



LESSON PLAN: WHAT ARE SOME OF THE FORCES THAT DRIVE ANTISEMITISM TODAY?

INTRODUCTION

In this lesson, students learn how antisemitism has frequently been used as a political weapon to attack opponents, gather support, and ultimately to gain power and influence. Invoking the Holocaust in order to misuse it is a particularly disturbing tactic that denies, distorts, and trivializes the horrors of the Holocaust. Students discover the dangers of allowing hate speech to go unchecked in which antisemitism can spread quickly and lead to real world violence.

PART ONE: HOW HAS ANTISEMITISM MANIFESTED FROM THE RADICAL RIGHT IN AMERICA?

1 Students share any prior knowledge they may have about the Tree of Life Synagogue attack that took place in Pittsburgh in 2018. The following background is shared as needed:

On the morning of October 27, 2018 (a Saturday, the Jewish holy day) Robert Bowers entered the Tree of Life Synagogue in Pittsburgh, PA yelling "All Jews must die!" He opened fire on the congregants, killing eleven and wounding six others. Bowers told a law enforcement officer that Jews "were committing genocide against his people." Authorities later found virulent antisemitic, xenophobic, and anti-immigrant posts on Bowers' social media profiles. The last of his posts reflecting his belief that Jews are enabling undocumented immigrants to enter the U.S.—stated that "[Jewish organizations] like to bring invaders in that kill our people. I can't sit by and watch my people get slaughtered. Screw your optics, I'm going in." The Tree of Life shooting is the deadliest attack on the Jewish community in U.S. history.

2 The **Tree of Life Synagogue Attack Word Cloud** handout is projected or distributed. The word cloud reflects some of the language the assailant posted online in the lead-up to the attack. In pairs or small groups, students analyze the language for clues about what might have fueled his irrational hatred and they identify traditional antisemitic themes. As a class, students discuss their findings. The following themes are considered:¹

- The U.S. is being attacked and "invaded"; overrun by "foreign" and dangerous people (Jews, Israel, Muslims, migrants, refugees, etc.).

¹ This activity asks students to critically analyze strong antisemitic language and deduce how hateful rhetoric can escalate to violence. Review carefully to determine if it is appropriate for your students. Some acronyms that may be unfamiliar to students have been defined on the handout. You may want to explain or contextualize other terms that may be new to students. Tell students that they are examining this language in order to better understand the motivations behind and impact of hateful behavior. Reinforce that they should participate in discussions in a mature and sensitive manner, and never repeat derogatory language outside the context of this lesson. Consider other strategies to maintain a safe classroom environment for students.

- Jews, Jewish organizations, and Israel are evil and engineering an “invasion” for self-serving purposes.
- White people in the U.S. are being “replaced” and their “way of life” threatened; they must unite and fight for their country.
- The Holocaust was justified and a modern-day genocide against Jews and other “enemies” (refugees, Muslims, non-White people, etc.) is warranted. Students should pay particular attention to the “other enemies” language, and discuss how antisemitism overlaps with racism and different hatreds of many other marginalized groups.

To conclude this activity, students view the testimony of **Judah Samet, (bio)** a Holocaust survivor and a member of the Tree of Life Congregation at the time of the attack. After watching, students discuss some or all of the following questions:

- What emotions came up when encountering this word cloud? What words did your eye first move towards?
- Even if hate speech does not escalate to violence, why is it harmful and to whom? Is antisemitism harmful only to Jews?
- Judah reacts to the news of the shooting with, “For me, it’s never over.” What does he mean by this?
- How has dehumanizing language like “invaders” and antisemitic rhetoric exhibited by Bowers been normalized? Why is this so dangerous?
- By analyzing the language of the word cloud and the experience of Judah, what conclusions can you draw about how hate escalates?

3 Students view the video, [*Eric Ward on Antisemitism at the Heart of White Nationalism*](#) and then review the student handout, *The History of White Supremacist Groups in America*. Students learn that an increase in white nationalism—such as that exhibited by Bowers as well as attackers involved in the 2017 Charlottesville rally and 2019 Poway Synagogue shooting in CA—is one trend that both fuels contemporary antisemitism and demonstrates its most deadly consequence. Students discuss the following questions:

- How does the antisemitism promoted by white nationalist groups today build on old ideas? How is it different?
- How does fear and uncertainty animate the antisemitism seen in White Nationalism and how is it used to incite violence?
- How does antisemitism and a belief in conspiracy theories fuel hatred and violence against other vulnerable populations?
- How does antisemitism jeopardize the civil liberties of all people and threaten democratic society?
- According to Eric Ward, why is it important for marginalized people other than Jews and society as a whole to fight antisemitism?

PART TWO: HOW HAS ANTISEMITISM MANIFESTED IN THE EXTREME LEFT IN AMERICA?

4. Students learn that, especially since the attack on Israel by Hamas on October 7, 2023, and the resulting war between Israel and Hamas, a significant and observable rise in contemporary antisemitism has manifested in the extreme political left. Influenced by multiple sources, including sources firmly outside of the political left, it is often centered on opposition to the State of Israel, sometimes because of certain policies and sometimes its right to exist at all. Students review the *Brief History of Israel* handout if necessary.²

5. The handout, *The Through Lines of Antisemitism*, is distributed and students review the directions. In small groups, they prepare for the exercise by replicating the chart from the handout on large sheets of chart paper. They then proceed as follows:

- a. Section 1 – Historical Survey: Small groups are assigned at least one of the three sources in the handout, *Antisemitism That Finds Common Cause With the Extreme Left*, which tracks antisemitism from the fundamentalist, extremist Arab world (known as “Islamist antisemitism”) as well as the historic roots of antisemitism in the former Soviet Union and in the Civil Rights Movement, that have found common cause with the Extreme Left in the United States.
- b. Section 2 – Contemporary Examples: Small groups are assigned at least one case study from the *Modern Examples of Antisemitism That Find Common Cause with the Extreme Left*, which focuses on modern-day examples of antisemitism. As students review, they add notes to their chart, paying attention to the ways in which the contemporary manifestations are similar to and distinct from the historical case studies.

6. When groups have finished, they post their charts so that they are visible to the whole class. Volunteers share back or highlight significant facts or ideas from the sources. The following questions are discussed:

- What are some myths and tropes from the past that have been adapted into the modern progressive movement? Cite specific sources that demonstrate a throughline of antisemitism from its historic roots to a modern example.
- How have language, ideologies, and movements of the past been manipulated to foment antisemitic beliefs today?
- In what ways has the State of Israel become a target, and how are accusations against it used to promote antisemitic ideas?
- How does the criteria of Double Standards help explain why so much attention is given to the policies of the government of Israel?
- How do these dangerous ideologies that rely on antisemitism threaten and harm American society and Americans?

² The International Holocaust Remembrance Alliance (IHRA) adopted a non-legally binding working definition of antisemitism in 2016 that condemns many of the anti-Zionist examples of this lesson as antisemitic. See [here](#) for more information.

7 Students watch the testimony of **Liron Velleman (Clip #92, 1:31:55 - 1:33:03, 1:33:40 - 1:34:12) (bio)** and the interview with **Dr. Dave Rich (Clip #16, 15:36 - 18:16) (bio)**. They discuss some or all of the following questions:

- How has Holocaust language been manipulated to promote antisemitism? Why do you think that is?
- What are some of the myths and tropes Liron and Dave mention? Connect them to the ***Antisemitism That Finds Common Cause with the Left*** document and examples you have studied so far. Why do you think these conspiracy theories continue to be recycled, especially among the political left?
- Dave talks about the double hit that occurs when an antisemitic statement is defended even after the offender is alerted of its antisemitism. Why is this harmful to Jews? To the larger society?
- Why do you think antisemitic language has become more socially acceptable? How does this threaten a safe and stable democratic society for all people?

8 Students reflect on the sources examined from the far right, far left, and Islamist antisemites which have become increasingly normalized throughout America, regardless of where one is on the political spectrum. Students view the interview with **Dr. Dave Rich (Clip #37, 36:06 - 38:15) (bio)** who discusses research from Britain that examined antisemitic attitudes from the left, right, and throughout the political spectrum. Students discuss some or all of the following questions:¹

- How has Holocaust language been manipulated to promote antisemitism? Why do you think that is?
- What are some of the myths and tropes Liron and Dave mention? Connect them to the ***Antisemitism That Finds Common Cause with the Left*** document and examples you have studied so far. Why do you think these conspiracy theories continue to be recycled, especially among the political left?
- Dave talks about the double hit that occurs when an antisemitic statement is defended even after the offender is alerted of its antisemitism. Why is this harmful to Jews? To the larger society?
- Why do you think antisemitic language has become more socially acceptable? How does this threaten a safe and stable democratic society for all people?

PART THREE: WHAT IS THE RELATIONSHIP BETWEEN HOLOCAUST DENIAL AND DISTORTION AND ANTISEMITISM?

9 Students view the testimony of **Mohammed Dajani Daoudi (Clip 130, 2:09:00 - 2:12:56) (bio)** and discuss the following questions:

- How was the Holocaust taught to Mohammed when he was in Lebanon?
- According to the Arab education Mohammed received in Lebanon, what was the purpose of the Holocaust? How is this a form of Holocaust denial? Why is this antisemitic?
- What is the relationship to the education Mohammed received in Lebanon about the Holocaust and the Holocaust inversion you have seen in Part Two of this lesson?
- Why is it important to learn about the Holocaust? How can understanding the history of the Holocaust help combat antisemitism?

¹ Although Dr. Dave Rich discusses research from Britain in 2017, similar evidence has been reported recently in the United States by ADL's Center on Antisemitism Research in their study: [Antisemitic Attitudes in America](#).

10 Students define the words denial (the action of declaring something to be untrue), distortion (the action of giving a misleading account or impression), and inversion (the reversal of relationship). The handout, ***Holocaust Denial, Distortion, and Inversion*** is distributed and reviewed as a class. Students learn that denial, distortion, trivialization, and inversion of the Holocaust and of Jewish victimhood are often features of contemporary antisemitism.

11 Students view the video, ***Holocaust Denial, Explained***, from the **[United States Holocaust Memorial Museum](#)**. They review the biographical information and testimonies of **Lillian Eckstein (bio)** and **Felix Sparks (bio)**. Students note the emotions of the interviewees, key words, and phrases that stand out to them, and thoughts and questions that come up as they listen. They discuss some or all of the following questions:

- Why do people deny, distort, and trivialize the Holocaust?
- How are Holocaust denial, distortion, and trivialization a form of antisemitism?
- How is the Holocaust used and manipulated as a weapon of antisemitism?
- Why might some people be influenced by the ideas of Holocaust deniers?
- Felix Sparks says he will fight the “stupidity and viciousness” of Holocaust denial to his “last breath.” What are some ways you can stand up to this form of antisemitism when you encounter it?

12 Students create a “found poem” using the notes they took in response to the videos. To accomplish this, they choose at least ten key words and phrases from their notes that most relate to the supporting question. They write each word or phrase on a separate slip of paper and arrange the slips into a poem that answers the supporting question and communicates their point of view. When students finish, they silently exchange their poems with peers in groups of three and attach written comments to one another’s work using sticky notes.

ESTIMATED COMPLETION TIME: 150-180 MINUTES