

Anti-Semitism – What, Where *and* Why?

When Tanenbaum’s *Peacemakers in Action*—religious individuals who risk their lives to stop armed conflicts—assessed their local community’s attitudes toward different religious groups in 2011, each reached the same conclusion. The most unfavorably viewed faith group across their 23 communities was the Jews. While other religious groups were targeted and suffering from great violence, the most vilified group was the Jewish people. In this assessment, the *Peacemakers* thus confirmed that anti-Semitism is a worldwide phenomenon, and one that remains a dangerous and persistent hatred.

With full recognition of the many individuals and organizations providing information on anti-Semitism, ideas on how to counter it, and data on how to analyze it, Tanenbaum shares the following fact sheet. We look at what anti-Semitism is, how it evolved, and whether it’s unique.

QUESTION I – What is Anti-Semitism? And What Isn’t?

Defining precisely what is—and is not—anti-Semitism is challenging. It may be helpful to start with an official definition, adopted in 2016, by the 31 member states of the International Holocaust Remembrance Alliance (IHRA), which is also referenced by the U.S. State Department and the United Nations:

“Antisemitism is a certain perception of Jews, which may be expressed as hatred toward Jews. Rhetorical and physical manifestations of antisemitism are directed toward or about Jewish individuals and/or their property, toward Jewish community institutions and religious facilities.”
[\[HolocaustRemembrance.com\]](https://www.holocaustremembrance.com)

Most modern definitions of anti-Semitism emphasize that it includes both hostile stereotypes and violent actions. For example, the ADL defines anti-Semitism as, “The belief or behavior hostile toward Jews just because they are Jewish.” [\[ADL\]](#)

Anti-Semitism’s Many Faces

Anti-Semitism takes many forms, including the following:

- Stereotypical and prejudiced views towards Jews [\[The Conversation\]](#)
- Religious teachings that proclaim the inferior and/or malevolent nature of Jews [\[The Christian Century\]](#)
- Conspiracy theories about Jewish wealth and power, including their intention to control societal institutions (e.g, the media) and even the entire world [\[My Jewish Learning\]](#)
- Scapegoating of Jews for larger societal problem [\[The Jerusalem Post\]](#)
- Verbal and/or physical violence targeting Jews or persons perceived to be Jewish because of their Jewish identity [\[The Atlantic\]](#)

- Vandalizing/destruction of Jewish-identified spaces [[The New York Jewish Week](#)]
- Political efforts to isolate, oppress, segregate into ghettos, incarcerate or otherwise injure Jews [[Facing History](#)]
- Requiring distinguishing clothes or symbols to publicly mark who is a Jew [[Holocaust Memorial Center](#)]
- Quotas in schools, universities, businesses that/ restrict Jewish participation [[The Holocaust Encyclopedia](#)]
- Accusing Jews of inventing or exaggerating the Holocaust [[Southern Poverty Law Center](#)]
- Micro-aggressions (e.g., Jew jokes, referencing/making analogies to stereotypical tropes) [[Seton Hall University](#)]

Current Debates: Where to draw the line?

In addition to the varying ways of defining and identifying this form of bigotry, there are societal debates about whether different acts or words should be interpreted as anti-Semitic. In this regard, we take note of the recent debates on social media over comments made by Representative Ilhan Omar (D–MN) and whether her words intended to draw on anti-Semitic tropes or were stating policy positions with careless but unintentional word choices. [[Tanenbaum](#)] We also note that many other statements made by government officials in recent years, including Representative Steven King (R–IA), have been documented that are overtly anti-Semitic and did not result in comparable media storms.

Regardless of the different ways in which anti-Semitism is defined, spelled, and expressed, one thing is certain—anti-Semitism is deeply hurtful and has dangerously harmful social consequences.

The Term Anti-Semitism

Though the term *anti-Semitism* is used to apply to Jewish people, it is technically a misnomer, because *Semite* is not synonymous with Jew. Rather, it refers to anyone who speaks a Semitic language, including Arabic, Hebrew, Aramaic, and other languages from the Middle East and Northern Africa. [[Encyclopedia Britannica](#)] Despite this technicality, the term is used to apply to Jewish people and has persisted over time, albeit with controversy.

Interestingly, the actual term “anti-Semitism” first emerged in late-19th-century Germany (though it is now applied to acts that occurred over centuries). At the time, Germany was only recently unified into a single nation. Though Jews made up only 1% of the total population, they still faced discriminatory treatment (e.g., being barred from certain jobs in academia and government).

Notwithstanding such institutionalized discrimination, many Jews in Germany still managed to achieve prominence in fields such as medicine, media, finance, and the arts. As a result of their increasing influence, German Jews were viewed by some fellow citizens as a threat and became scapegoats who were blamed for negative societal changes. A German journalist and political agitator named Wilhelm Marr stoked these sentiments and in 1879, he first used the term *Antisemitismus* to denote opposition to the Jewish people; he falsely claimed Jews were a dangerous racial minority conspiring to take over the state and that they were responsible for their societal ills. Galvanizing supporters in a shared “cause” defined by targeting a specific group with hate and blame is thus a historical pattern—and one that the Jewish community has experienced in multiple places and times.

QUESTION II – How Did Anti-Semitism Start?

Anti-Semitism is an historic hatred with dire consequences. In ancient times, the Jews believed in monotheism when others did not share that world view. That made them different--and a target.

Rooted in Ancient Times

Anti-Semitism dates all the way back to the pre-Christian era when the Hebrews (early Jews) were viewed as untrustworthy outsiders because of their devotion to one G-d and their resistance to polytheism, emperor-worship, and the appropriation of their lands. Many modern stereotypes of Jews were spawned during these times, as rulers scapegoated and demonized them for political gain. Cicero, the skilled Roman orator, insulted the Jewish religion as “barbara superstitio,” which meant that its followers were both sacrilegious and unpatriotic. [[The Public Medievalist](#)]

From the Onset of Christianity

The earliest Christians were Jews who recognized Jesus as their long-awaited messiah. When many of their fellow Jews rejected that belief, the early church separated from its Jewish roots and began a teaching and preaching tradition later characterized as the *teaching of contempt*, in which Jews were depicted as inherently sinful, spiritually blind, and responsible for the death of Christ. When Christianity became the official religion of the Roman Empire in the 3rd Century, these attitudes were wedded to the power of the state; the Jews’ refusal to believe in the saving grace of Jesus was viewed as undermining Roman rule and a threat to the survival of Christianity. [[ADL](#)] The result was a long period during which Jews faced discrimination, persecution and expulsion.

Into The Middle Ages

At the beginning of the Middle Ages, anti-Jewish sentiment was institutionalized and further solidified.

A contributing factor were the Passion Plays, which dramatized the death of Jesus and stirred anti-Jewish sentiment. First documented in the 12th century, the most well-known of these plays is the elaborate, multi-hour production known as the Oberammergau Passion Play. Since its first staging in 1634, it has been performed, with only a few exceptions, every 10 years in the German village of Oberammergau. Though some adjustments have been made to the original depictions, over most of its history, it included anti-Jewish tropes and stereotypes including that Jews were responsible for Jesus’ death, which often fueled violence against Jews and anti-Semitic slurs that they were “Christ Killers”. [[BBC](#)]

In addition, across Europe, Jews were barred from holding government positions, marrying Christians, or serving as witnesses against Christians in court. [[ADL](#)] As the Middle Ages progressed, additional restrictions were imposed, and many Jews were banished from their home countries. In 1290, for example, King Edward I issued an Edict of Expulsion against the Jews of England; they weren’t allowed to return until the mid-1600s. [[British Library](#)] Similar expulsions took place in France (14th century), Germany (1350s), Portugal (1496), Provence (1512) and then the papal States (1569). [[Encyclopedia Britannica](#)]

In 1492, King Ferdinand and Queen Isabella issued the Alhambra Decree, which forced the Jews of Spain to convert to Christianity or be expelled. [[SephardicStudies.org](#)] The Inquisition was conducted by a Roman Catholic tribunal that inflicted cruel punishments (including burning at the stake) on so-called “heretics” who deviated from Church doctrine. In addition to targeting Jews, Jewish converts were also targeted, often because they had not truly adopted Christianity. [[Jewish Virtual Library](#)]

These injustices coincided with escalation of anti-Jewish mythology. “Blood libel” alleged that Jews murdered non-Jewish, usually Christian, children and used their blood for satanic rituals, such as baking it into Passover Matzoh. The blood libel myth grew during the Middle Ages, especially after the First Crusade in the 12th Century, and has repeatedly been cited to “justify” murders of Jews, pogroms, and slaughters of entire Jewish communities. Despite a complete lack of evidence, this myth has reoccurred throughout history and even persisted into modern times. [[USHMM](#)]

Jews were also wrongly blamed for poisoning wells and causing the Bubonic Plague of the mid-14th Century, which killed one-third of Europe’s population. They made for easy scapegoats not only due to the preexisting stereotypes but also because many lived in ghettos, had rituals of cleanliness, and therefore were not equally infected by the plague. In Germany and Austria, an estimated 100,000 Jews were burned alive during this time. [[ADL](#)]

Misconceptions and other damaging stereotypes about Jews developed as members of the community became involved with the business of lending money. During the Middle Ages, Jews faced limited options for earning a living. Institutionalized anti-Semitism meant they could not own land, hold government positions or practice their trades. And since Christianity forbade their followers from loaning money with interest, Jews often filled that vacuum. In contrast to the more prestigious label of “banker” used today, the term “money lender” took on a pejorative connotation, synonymous with usury, or loans that unfairly enrich the lender. From this, the stereotype of Jews being greedy emerged.

More Modern Times

Scapegoating Jews often triggered pogroms targeting Jews (riots and massacres) that destroyed Jewish homes, businesses, and lives. In Russian, the word pogrom means, “to wreak havoc.” Beginning in the 1880’s, pogroms began occurring frequently in the Russian Empire. Russian authorities often led or spurred them on, and they were sanctioned by the Czar’s anti-Semitic policies. The Kishinev pogrom in 1903, which began when a newspaper falsely blamed the death of two children on Jews, led to 49 murders, numerous rapes, and hundreds of ruined homes. [[History.com](#)]

That same year, Russia witnessed the publication of the *Protocols of the Elders of Zion*, fake minutes from fake meetings of Jewish leaders who purportedly outlined a secret plan to take over the world. The *Protocols* were translated into multiple languages and distributed internationally in the early 20th Century. [[USHMM](#)] Henry Ford, titan of the auto industry, republished them in the U.S. along with a series of anti-Semitic articles.¹ The series was eventually compiled into a book that sold over a half million copies and won praise from Adolf Hitler. [[Facing History](#)]

Anti-Semitism reached a peak during the Holocaust from 1933-1945. Hitler cultivated support for the Third Reich by capitalizing on old, embedded myths to stoke fears that Jews would taint the superior Aryan race. Once again, Jews served as convenient scapegoats for a major crisis: Germany’s humiliation and financial ruin after World War I. The anti-Semitic positioning by Hitler and the Nazi party fueled discrimination and violence against Jews, and ultimately facilitated genocide. [[ADL](#)]

The Holocaust was documented in ways unlike any prior global genocide and shocked the world. In its aftermath, outward expressions of anti-Semitism diminished but anti-Semitism itself never went away. As the lessons of the Holocaust risk fading into the past, anti-Semitism and many of the fake news tropes embedded within it are increasingly visible across the globe, including from extremist movements (e.g., [White Supremacy](#)), and the adoption in Arab countries of classic Christian European anti-Semitism. [[AJC](#)]

¹ https://www.washingtonpost.com/outlook/2019/02/08/why-ford-needs-grapple-with-its-founders-anti-semitism/?utm_term=.65e7f0e94160

The pattern of defaming and scapegoating a group as *other*, which began thousands of years ago and is a theme throughout Jewish history, is again emerging with force. Anti-Semitism is again rearing its ugly head but so is hate against others including Muslims, Baha'is, Christians, Sikh's, Buddhists and people with a range of different identities.

QUESTION III – Is Anti-Semitism unique? How? And Why?

Countless religious and ethnic groups have suffered prejudice and discrimination throughout history; they have been scapegoated, othered, massacred. Yet, in some ways, anti-Semitism is unique. For one thing, anti-Semitism spans time, place, and ideology. It has been documented since ancient times through the present day across all seven continents, and perpetrated by diverse groups within a range of religions and political beliefs (e.g., from Communism on the far left to Nazism on the far right).

Secondly, anti-Semitism is often accompanied by false accusations of malevolent Jewish power and plots to take over the world. Anti-Semites have often raised the specter of Jewish control over the organs of power, such as the media, banking, and government. Hitler claimed that he was protecting the world from Jewish domination and that the Jews wanted to destroy Germany. Ayatollah Khomeini, the religious leader of the 1979 Iranian Revolution, had a similar refrain. And when white supremacists marched on Charlottesville, Virginia in 2017, they were still chanting, “Jews won’t replace us.” [[Pittsburgh Post-Gazette](#)]

Third, while many other countries identify with particular religions, Israel is the only nation in the world that identifies as Jewish. When someone criticizes Israel, questions are often raised. Is the speaker criticizing a nation-state, just as they would criticize any another? Or are they conflating the country of Israel with Jews and Jewishness and in some way perpetrating anti-Semitic sentiments? Criticism of the state, the actions of the Israeli government, and its policies are not *per se* the same as anti-Semitism, though they can involve anti-Semitic attitudes. [[Christian Science Monitor](#)] The challenge is that whether a critique of Israel does, in fact, involve anti-Semitism is frequently debated and often triggers heated disagreement.

Assessing Whether Something is Anti-Semitic

Historically, anti-Semitism was recognizable as something targeting Jewish people and/or the Jewish religion. Today, the issue is complexified by the question of Israel, and whether particular critiques of it are anti-Semitic or legitimate criticism that is being stifled by claims of anti-Semitism. Suggestions on how to assess a critique of the state have been offered but not universally accepted.

One such approach is whether a critique is used to justify hostility or discrimination against any and all Jews. Natan Sharansky, a dissident from the former Soviet Union, offers another approach known as the “three Ds test,” which assesses whether statements or positions about Israel do one or more of the following:

- Does it delegitimize the right of the state of Israel to exist?
- Does it hold Israel to a double standard not required from other democratic states?
- Does it otherwise demonize Israel because it is a Jewish state?

[[See JCPA for Sharansky’s fuller explanation of the three D’s](#)]

The 3D test is widely cited and widely criticized. For example, it has been incorporated into legislation on anti-Semitism in different places around the world. [[Future Learn](#)] In contrast, critics of the test note concerns including that it is used to suppress debate and political criticism of Israel, is vague, and subject to interpretation. For example, critics question how, precisely, does one define demonization of a nation? What if a statement is not thought to be demonizing by the speaker but feels like demonization to the listener?

At this time, there is no consensus on how to navigate the many ways that anti-Semitism and the politics of the State of Israel are entangled. [\[Buttrick\]](#)

Anti-Semitism as a Bellwether

Last but certainly not least, anti-Semitism frequently serves as a bellwether for wider societal trends. It is often referred to as the “canary in the coal mine.” A rise in anti-Semitism typically indicates a rise in stereotyping, demonizing others, more widespread prejudice and hate, as well as a rise in idolatry (attributing superhuman traits to regular people).

Leaders seeking to be idolized often use this superior status to justify oppression against specific groups. Idolatry is the foundation of all anti-Semitism because it flips the desire for absolute power onto the Jews, portraying the victim as the perpetrator and vice versa. [\[Pittsburgh Post-Gazette\]](#)

TAKE-AWAYS

With this resource, we intended to provide a brief overview of a vast and complicated topic. As you’ve just read, there are multiple perspectives on how to define anti-Semitism, and many different ways in which anti-Semitism has emerged as a destructive force throughout history and around the world.

We encourage you to delve deeper into the outside resources referenced above and cited below, as well as others, to learn more about this insidious hatred in all its dimensions and nuances. We hope you’ll consider sharing what you’ve learned with others—with students, friends, family, and community members. In that way, you can help us reduce the prejudice and hate directed at Jews and people from other religious groups with information, education, and understanding.

All of us can be—and need to be—part of the solution.