i.e., harassment, vandalism, and assault) in the United States. This was 33% lower than the 9,354 incidents tabulated in 2024, but five times higher than a decade ago. 825 of these incidents occurred in K-12 schools.

Section 1: Critical Conversation Questions

- Why might people choose indifference instead of action when faced with injustice?
- How does indifference allow harmful ideas to spread?
- How does Yehuda Bauer’s statement challenge the idea of being a bystander?

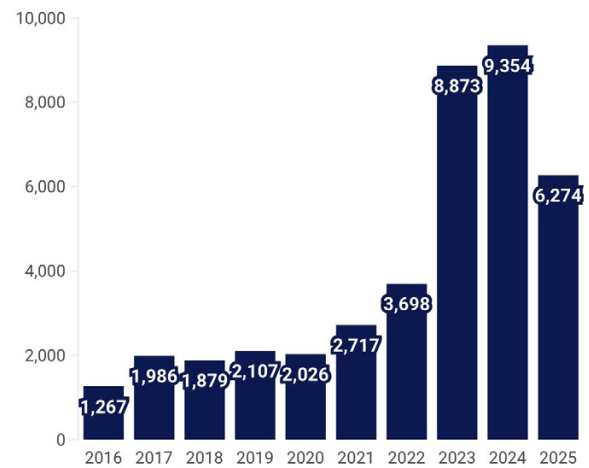
How To Use This Guide

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 | U.S.

Ten-Year Review | 2016 – 2025



Antisemitic incidents in the U.S. 2016-2025. ADL.



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 Indifference

The Holocaust demonstrates how antisemitism can escalate when falsehoods go unchallenged and when individuals fail to act. Nazi ideology depended on propaganda and disinformation that portrayed Jews as dangerous, inferior, or responsible for Germany's economic and political struggles. Repeated constantly, and left unchallenged, these false claims gradually became accepted as truth.

The persecution of Jews in Nazi Germany happened gradually. The Nuremberg Laws stripped Jews of citizenship and legal rights. Jews were excluded from schools, professions, and public life. Businesses were boycotted. Neighbors watched Jewish-owned stores disappear from their streets. Teachers vanished from classrooms. Children were excluded from schools they had once attended alongside their friends. Yet, rather than resisting, most people continued their daily routines.

This indifference became even more visible during Kristallnacht, when synagogues were burned, Jewish businesses and homes were destroyed, and thousands of Jews were arrested across Germany and Austria. These attacks occurred publicly, often in front of ordinary citizens.

Indifference also existed outside Germany. At the Evian Conference, representatives from dozens of countries discussed the growing refugee crisis caused by Nazi persecution. Although many leaders acknowledged the danger facing Jews, most countries refused to increase immigration quotas. Even after hearing firsthand reports of persecution, most nations kept their doors closed to Jews escaping persecution and death.

Today, antisemitic conspiracy theories spread online, often falsely claiming that Jews secretly control governments, media, or financial systems.

While the assembled crowd watched and cheered, Nazis forced these Viennese Jews to scrub the street on their hands and knees. Such acts of public humiliation were made possible through the indifference and participation of ordinary citizens. US Holocaust Memorial Museum.



During periods of crisis or uncertainty, these narratives frequently intensify. For example, during the COVID-19 pandemic, extremist groups spread false claims blaming Jews for creating or profiting from the virus. Following the October 7, 2023 attacks in Israel, antisemitic incidents and conspiracy theories surged online and on college campuses around the world. In many cases, disinformation spread faster than efforts to challenge it.

Indifference does not require agreement with hatred. It only requires silence. When harmful ideas go unchallenged, and people assume someone else will respond, hatred gains space to spread. But indifference does not appear out of nowhere. It is often shaped by how people think, what information they consume, and the beliefs they refuse to question.

Section 2: Critical Conversation Questions

- ▶ Why did gradual changes in Nazi Germany make indifference more likely?
- ▶ What similarities exist between historical and modern disinformation?
- ▶ Why does ignoring harmful ideas contribute to their spread?

Section 3: Dogma, Close-Mindedness, and Hostility

Throughout history, religious dogma, close-mindedness, and hostility toward outsiders have often contributed not only to prejudice but also to indifference. When people accept beliefs without questioning them, view others as fundamentally different or threatening, or refuse to consider perspectives outside their own, they become more likely to ignore injustice when it occurs.

Dogma: belief or doctrine treated as absolutely true and not open to questioning

- Often connected to religious authority or tradition
- Can discourage critical thinking if interpreted rigidly
- May create an “us vs. them” mindset

Close-Mindedness: an unwillingness to consider new perspectives, evidence, or experiences

- Leads to stereotyping and prejudice
- Makes dialogue and understanding difficult
- Can cause people to ignore injustice affecting others

Religious traditions have inspired both compassion and persecution throughout history. Problems arise, however, when religious or ideological beliefs are treated as unquestionable truths and when disagreement or critical inquiry is discouraged.

For centuries in Europe, Jews were targeted through religious myths and false accusations. Jews were falsely blamed for the death of Jesus, accused of poisoning wells during the Black Death, and targeted by the “blood libel” myth, which falsely claimed Jews murdered Christian children for religious rituals. These claims had no factual basis, yet they spread fear and hostility for generations.

These ideas endured not because they were true, but because many people accepted them without question. In societies shaped by religious dogma and limited exposure to different perspectives, challenging these beliefs could be socially dangerous or even forbidden. Over time, hostility toward Jews became normalized, and indifference toward Jewish suffering became easier.

Nazi Germany built upon many of these older antisemitic stereotypes. Through propaganda, schools, films, newspapers, and rallies, Jews were portrayed as dangerous outsiders responsible for Germany's problems. Many people did not participate directly in violence.

They simply adapted to it.

Constant repetition encouraged conformity and discouraged independent thinking. When individuals stop questioning what they hear, prejudice becomes easier to accept and easier to ignore.

Not all religious leaders remained silent. German theologian Dietrich Bonhoeffer publicly opposed Nazism and argued that moral responsibility required resisting injustice.

Antisemitism in Medieval Europe

For centuries, some Jews in Europe faced discrimination rooted partly in distorted religious beliefs and stereotypes. False accusations included:

- Blaming Jews for the death of Jesus
- “Blood libel” myths claiming Jews harmed Christian children
- Claims that Jews caused disasters like the Black Death

These ideas spread fear and hatred, often leading to violence and segregation. Many people accepted these accusations without questioning them. Religious dogma and social pressure discouraged critical thinking, making it easier for communities to ignore the suffering of Jews.

Nazi Germany and Religious Silence

Although Nazi ideology was primarily racial rather than religious, some religious leaders and followers remained silent or failed to oppose persecution.

- Synagogues were burned and destroyed.
- Jews were attacked and killed throughout Europe
- Bystanders, including some religious communities, did little to intervene

Close-minded loyalty to authority, fear of social consequences, or unwillingness to question dominant ideas contributed to widespread indifference.

Religious Extremism and Intolerance

Today, some extremist groups misuse religion to justify hatred against Jews, Muslims, Christians, LGBTQ individuals, immigrants, or other groups.

- Sacred texts may be taken out of context
- Complex issues are reduced to simple “good vs. evil” thinking
- Outsiders are portrayed as threats

When people stop questioning hateful ideas, it becomes easier to ignore suffering.

Section 3: Critical Conversation Questions

- How can dogma and close-minded thinking contribute to indifference?
- Why do people often accept information that supports their existing beliefs without questioning it?
- How can critical thinking help individuals resist misinformation and prejudice?

Section 4: Being an Upstander—Open-Mindedness and Goodwill

An **upstander** is someone who recognizes injustice and **chooses** to respond rather than remain passive. This does not always require dramatic action. Often, it begins with small decisions: questioning harmful ideas, refusing to spread misinformation, supporting someone who is targeted, or speaking up when others remain silent.

People willing to question assumptions and engage with different perspectives often share several qualities:

- **Goodwill** as a commitment to shared humanity
- **Critical thinking** as a defense against misinformation
- **Empathy** as a response to dehumanization
- **Informed action** as a rejection of passivity

During the Holocaust, Oskar Schindler used his influence to save more than one thousand Jews, while Irena Sendler risked her life smuggling Jewish children out of the Warsaw Ghetto. Both rejected indifference and chose action despite enormous danger.

Contemporary examples of upstander behavior can be seen when students challenge antisemitic jokes in school settings, when communities support synagogues after acts of vandalism, or when individuals use online platforms to counter misinformation with accurate information and respectful dialogue.

Being an upstander does not require perfection or fearlessness. It requires awareness, empathy, and the willingness to act thoughtfully when confronted with injustice.

History shows that hostility often grows gradually. When people stop questioning harmful ideas and stop engaging thoughtfully with others, prejudice can spread with little resistance. Preventing this requires critical thinking, empathy, and the willingness to challenge misinformation rather than passively accept it.

Historian and survivor Elie Wiesel warned that indifference can be more dangerous than hatred itself because it allows injustice to continue unchecked. Indifference is not inevitable. People always have choices in how they respond to hatred and injustice.

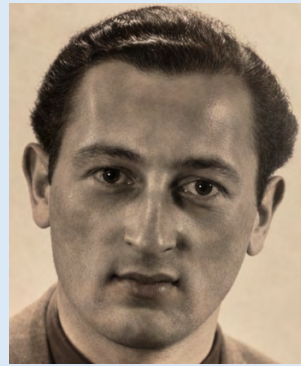
How to Prevent Indifference

- Practice open-mindedness and goodwill
- Ask questions and verify information
- Engage respectfully with people from different backgrounds
- Challenge prejudice and misinformation

Every generation faces the same choice: remain passive in the face of injustice—or choose to act.

Section 4: Critical Conversation Questions

- What motivates some people to act while others remain indifferent?
- How can open-mindedness help people resist propaganda and misinformation?
- What are realistic ways students can act as upstanders in their own communities?



Spotlight: Murray Gordon

Before becoming a Jewish partisan in World War II, Murray Gordon was an ordinary kid, living in the seaside resort town of Klaipeda, Lithuania. At the age of six, Murray and his family moved to Kovno, the capital of Lithuania, to be closer to his mother's parents and siblings. Two rivers

surrounded Kovno, and this is where Murray and his brother ice-skated in the winter and fished during the summer.

Murray was fifteen years old, and his brother just eleven, when the Nazis began their occupation of Lithuania. They made decrees and put harsh restrictions on the Jewish people. From the first week, Lithuanian collaborators started rounding up all the Jews on the street and executing them right outside of Murray's town. Then, in August, the Nazis told the inhabitants that they had to move to a ghetto ten miles outside of Kovno. The people hurriedly packed their bags and were forced to carry all their belongings as they walked 10 miles. There was a hospital inside the ghetto when they arrived, but as they stood in the field, the SS burned it down with 80 people inside, including nurses, patients, and doctors.

Just two months later, the inhabitants were told to go to the fields. The Nazis formed two groups of people – those who were able to work and those who weren't. If they weren't able to work, they were brought to a "resort area" where they were killed. Murray's grandparents, two uncles, and their families were among the 80,000 people killed. Murray, his father, mother, and younger brother were left to work alongside the remainder of the ghetto population.

Murray Gordon's experience shows how quickly prejudice and indifference can escalate into violence when harmful ideas go unchallenged.

For more about Murray Gordon and his experience as a Jewish partisan, visit: <https://www.jewishpartisancommunity.org/partisans/murray-gordon>

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