



## Handout: What is Antisemitism

Antisemitism is discrimination against Jews, violence against Jews, or targeting of Jews because they are Jewish. Stereotypes of Jews are also manifestations of antisemitism.

Antisemitism, like other injustices, has distinct characteristics, while also connecting to and intersecting with other systems of oppression. Antisemitism—as with all forms of racism— is incompatible with collective liberation.

### Antisemitism in historical context

Antisemitism is **historically contextual**, situated amidst interrelated conditions and struggles. That is, antisemitism interacts with specific political, social, and economic forces, as well as with different targets of systemic violence and oppression. When looking at Jewish experience, the complexity of Jewish life, and the reality of antisemitism in different locations, context is critical.

Understanding this helps clarify that the work of dismantling antisemitism will always be an inextricable part of struggling for more just societies, and that Jews—like all people— will find safety, liberation, and dignity alongside their neighbors in societies where everyone is afforded security, belonging, and freedom.

This is distinct from situating antisemitism as **eternal**, as a natural phenomenon, and in isolation from other forms of oppression. An eternalist perspective puts forth that antisemitism is a given, is never-ending, can't be understood, and can't be stopped. This perspective sees Jews as always under threat—it is “us” versus “them.”

### **Eternalist Perspective:**

*“[t]here has been no hatred in Western Christian civilization more persistent and enduring than that directed against the Jews...”*

- Robert Wistrich, *Demonizing the Other*

### **Historical perspective:**

*“The assumption that occurrences such as blood libel charges meant the same thing in twelfth-century England as they do in the modern Middle East simply does not make sense. What has endured are persisting myths, images, tropes, or fantasies about Jews developed over the long history of Christian anti-Judaism. But these representations are reworked in different ways in different periods to serve different ends....”*

- Jonathan Judaken, AHR Roundtable

*“If one accepts antisemitism to be eternal, and not a consequence of social or historical factors, then it is a fact of life that will forever push Jewish people into defensive postures. It will make us more nationalist, more reactionary, more militaristic, and more closed off from the rest of the world.”*

-Barry Trachtenberg, “Deborah Lipstadt vs. “The Oldest Hatred”

These different understandings not only impact how we see antisemitism, but also how we think about responding to it—that is, distinct from, or as part of and connected to other struggles against oppression.

As we consider what antisemitism is, we find it useful to understand the uniqueness and commonalities of different forms of racism, their connections and intersections, and why we do not look at antisemitism in isolation.

*“As I see it, there is a general logic of racism (and of Othering in general), which applies across the board, and a specific logic that applies with each particular kind of racism/Othering. To put it another way: every form of racism (and of Othering) has unique features, but they all have certain things in common. (They can also, of course, overlap, but that’s a different point.) Thus, to understand any given kind of racism (such as antisemitism), it is necessary both to bring that ‘dot’ into focus in its own*

*right and to join it with the other 'dots.'"*

-Brian Klug, *The Logic of an Illusion*, at *The Roots of Prejudice: Philosophy and Psychoanalysis International Conference*, The Anna Freud Centre

In order for anti-democratic state structures to maintain power and control, including of resources and capital, groups are targeted that are seen as a threat to the dominant ideology. In many instances, antisemitism, like Islamophobia, and other forms of oppression and racism, have been employed to otherize and to gate-keep and as a means of consolidating and exercising power.

## **Diverse Jewish experiences**

In our exploration of antisemitism, we are deeply aware of the breadth and depth of Jewish experience. We honor the richness of Jewish experiences and histories across the globe and understand that antisemitism has operated differently in a range of geographies and distinct contexts.

Jews reflect racially, ethnically, economically, and culturally diverse communities, experiences, and histories and have lived throughout the globe for centuries. There are white Jews, Jews of color, and Jews from different parts of the world, including Africa, Asia, Europe, Latin America, and the Middle East.

With an understanding that Jews are multi-ethnic and multiracial, discussions of antisemitism must not only focus on the experiences of white Ashkenazi Jews.

*"...when talking about antisemitism, one cannot focus only on the experiences of white, Ashkenazi Jews. To do so is to contribute to the ongoing erasure of Mizrahi Jews in Jewish communities...and to perpetuate the idea that European Jewish history is the history of all Jews."*

-Tallie Ben Daniel, *"Antisemitism, Palestine, and the Mizrahi Question"*

When discussing definitions of antisemitism, it is important to understand the specificity of each historical context in which it arises. That includes the time, place, and conditions of our society today.

*"...in fact, far more important than a single definition of antisemitism would be an account of its history and its various forms; the language, the attitudes, actions and*

practices, the policies. That is the only way to know what it is, and that means we cannot expect that a single definition will hold for all cases.”

– Judith Butler, “On Antisemitism”

This is particularly important, given that definitions have emerged at different times and places and in response to particular phenomena and political realities.

*“True, historians differ over a precise definition– quite understandably, given that the term was coined only in the 1870s, and was then used to describe varieties of Jew-hatred going back two thousand years. But, I would argue that, in practice, during the first three or four decades after the Second World War, antisemitism was commonly linked to the classical stereotypical images of “the Jew” forged in Christendom, adopted and adapted by antisemitic political groups in the nineteenth century and further developed by race-theorists and the Nazis in the twentieth century.”*

– Antony Lerman, *Antisemitism Redefined*, in *On Antisemitism*.

## Contemporary Antisemitism

**Contemporary antisemitism emerged out of the project of Western nation-state building. European Christian antisemitism, as well as Islamophobia and other forms of racism, were among the foundational elements that othered and dehumanized all who were deemed "outside" the white Christian nation. Along with other racist “scientific” and taxonomic classifications from the 17th century and beyond, Jews were categorized as a race.**

*“The Crusades, which helped inaugurate “Europe” by reconquering the Mediterranean area, coincided with antisemitic pogroms. Christian Europe, on the verge of the conquest of the New World, indulged in fears of diverse “agents of Satan”--women, witches, heretics, Jews and Muslims--but antisemitism formed an especially integral part of the European ideological system then projected outwards against Europe’s external others--the indigenous peoples of Africa and the Americas.”*

– Ella Shohat, “Rethinking Jews and Muslims: Quincentennial Reflections.”

**Racial categories are social constructs. This is true for all people, including for Jews of different racial and ethnic backgrounds. Anti-Jewish sentiment, discrimination, and partiality against Jews has been situated within a hierarchical racial system. Antisemitism today, while rooted in this history, goes beyond early notions of biological racism to a range of attitudes and actions:**

“Thus, the term ‘antisemitism’ was initially associated with a quite specific phenomenon: a biologically-based conception of Jewish identity and a political movement rooted in a racial ideology...Today, in its usual, everyday employment, ‘antisemitism’ covers a broad spectrum of attitudes and actions that target Jews, whether those actions and attitudes are based in biological racism or not.”

– Brian Klug "What do we mean when we say 'antisemitism'?" *Antisemitism in Europe Today: the Phenomena, the Conflicts*; Jewish Museum Berlin

“Yet it’s never been clearer that antisemitism is not exceptional: it is part of larger forces of racism, nativism, and Christian hegemony.” –Mark Tseng-Putterman, *What Anti-Semitism Is—And What It Is Not*

## Manifestations of Antisemitism

We look at antisemitism in relation to other forms and histories of racism, violence, and oppression and we also look at its unique features. **Christian Hegemony**,<sup>1</sup> a system and belief that privileges and benefits Christianity and Christians, it is seen as the default religion, internalized in culture, values, ethics, and customs. It has historically impacted and marginalized religious minorities, including Jews, in different ways. At times, manifestations of, for example, anti-Jewish and anti-Muslim and anti-Hindu attitudes and behavior have intersected with racist ideologies and practices.

An extreme manifestation of antisemitism today is **white nationalist violence**. We have witnessed horrifying white nationalist violence directed at many of our communities– against immigrants, Muslims, Black, Queer and trans people, and Jews. Antisemitic white nationalist violence has included, among others, the 2018 murder of 11 congregants at the Tree of Life Synagogue in Pittsburgh; the 2019 shootings at a Chabad synagogue in Poway, California; antisemitic hate groups and rallies; the desecration of cemeteries; and bomb threats in Jewish spaces.<sup>2</sup>

White nationalists propagate **antisemitic conspiracy theories** that promote notions

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<sup>1</sup> Small, J. L., Edwards, S., Sayers, M. R., Bowling, R. L., Collett, J. R., Kaur-Colbert, S., & Nielsen, J. C. (2022). Recognizing Christian hegemony as broader than Christian privilege: Critical religion scholars respond to Glanzer. *Religion & Education*, 49(4), 355–373. <https://doi.org/10.1080/15507394.2022.2139996>

<sup>2</sup> Among the many examples of White nationalist violence: Ratskoff, B. (2019, May 2). White supremacy and Christian hegemony came to a head in Poway violence. *Truthout*. <https://truthout.org/articles/white-supremacy-and-christian-hegemony-came-to-a-head-in-poway-violence>

of Jewish power and control and of Jews as untrustworthy and sinister. They also push the view that “white identity” is being erased as a result of a ‘great replacement’ of people from other cultures and backgrounds. This includes Jews, but is also considered to be caused by Jews.<sup>3</sup>

We also see the use of tropes and stereotypes which have been used historically, and continue to be used in different ways that harm or mischaracterize Jews. We have seen the many ways that these characterizations of Jews continue to be articulated and used loosely in different settings and can take different forms, for instance in cartoons and images that recirculate in media, imagination, and discourse.

*“...at the heart of antisemitism is the negative stereotype of ‘the Jew’: sinister, cunning, parasitic, money-grubbing, mysteriously powerful, and so on. Antisemitism consists in projecting this figure onto individual Jews, Jewish groups, and Jewish institutions.”*

– Brian Klug, UCU Challenging Antisemitism Pamphlet

**Tropes and stereotypes** impact different communities<sup>4</sup> and those that are antisemitic falsely create an image of “THE JEW”—for example, believing that all Jews reflect the tropes and stereotypes as described in the Klug quote. An example of a contemporary trope is the belief that George Soros is an evil “puppet master” who wields outsized financial and political control.

While some certainly draw upon tropes intentionally, some statements or images may unintentionally invoke tropes, or some tropes may be recirculated without an understanding of their histories.

Here are just a couple of examples of tropes:

**Greed:** the false beliefs that all Jews are rich, good with money, stingy, cheap, selfish, or obsessed with gaining more wealth. This stereotype originated in the Middle Ages, when restrictions were placed on Jewish occupations. Money lending and tax

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<sup>3</sup>Vasquez, T., & Lorber, B. (2019, October 26). A year after the Tree of Life shooting, anti-Semitism and anti-immigrant racism thrive. *YES!*

<https://www.yesmagazine.org/opinion/2019/10/26/tree-of-life-shooting-anti-semitism-immigrants-racism>.

<sup>4</sup> We appreciate Mark Tseng-Putterman’s analysis here “...the Yellow Peril tropes have galvanized anti-Asian racism—from immigration exclusion to U.S. military intervention—since at least the turn of the twentieth century. These mechanics also invoke Asians as a powerful, external threat... The same can be said for “clash of civilizations” rhetoric about Muslims and the so-called “East” that is central to the “War on Terror.”

<https://www.bostonreview.net/articles/donna-nevel-mark-tseng-putterman-what-anti-semitism-is/>

collection were among the available occupations for many Jews.<sup>5</sup>

**Global Domination:** a false conspiracy narrative that Jews are global puppet masters who control the media, the economy, and governments. This trope originated in The Protocols of the Elders of Zion, which claimed to document the secret meeting of powerful Jews conspiring to take over the world. This trope circulates today with use of terms like “Globalists” and “The Rothschilds.”

We have seen how Trump and MAGA Republicans promote antisemitism through the use of these conspiracy theories and tropes: Among many others, Trump’s comments about Jews and money (“The only kind of people I want counting my money are short guys that wear yarmulkes every day.”<sup>6</sup>); Chair of the House Republican Conference, Elise Stefanik, using the great replacement theory in her campaign ads; George Soros depicted as an evil puppet master who wields outsized financial and political control<sup>7</sup>.

Connected to tropes and stereotypes is **philosemitism**,<sup>8</sup> which, while suggesting a love for Jews, actually reflects, in many key ways, an “othering” of Jews. A related example is that the Christian Zionist movement, which is a strong and reactionary advocate of the State of Israel, puts forth the false claims that Israel equals all Jews and that support for Israel is the same as love for Jews. In actuality, that “love” is rooted in the view that once Jews are in “their homeland,” the Second Coming of Jesus can happen.<sup>9</sup> That is, Christian Zionists believe Jewish conquest of historic Palestine is a necessary precondition for the rapture and the return of Christ. They also hold that when this happens, non-Christians will either convert to Christianity or perish.

These tropes as well as other examples reflect Jews being “othered” and considered as outsiders in their societies— along the lines of race, class, nation, or religion.

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<sup>5</sup> We look to historians and writers such as Massoud Hayoun's *When We Were Arabs* <https://thenewpress.com/books/when-we-were-arabs>, and Razack, S. H. (2022). *Nothing has to make sense: Upholding white supremacy through anti-Muslim racism*. University of Minnesota Press to help ground our understanding of this time.

<sup>6</sup> Congressional Record, 2016

<https://www.congress.gov/congressional-record/volume-162/issue-145/senate-section/article/S6073-2>

<sup>7</sup> We also understand how tropes can be misused and look to Antony Lerman’s book Lerman, A. (2022). *Whatever happened to antisemitism?: Redefinition and the myth of the “collective Jew.”* Pluto Press.

<sup>8</sup> Karp, J., & Sutcliffe, A. (2011). *Philosemitism in history*. Cambridge University Press.

Or Lentin, A. (2021, December 16). Anti-antisemitism: A proxy war on racism.

<https://www.alanalentin.net/2021/12/16/anti-antisemitism-a-proxy-war-on-racism>

<sup>9</sup> <https://cufi.org/>

While we highlight places and ideologies that we believe antisemitism is most present and concerning, we also recognize that antisemitic attitudes and views, like all forms and manifestations of injustice, can show up among anyone who lives in our society.

## **Conclusion**

Antisemitism is incompatible with movements for collective liberation. Particularly at this time, when false accusations of antisemitism are being wielded to destroy movements for justice, we need to be clear about what antisemitism is, what it isn't, and the importance of building together as part of collective movements for justice. With real threats toward so many of our communities and with rising fascist and far-right movements, we need to learn together, challenge and push ourselves, and make sure our organizing is rooted in a liberatory framework that is truly devoted to keeping one another safe and insuring true dignity, freedom, and justice for all our communities.

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The "Curriculum on Antisemitism from a Framework of Collective Liberation" is devoted to understanding and challenging antisemitism grounded in a deep commitment to justice and dignity for all people. The sessions are geared toward universities and middle schools/high schools, social justice and community-based organizations, foundations, religious and cultural institutions, and others. PARCEO has created a series of hand-outs drawn from the curriculum.

*This hand-out is excerpted from the curriculum.*

PARCEO is available to facilitate 1, 2, and 4 hour workshops or classes in your school or community. Please reach out to us at [antisemitismcurriculum@gmail.com](mailto:antisemitismcurriculum@gmail.com).