

Critical Conversation Guide

ANTISEMITISM AND FALSEHOODS

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.

Falsehoods are the fuel of antisemitism. Taking the form of **misinformation, disinformation, and conspiracy theories**, falsehoods about Jewish people and Jewish beliefs create an environment of social discord and mistrust, often resulting in antisemitic bias and behavior. Antisemitic falsehoods uniquely find a path into every cultural medium. They course through the internet and social media. They infect popular culture—music, sports, film, TV, and multiplayer gaming.

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.

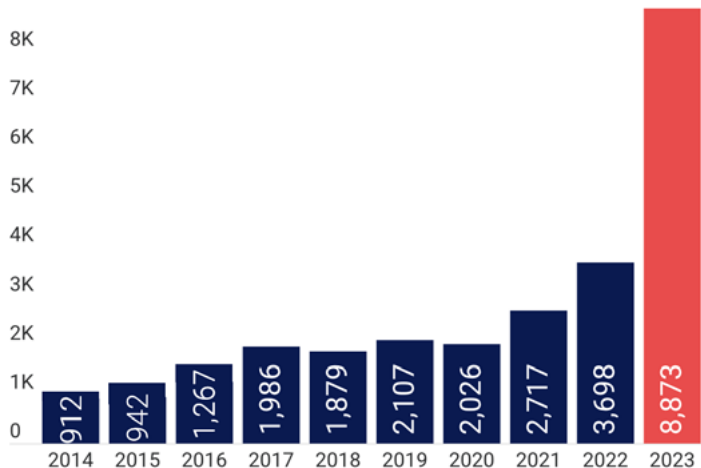
Critical Conversation Questions: Section 1

- ? 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

Section 2: Misinformation, Disinformation, and Conspiracy Theories

Antisemitism is more than just a threat to Jewish people. The falsehoods that fuel antisemitism sow the seeds of division and prejudice. They can lead to physical and emotional harm to individuals and communities and serve as a gateway to broader forms of discrimination and xenophobia. To maintain informed, cohesive, and democratic societies, citizens must be able to recognize misinformation, disinformation, and conspiracy theories. While all three refer to inaccurate, false, or misleading information, there are important distinctions between them:

Misinformation is incorrect information shared without intent to deceive. It is often spread unintentionally due to misunderstanding, confusion, or a lack of fact-checking. It can take the form of sharing an outdated article, believing it's current news, or accidentally posting incorrect health advice you thought was true.

Disinformation is incorrect or misleading information deliberately created or shared to deceive, manipulate, or mislead the public. It is spread intentionally, often with a malicious or strategic goal, such as influencing political outcomes or causing social unrest. It can be fabricated political propaganda to influence elections or false rumors deliberately spread to harm reputations or cause panic.

Misinformation vs. Disinformation

Misinformation	Disinformation
False information shared without intent to deceive	False information deliberately created and shared to deceive
Usually accidental or unintentional	Always intentional and strategic
Can spread quickly through misunderstanding or mistakes	Purposefully amplified to achieve a goal or influence outcomes

Misinformation and disinformation proliferate in numerous ways. They often spread via social media, as most platforms enable people to post anything without verification. They also spread through websites and blogs on unreliable websites or conspiracy sites that intentionally spread falsehoods.

Conspiracy theories are beliefs or explanations suggesting that influential people or organizations secretly collaborate to harm society.

Characteristics of Conspiracy Theories:

- **Secret plots:** Hidden actions by powerful groups or people
- **Lack of reliable evidence:** Speculation and misinterpretations rather than verifiable facts
- **Suspicion of official explanations:** Rejection of mainstream narratives as deceptive
- **Interconnectedness:** Belief in a web of connections linking unrelated groups or events

Examples of Conspiracy Theories:

- **Moon Landing Hoax:** Claiming that NASA faked the 1969 Moon landing
- **9/11 Conspiracies:** Alleging involvement of the U.S. government or the State of Israel in planning 9/11
- **Illuminati/New World Order:** Belief that a secret global cabal controls world events
- **Anti-vaccine conspiracies:** False claims that vaccines are harmful or used to control the public

People are drawn to conspiracy theories because they provide simple explanations for complex events. Some believe in them to feel empowered by knowing “hidden truths.” Others indulge in conspiracy theories because they belong to communities that reinforce these beliefs. And some people are inclined to seek out patterns or intentionality where there is none.

Misinformation, disinformation, and conspiracy theories cause significant societal harm and lead to realworld damage. They can cause people to lose faith in reliable news sources, government institutions, and scientific research, leading to social polarization.

Critical Conversation Questions: Section 2

- ? Are all conspiracy theories false?
- ? What role do you think arrogance plays in believing falsehoods over facts?
- ? Inciting violence is illegal in most free societies. Is this a prudent exception to free speech?

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 3: Antisemitism and Conspiracy Theories

Unlike other forms of bigotry, antisemitism is not just a social prejudice—it is a conspiracy theory about how the world operates. Antisemitism is a set of beliefs about the world that blame Jewish people for things that are not their fault, like social, economic, or political problems.

As antisemitism increases in a society, so too does hostility and hate against other communities. Due to the all-encompassing nature of antisemitism, when people turn to conspiracy theories to explain the causes of society's problems, Jews are often the first group of people to become scapegoats—but scapegoating rarely ends with the Jewish people.

For example, in recent years, the antisemitic “Great Replacement” conspiracy theory incited not only the White Supremacist mass murder of Jews at the Tree of Life Synagogue in Pittsburgh, but also the mass murder of Black Americans at the Emanuel African Methodist Episcopal Church in Charleston and a supermarket in Buffalo; the mass murder of Latino and Hispanic immigrants at a store in El Paso, the mass murder of Muslims at the Al Noor Mosque in New Zealand.

Features of Antisemitic Conspiracy Theories:

- **Secret Control:** Claiming Jews surreptitiously dominate global politics, media, and finance
- **Scapegoating:** Blaming Jews for major historical events or societal problems, like wars, financial crises, or pandemics
- **Demonization:** Presenting Jewish people as inherently evil, manipulative, or corrupt

Historical Examples of Antisemitic Conspiracy Theories:

- The *Protocols of the Elders of Zion* is a fabricated document alleging that Jews secretly plan world domination. Widely spread in Europe during the early 20th century, this false and malicious text fueled widespread antisemitism and was used extensively by the Nazis as justification for persecution.
- The “Stab-in-the-Back” myth accused Jews of betraying Germany during World War I, causing its defeat. This conspiracy theory fueled German resentment against Jews, enhancing Nazi justification for persecution and violence.
- The conspiracy theory that Jews control banks and economies asserted that Jews manipulated international banking systems and created economic crises for their collective benefit. The Nazis and their collaborators used this falsehood to justify discriminatory practices like seizing Jewish property and businesses.
- The Jewish-Bolshevik Conspiracy alleged that Jews were the driving force behind communism, notably the Russian Revolution, to destabilize and control societies. This conspiracy led to fear and violence against Jews under the guise of fighting communism.

Antisemitic conspiracy theories in the 1930s played a central role in fueling the hatred that led to the Holocaust. The Nazis systematically spread antisemitic conspiracy theories through propaganda and miseducation, creating a generation indoctrinated with hostility and suspicion against Jewish people. These falsehoods facilitated public acceptance of persecution and, ultimately, the atrocities of the Holocaust.



Spotlight: Harry Burger

Before becoming a Jewish partisan in World War II, Harry Burger was an ordinary teenager who enjoyed photography, music, and playing soccer. Harry was born in Vienna, Austria, on May 10, 1924. In 1938, when Germany annexed Austria, the German Nuremberg laws were put into effect, which stripped Jews of citizenship

and banned intermarriage. Germany passed these laws as a result of the **antisemitic conspiracy theory** that Jewish people were “racial polluters,” portraying them as not just a religious group but a dangerous, biologically inferior race that threatened the “purity” of the Aryan race.

Harry's family escaped to France, hoping to flee persecution. However, their plans were dashed when Germany conquered France in 1940. Harry's father was arrested and sent to Auschwitz, where he perished. Meanwhile, Harry and his mother were forced into a makeshift ghetto in Nice, France. Their one stroke of luck was that the Italian Army, which at that time was not abusive to Jews, occupied Nice. When the Italians left France, Harry, his mother, and 700 other Jews followed them into Italy. When they arrived at an Italian fort, Harry learned that the Nazis were en route to collect the Jews. Harry and his mother escaped capture, while the Nazis took more than 350 of the others to their deaths.

For more about Harry Burger and his experience as a Jewish partisan, visit: <https://www.jewishpartisans.org/partisans/harry-burger>.

Modern Examples of Antisemitic Conspiracy Theories:

- **Holocaust Denial:** Claiming the Holocaust was exaggerated or fabricated by Jews for sympathy or political gain. Holocaust denial encourages discrimination, hostility, and violence against Jewish individuals and communities.
- **QAnon:** Incorporating antisemitic narratives about Jewish elites controlling global events and harming children. These narratives reinforce harmful stereotypes and create conditions for systemic antisemitism while creating distrust toward democratic institutions by suggesting they are manipulated by secretive, hidden powers.
- **Great Replacement Theory:** Suggesting Jews promote immigration to undermine white or Western populations. This conspiracy theory fuels extremism, which is historically and currently linked to extremist ideologies and acts of terrorism.

Critical Conversation Questions: Section 3

- ? Is it realistic for two individuals to share the same opinion on every issue?
- ? Do all people of a specific religion believe and act the same way?
- ? How might you avoid believing in harmful conspiracy theories?



Section 4: Digital Literacy and Digital Citizenship

Digital literacy is the ability to use technology and digital tools safely, effectively, and critically to find, evaluate, and share information. It requires having the skills, knowledge, and attitude necessary to navigate social media and the internet and distinguish between truth and falsehoods online. Digital literacy is critical to countering antisemitism and other forms of hate.

Distinguishing between facts and falsehoods online can be challenging. Misinformation, disinformation, and conspiracy theories are rampant on social media platforms and can easily masquerade as genuine information, even to experienced users. Enhancing your skills in the following three areas can improve your digital literacy:

- **Identifying reliable sources:** Learning to identify trustworthy sources of information is paramount to digital literacy. Reliable sources avoid biased reporting and provide evidence of their claims. Beware of sources that redefine vocabulary or subjects to create biased narratives. Rely on credible institutions, experts, and factual reporting when selecting resources for accurate information.

- **Critical thinking:** Critical thinkers don't just accept information; they question, investigate, and understand it. Critical thinking helps you form informed opinions rather than just repeating what others say. By thinking critically about information, you will more often question sensational claims and seek evidence, evaluating information for accuracy.
- **History Education:** Challenging antisemitic stereotypes and conspiracies requires *history education*. Learning about the history of antisemitism, particularly the Holocaust, can help provide context and help you debunk myths about Jewish people, including recognizing the difference between what is *genocide* and what is simply a terrible consequence of war. Be skeptical of online sources that attempt to re-envision history or portray tyrants and dictators in a positive light. Being digitally literate requires a solid foundation in historical facts.

Digital citizenship means being responsible for the social, cultural, and legal implications of your online actions. What you post or share online has real-world implications. Spreading falsehoods can lead to societal discord and violence. Conversely, spreading accurate information and countering falsehoods can help to build a better world.

Digital citizenship includes:

- **Fact-checking**, such as verifying a news article or a social media post before sharing it
- **Engaging respectfully** with others online. Encouraging understanding and collaboration between diverse groups
- **Promoting digital literacy** and education about the dangers of misinformation, disinformation, and conspiracy theories
- **Encouraging social media platforms** to reduce the spread of false content through improved moderation or promoting independent organizations dedicated to correcting misinformation

Critical Conversation Questions: Section 4

- ? How would you assess your own digital literacy and digital citizenship?
- ? How is antisemitism a danger to society?
- ? Can you help counter the spread of misinformation, disinformation, and conspiracy theories?

PLACEHOLDER for endnotes, references or further reading.