



STUDENTS' QUESTIONS RELATED TO THE ISRAEL/HAMAS WAR: GUIDANCE FOR HOLOCAUST EDUCATORS

Introduction:

Echoes & Reflections is dedicated in purpose and program to ensuring that students learn about the Holocaust and its lessons for the world today. The brutal attacks in Israel on October 7th and the subsequent dramatic rise in antisemitism are profoundly unsettling, and reinforce the need for all people to understand, identify, and challenge antisemitism in our society and world.

Our pedagogy supports student learning to critically examine and make connections from history to today in appropriate, thoughtful, and accurate ways. The following information is intended to provide guidance and resources to help Holocaust educators address these current events with students specifically as they relate to identifying and understanding antisemitism and the use/abuse of Holocaust history in this moment.

Given the sensitivity and emotional toll of the current conflict on so many, the safety and well-being of students must remain at the forefront of teaching and classroom discussions. As such, we recommend that educators take the time to prepare themselves emotionally for discussing sensitive topics, fostering a trusting and calm environment, and responding respectfully to all questions. Emphasize and acknowledge the complexity of incidents, avoid simplistic explanations, and exercise caution around unintentionally reinforcing stereotypes, bias, and antisemitism/anti-Muslim bigotry. Consider these additional resources to help in classroom framing and productive dialogue:

- [10 Ways to Have Conscientious Conversations on the Israeli-Palestinian Conflict](#) - ADL
- [Helping Children Cope with Terrorism](#) - National Association of School Psychologists (NASP)
- [How to Talk to Kids About Violence, Crime, and War](#) (Common Sense Media)

When working with students on topics such as these, it is imperative to use precise language when discussing current events that are difficult and often contentious. While the below provides guidance and suggested responses to specific queries related to antisemitism and the Holocaust, we encourage teachers to support students' critical thinking, encouraging them to research the history of the region and how that affects the current conflict, and to continue to learn more about what is happening in Israel and Gaza using reliable and trusted sources.

1. What happened on October 7?

On October 7, 2023, on the Jewish Sabbath and during the celebration of the Jewish holiday Simchat Torah (which marks the conclusion of the annual cycle of public Torah readings), the Gaza-based terrorist group Hamas, which governs the Gaza Strip, carried out a brutal attack on Israel. Hamas terrorists overran as many as 22 communities in southern Israel, burning and looting homes. More than 1,200 Israelis, mostly civilians, were slaughtered, thousands wounded and more than 240 people were taken hostage.

2. How does this conflict connect to the history of the Holocaust?

The attack on Israel by Hamas on October 7th was the deadliest single day for Jews since the Holocaust. Since October 7th, there has been an alarming rise in antisemitism in the United States and across the world, including violence.

Jewish history shows us that antisemitism can lie relatively dormant and be revitalized when anxiety, anger, and fear are present in a society, and justify hatred and mass violence. As we think about these lessons from the Holocaust, we have seen many of the same age-old antisemitic tropes being invoked today as were invoked then. We have also seen attacks on Jewish individuals and institutions that are far too reminiscent to what happened then.

3. The October 7th attack has been referred to as a “pogrom” - what does that mean?

A pogrom, originally a Russian word meaning “devastation,” is a term used to describe an organized, large-scale eruption of violence against Jewish communities, historically the kind instigated by the authorities in Czarist Russia.

The Hamas attacks on Israel on October 7, 2023, had many of the characteristics associated with a pogrom, including rampant attacks against Jews of all ages, sexual violence, dismembering and beheadings. Hamas’ intent, which has always been the destruction of the Jewish state of Israel, can be found explicitly in the 1988 Hamas Charter and is demonstrated by Hamas’s repetition of violence against Jews and expressions of antisemitism by current Hamas leadership.

4. The word antisemitism is in the news often now, what does that term mean?

A central feature of antisemitism is that it relies on conspiracy theories - the belief that Jews are working together toward a supposed common goal, and are like puppet-masters, pulling strings secretly behind the scenes to control, damage or destroy the world, and that they are responsible for whatever circumstance or event is causing fear or anger, or needs to be explained. As such, Jews have been blamed throughout history for critical events and disasters including the Black Death, the plagues that wracked Europe in the Middle Ages, the advent of communism, and even the terrorist attacks of 9/11.

Jews throughout the world are often held collectively and individually responsible for the policies and actions of Israel and the Israeli government. This can include demonization of its leaders, its people, and Jews everywhere, and may culminate in attacks on individual Jews, Jewish institutions, and synagogues. These antisemitic expressions also fuel opposition to the State of Israel’s right to exist.

5. Why are we seeing more violence and acts of antisemitism and hatred throughout the world because of what’s going on in Israel/Gaza?

The terrorist attack in Israel and subsequent conflict in Gaza have led to escalated attacks on Jews globally. This pattern is not new; historically, conflicts involving Israel and Palestinians correlate with increased antisemitic activity against Jews. According to the ADL, antisemitic incidents in the US rose by 318% in the month after the massacre by Hamas. It’s crucial to note that while escalation in the conflict doesn’t create prejudice, it intensifies pre-existing negative attitudes that can lead to threats against the Jewish community or individual Jews. Even before the events of October 7th and subsequent war, antisemitism has been steadily rising for several years.

Often in times of conflict and unrest, as we have seen in the past related to Covid-19 or September 11th, scapegoating and blaming emerge as convenient vehicles for societal anger, anxiety, pain, and fear. There is a tendency to reduce complex issues by blaming one group or individual, which has resulted in violence and harm to that community. This is a recurring theme in antisemitism as Jewish people have been targeted as scapegoats for societal issues for centuries, justifying discrimination and violence.

6. Why have there been so many references to the Holocaust at protests and rallies?

Even prior to the conflict, Holocaust comparisons proliferated in anti-Israel rhetoric and other expressions of antisemitism across the entire political spectrum. The rhetoric ranges from offensive Holocaust imagery to the equation of Zionism with Nazism and the accusation that Jews are treating Palestinians just as the Nazis treated Jews during the Holocaust. Often, the Holocaust is invoked and couched in criticism of Israel as a means to harm the broader Jewish community.

Many people believe the Holocaust was the most evil event in human history, perpetrated by Hitler and the Nazis. Therefore, when trying to describe something or someone as evil, it is a cheap and shallow, but sadly effective tool, to equate them with Nazism or the Holocaust. To use this imagery against the Jewish people and the State of Israel is especially incendiary and is generally loaded with antisemitic intent. This is called “Holocaust Inversion.” It distorts and diminishes the history of the Holocaust and causes pain to those who survived and their descendants. Holocaust inversion is not only inaccurate, but also antisemitic.

7. What is genocide? Why are people saying Israel is committing genocide against the Palestinians?

Genocide is a legal term defined by the United Nations in the wake of the Holocaust in 1948 in the Convention on the Prevention and Punishment of the Crime of Genocide (see the definition below). Commonly it is viewed as violent attacks with the specific intent to destroy, in whole or in part, a national, ethnic, racial, or religious group.

To categorize mass casualties of a group of people (ethnic, religious, or other) as genocide, proof of intent to destroy that group is required. The Israeli government does not have, and has never had, a policy that advocates for genocide. Hamas, on the other hand, includes the goal of mass annihilation of Jews and the elimination of Israel in its charter, and has repeated its goal of genocide publicly, innumerable times over the years, including in its education activities. While there may be extreme individual voices in Israeli discourse, there has never been a governmental policy that advocates for genocide.

In 1948, the United Nations defined genocide as any of the following acts committed with intent to destroy, in whole or in part, a national, ethnic, racial, or religious group, including:

1. killing members of the group
2. causing serious bodily or mental harm to members of the group
3. deliberately inflicting on the group conditions of life calculated to bring about its physical destruction in whole or in part
4. imposing measures intended to prevent births within the group
5. forcibly transferring children of the group to another group

Tragically, in modern warfare, civilians are often unintentional victims. People are and should rightly be concerned about the humanitarian crisis in Gaza in the wake of the war instigated by Hamas, with a hope for a future of stability and peace in the region. However, invoking the term genocide regarding Israel’s actions when it is not appropriate does not do anything to solve the current crisis or provide a pathway to peace; to the contrary, it only inflames the situation unnecessarily and demonizes Israel.

6. What does “From the River to the Sea” mean and is it antisemitic?

“From the River to the Sea” is a phrase often used in the context of discussions about the Israeli-Palestinian conflict. It refers to the geographic area between the Jordan River and the Mediterranean Sea, which encompasses the entirety of Israel, the West Bank, and the Gaza Strip. While the phrase has been used by some who claim to advocate for freedom and peace, it is important to note that the phrase first gained traction with the Palestine Liberation Organization (PLO) in the 1960s when the PLO advocated for the elimination of the State of Israel. Of late, especially in anti-Israel protests post-Oct. 7, it has become a rallying call for the elimination of Israel and to replace it completely with a wholly Palestinian state that does not include the Jewish people. Because it can be seen as promoting the removal or destruction of the State of Israel, it is antisemitic and genocidal.

7. Why are some people calling Pro-Palestinian rallies antisemitic?

Pro-Palestinian rallies, on their own, are not necessarily antisemitic, and those that participate in them may do so to advocate for Palestinian rights for self-determination, and for humanitarian purposes. However, Pro-Palestinian rallies in the wake of Hamas’s attack and the war it instigated have consistently included participants who embrace antisemitic views and make declarations advocating for the end of the State of Israel, thus crossing the line from criticism to antisemitism, even if not all participants agree with these views. Thus, although many who are advocating for Palestinian rights may be well-intentioned and not antisemitic, the impact of the rallies has fueled antisemitism. Some of the rallies have also led to outright violence.

Students should be encouraged to think through the situation before they decide to act, and to act in such a way that they are not contributing to hate. They must be made aware of the impact their advocacy may have, particularly at this moment.