

What is Antisemitism?

MIRIAM EVE MORA, PH.D., MANAGING DIRECTOR OF THE RAOUL WALLENBERG INSTITUTE AT THE UNIVERSITY OF MICHIGAN

Despite its long and troubling history, **antisemitism** is a term that continues to defy consensus. Its definition is possibly more contested today than ever. This article will explore the history, the contradictions, and complications inherent in antisemitism, and suggest methods for both understanding this complex issue better and presenting it to your students.

In this article, we will explore the difficult and pressing question, “*What is antisemitism?*” while looking at another important question: “What and *whom* are we really studying when we study antisemitism?”

Examining this second question is a challenge that many people face. Jewish history and the history of antisemitism are deeply connected, but they are not the same, and it is important not to confuse them. From the start these are two different stories.

Studying or teaching the history of antisemitism is *not* the same as studying or teaching Jewish history. In fact, it is pointedly the opposite. Antisemitism is the study of how non-Jewish people have held and acted on prejudice against Jewish people over time. Jewish history is the complex and multifaceted story of the Jewish people, spanning over three millennia across diverse geographic regions, cultures, and experiences. It encompasses ancient origins in the Middle East, movements through Europe, Africa, and Asia, and more modern developments in the Americas, Israel, and around the globe. This history is not a single narrative, but a tapestry of varied voices, traditions, and identities shaped by resilience, adaptation, and cultural exchange.

When we teach Jewish history and contemplate antisemitism, we must recognize it in two parts: the ideology of antisemitism (a set of ideas that seeks to legitimize hate against Jewish people, the Jewish religion, Jewish institutions, and even the idea of Judaism itself) and the experiences of the Jews it directly affects (by those acting out the ideology).

Antisemitism, therefore, must be shown as *part* of the larger Jewish experience. If we focus too much on antisemitism we risk turning Jewish history into a story only about suffering. And if we swing too far in the opposite direction, we paint a lovely veneer over a complex human narrative. Neither approach tells the whole story. Like the history of any group of people, Jewish history includes a wide range of experiences: good and bad, celebrations and struggles, progress and setbacks, and yes, hatred, but also love.

Jewish suffering has held a special place in education over the past three quarters of a century since the events of the **Holocaust** and the murder of six million Jews in Nazi occupied Europe. More than half of U.S. states have mandatory Holocaust education legislation (some also mandate instruction on other genocides).¹ For many students, the curriculum addressing the Holocaust in their schools constitutes the entirety of the content presented on Jewish history.² The teaching of Jewish history is often skewed towards the tragic.

For that reason, throughout this volume, you will find vignettes of American Jewish history which offer diverse Jewish stories. Many contain instances of antisemitism, when reactions to it are a part of the Jewish narrative. For the most part, however, the focus is on Jewish life in its unique American manifestation. The quote from Ruth Bader Ginsburg used for the title of this volume references her own family's American transformation. She asked, "What is the difference between a bookkeeper in New York's garment district and a Supreme Court Justice?" And she answered, "Just one generation, my mother's life and mine bear witness. Where else but America could that happen?"

WHERE DOES ANTISEMITISM COME FROM?

Antisemitism, or prejudice against Jews and their ancestors, has existed for thousands of years and has taken different forms throughout history. It began before Christianity, during the Hellenistic period, when some Greek and Egyptian writers spread negative views of Jews. Under Roman rule, Jews were seen as different and resisted worshiping Roman gods, leading to further suspicion and hostility.

As Christianity became dominant in the Western Roman world in the third and fourth centuries CE, antisemitism took on a religious form. Although Jesus was Jewish, early Christians blamed Jews for his death. This idea became deeply rooted in Christian teachings, lasting for centuries, and antisemitism increased dramatically with the rise of Christianity in Europe. During the Middle Ages, Jews were forced into ghettos, denied membership in non-Jewish communities, made to wear visual identifiers, and restricted from many jobs. They were often pushed into moneylending, which led to harmful stereotypes about greed. The **Spanish Inquisition** forced Jews to convert, flee, or face execution. Even after conversion, however, they were often viewed with suspicion for their Jewish ancestry. In addition, **pogroms** (violent attacks on Jewish communities) occurred across Europe.

In the eighteenth and nineteenth centuries, the Enlightenment and revolutions in Europe gave Jews more rights. For example, the *French Declaration of the Rights of Man and of the Citizen* in 1789 declared universal suffrage for all men in France. French Jewish men were included eventually, though it was not written for their benefit.³

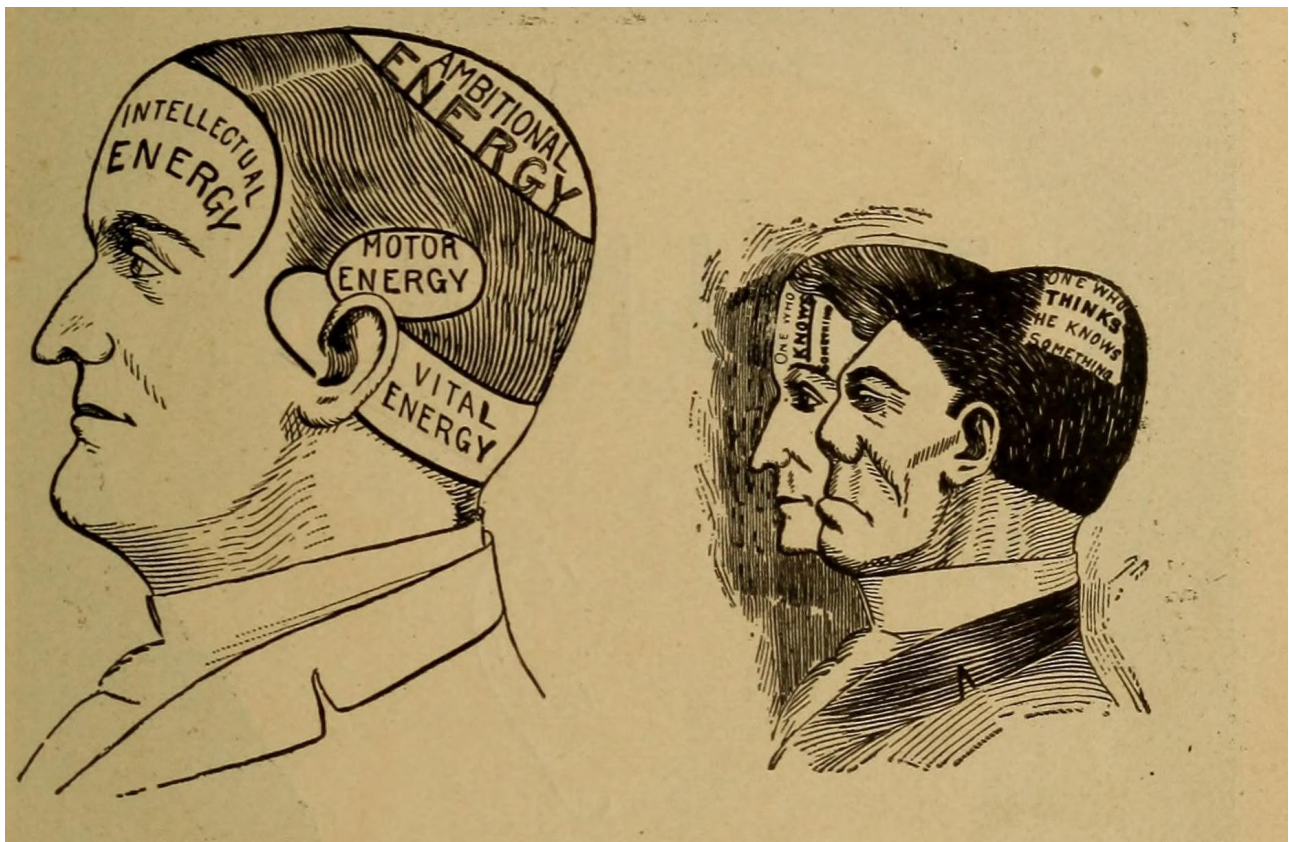
¹ For a helpful map and resource, visit echoesandreflections.org/interactive-map/.

² For a contemporary reflection that addresses the impact of Holocaust curriculum and antisemitism, see the article titled "Is Holocaust Education Making Anti-Semitism Worse?" by writer Dara Horn in the May 2023 issue *The Atlantic*; available at theatlantic.com/magazine/archive/2023/05/holocaust-student-education-jewish-anti-semitism/673488/.

³ For an example of a lesson from National History Day that addresses Enlightenment ideas and their impact on the American, French, and Haitian Revolutions, see *Revolutionary Ideals in Action: Comparing the American, French, and Haitian Revolutions*, available at: nhd.org/en/resources/revolutionary-ideals-in-action-comparing-the-american-french-and-haitian-revolutions/.

Many became successful in professions including medicine, law, and journalism, which sparked jealousy, suspicion, and new forms of antisemitism. Instead of focusing on religious difference as a way of marking Jewish people as different, people began to claim Jews were a separate and dangerous race, in accordance with new ideas of so-called **scientific racism**.⁴ It was these ideas, based on the concept of innate qualities as opposed to learned ones, that helped fuel and justify the Holocaust in the twentieth century.

In the American colonies and later the United States, both Jewish and other European **immigrants** were given more rights and put on equal legal footing with one another. These immigrants carried much of European society to the U.S., including its systems of religion, prejudice, science, and oppression. Among European immigrants, for example, not all pale-skinned ethnicities were considered *white*, and were therefore treated as less desirable citizens. Jews in America still faced social discrimination in schools, clubs, and the military.



In the 1800s, a fake science called phrenology became popular. It claimed that you could learn about a person's character or intelligence by feeling the shape of their skull. People used this idea to justify racism, sexism, and other unfair treatment, pretending it was based on science. Phrenology led to many harmful beliefs and practices. Some books, like Vaught's *Practical Character Reader* (1902) even tried to teach regular people how to judge others based on the bumps on their heads or facial features. This illustration shows where different types of "energy" are located within the head. Today, we know that phrenology is not real science, but it caused a lot of damage. Library of Congress (03018663).

⁴ For a helpful resource on "scientific" racism, see: [ebsco.com/research-starters/science/scientific-racism](https://www.ebsco.com/research-starters/science/scientific-racism).

WHAT'S IN A WORD?

Whiteness is a socially constructed racial category in the United States that has historically defined who is granted full social, political, and cultural belonging. Particularly during periods of mass migration, whiteness functioned as an aspirational and exclusionary ideal (closely tied to nationalism, class, and masculinity) selectively extended to certain immigrant groups to assert dominance and maintain social hierarchies.

During the mass migration period (1880s–1920s), the Jewish population in America grew tremendously. In response, people began to form uniquely American antisemitic fears about replacement and migration, closely tied to the American **Nativist** movement. For the most part, however, Jews in America found unprecedented freedom, safety, and access to the larger society.

WHAT IS ANTISEMITISM AND WHAT IS IT NOT?

Why is there not a universal, or even widely accepted definition of antisemitism? Like other terms where the meaning carries real-world consequences (such as accusing someone in the workplace of misogyny), accusations of antisemitism are rife with feeling and personal injury. In addition, as Miriam Sobre's chapter in this volume shows, Jewish identity is complex and made up of many different experiences. Because of that, the ways people understand prejudice against Jewish people are also varied and complicated.

There is some general agreement about what should be considered the basic level of antisemitism and antisemitic behavior, which we might call *essential* antisemitism.⁵ Essential antisemitism would generally be recognized by all Jews as antisemitic, largely because it assumes (on the part of the perpetrator) that all Jews are essentially the same. For example, in 2018, a shooter entered the Tree of Life **synagogue** in Pittsburgh, shouting “All Jews must die,” and fired indiscriminately at those in prayer. This is a clear example of essential antisemitism.

Still, much can fall into the category of essential antisemitism without the intensity of the Tree of Life shooting example. Many of the small, everyday events experienced by Jews in the United States would easily be categorized as antisemitic, even if the intention was not malicious. For example, upon meeting a Jewish person for the first time, a person might ask (as happened to this author personally), “I feel foolish asking, but where are your horns?” This was not intended to hurt me, but a result of being born into and raised in a modern society in which antisemitism is woven into the very fabric. There are many such falsehoods: that Jews have horns or discolored fingernails, that Jews are good with money or are inherently clever, or that Jews have certain noses, that people may believe without malice until they are taught (or have experienced) the reality that disproves them.

By contrast, actions and rhetoric that make clear distinctions between which Jews are “bad,” and therefore on the receiving end of the hatred or violence, and which are acceptable or “good,” are much more contentious.

⁵ A similar concept of this division (between consensus and selective antisemitism) is clearly illustrated by Keith Kahn-Harris, *Strange Hate: Antisemitism, Racism and the Limits of Diversity* (Watkins Media Limited, 2019).

Jews are often split as to whether or not the aggression is indeed antisemitism. This is where the definition itself (and the question of what antisemitism is) becomes so contentious, as it is often Jews who are engaging in the arguments over these points of contention. Jews disagree internally about a great many topics. For example, they disagree over the ideology and political movement of **Zionism**, a movement to establish and support a Jewish national homeland in the historic region of Palestine, now known as Israel.

Zionism has been a point of contention across diverse Jewish communities, particularly in the United States, since its inception in the late nineteenth century. Many Jewish people supported this movement. Others, like **Rabbi David Philipson** (1862–1949, an early leader of the Reform Movement in Judaism), believed that a distinctive Jewish nationalism was a poor response to the challenges of the larger world, calling this response a “confession of surrender and defeat.”⁶ From the time of its inception, Jews in America were split on whether to support or reject the movement.

Many considered it a necessity for Jews living in Europe, but not for themselves. They believed that American Jews had attained equality and religious freedom and were unwilling to risk that.⁷ The Second World War and the Holocaust represented a turning point for Jews around the world, and most American Jews came to support the idea of a homeland and safe place for Jews abroad, even if they never intended to relocate themselves. But it has never been unanimous. Even now, the Jewish community is split over Zionism and over the existing State of Israel (according to recent survey data, about 80% of American Jews consider Israel closely connected to their Jewish identity).⁸

Zionism can become an example of a distinctive or selective accusation of antisemitism. When Zionism is criticized or attacked, many non-Zionist or even anti-Zionist Jews defend the criticism as not being antisemitic. Zionism, they contend, is a political ideology, and many Zionists are not Jewish, making it political discrimination rather than ethno-religious discrimination. Many Zionist Jews (and just as importantly, non-Jewish Zionists), however, believe that Zionism and Judaism are inextricably linked, pointing to Jewish indigeneity in Biblical Israel and two thousand years of Jewish identification with the Land of Israel. They therefore see criticism of Zionism as antisemitic.⁹

WHAT'S IN A WORD?

The term antisemitism should be written without a hyphen. Adding a hyphen (anti-Semitism) falsely suggests that there is a defined thing called “Semitism” being opposed. In reality, “Semitism” refers to a group of languages, including Hebrew and Arabic.

Antisemitism specifically refers to a racialized hatred toward Jewish people, not all speakers of Semitic languages. The hyphen also implies that “Semitic peoples” form a single racial group based on science, which is inaccurate. The word was first coined in 1879 by Wilhelm Marr, who openly identified as antisemitic. He used it to describe anti-Jewish movements happening in central Europe at the time. As with many terms, use and meaning changes over time and the word did not carry the same negative weight it does today.

⁶ Correspondence with Jacob Schiff, box 1, folder 1, MS-35, David Philipson Papers, American Jewish Archives, Cincinnati, Ohio.

⁷ For more information, see Miriam Eve Mora, *Carrying a Big Schtick: Jewish Acculturation and Masculinity in the Twentieth Century* (Wayne State University Press, 2024).

⁸ For more information, see: pewresearch.org/religion/2021/05/11/u-s-jews-connections-with-and-attitudes-toward-israel/.

⁹ For more information on the debate over the definition of antisemitism and Zionism, see: nexusproject.us/nexus-resources/the-nexus-document/.

There are other criticisms that divide “good” Jews from “bad,” and these deepen divides within the Jewish community about whether or not the criticism is antisemitic, since it does not condemn all Jews, and is a matter of contention among Jews.¹⁰

Even assumptions that seem positive, like saying Jews are naturally good with money or especially intelligent, can still be harmful stereotypes. This kind of thinking, known as **philosemitism**, might appear complimentary on the surface, but it still reduces Jewish people to a set of stereotypical traits and ignores diversity within the Jewish community. It also reinforces the idea that there are “good” Jews who fit certain expectations, and “bad” Jews who do not, which can deepen divisions and still reflect antisemitic thinking, even if it sounds like praise.

Understanding antisemitism requires more than just definitions. It demands strong historical thinking skills and media literacy. To recognize how ideas take shape, shift over time, and influence societies, we must critically evaluate sources, question assumptions, and set sources in historical context. These tools help us better understand the past and navigate present-day narratives with clarity and care. By sharpening these skills, educators and students are better equipped to identify, discuss, and respond to antisemitism when it arises, including in classroom settings where it often goes unrecognized or unaddressed.

ANTISEMITISM AND THE CLASSROOM

Regardless of whether there are Jewish students in your classroom, it is essential to actively address and correct antisemitic language, ideas, or assumptions among our students, just as we would with any form of prejudice or misinformation. Creating a safe and respectful learning environment means helping all students feel seen and heard, even when they express ideas that may be based on misinformation.

When there are Jewish students in the class, keep in mind that it is not the job of Jewish students to define antisemitism or speak for all Jews. Calling on them based on their identity not only places an unfair burden but also ignores the rich diversity within Jewish communities. Even when students are eager to share, it is important to remind the class that one perspective does not speak for a whole group.

It is important to begin by acknowledging that antisemitism is one of the oldest and most persistent forms of prejudice. It is deeply woven into both American and European history and culture. Because of this, students may come into the classroom having absorbed harmful stereotypes or ideas—often without even realizing it. In fact, it is likely that you are also bringing conceptions of Jewish people, culture, religion, or history into the classroom that you may not have ever had reason to question.

There are many high-quality teaching resources available on antisemitism and how to address it in the classroom, so we will not duplicate that work here. Instead, we want to focus on a challenge that often arises—especially for non-Jewish educators—when teaching Jewish history: how to navigate the discomfort that can come up when the topic of antisemitism enters the conversation. And it will come up.

¹⁰ For more information on the debate over the definition of antisemitism and Israel/Zionism, see the Nexus Document: nexusproject.us/nexus-resources/the-nexus-document/.

Throughout this volume, antisemitism surfaces in various contexts—from stories of Jewish soldiers to Jewish artists and writers, from migration to philanthropy and gender politics. These moments are essential to understanding Jewish history, though they hint at and draw out elements of hatred and prejudice that can be uncomfortable to teach and discuss.

Plan ahead by preparing your students. Set clear expectations about the topics you will cover, including the long and painful history of antisemitism. Acknowledge its presence and create a classroom culture that encourages respectful questions and thoughtful discussion. Doing this not only helps your students engage more meaningfully, it also helps you feel more confident and supported in guiding the conversation. Sitting with this discomfort—and learning not in spite of it, but through it—is the work of doing history.

Like white nationalism and anti-Black racism, antisemitism is part of the broader system of oppression in American history. It is in the culture around us, so much so that it can feel invisible. It is important to remember that none of us, educators or students, are at fault for having internalized messages that have been passed down for generations.

One way to support students in this learning is to clearly say: *When we talk about antisemitism, we are talking about a set of ideas—not about individuals.* This helps students understand that being influenced by a harmful idea does not make them a bad person. It opens space for honest conversation, critical thinking, and real growth.

Be gentle with yourself and your students. Rather than placing blame, we can create an environment where students are open to learning and unlearning. By naming the prevalence of these beliefs, we give students permission to reflect, ask questions, and grow. These moments can become valuable opportunities for discussion and deeper understanding.

Teaching about antisemitism is not just an academic exercise. As educators, we are asked to confront ideas that may feel uncomfortable for us and for our students. But sitting with that discomfort is how growth happens. We are not just teaching history. We are helping students recognize the ways harmful ideas can persist, often unnoticed, in their own lives and communities. This work is not about having all the answers—it is about being willing to ask the right questions, listen deeply, and stay open. When we teach tough topics with honesty and care, we give students tools to think critically, act with empathy, and engage more responsibly with the world.