

HOW DOES ANTI-SEMITISM FUNCTION?

Three Key Elements

The three key elements of anti-Semitism are:

- **Blame**—scapegoating Jews for problems on both a global and personal scale
- **Isolation**—forcing Jews to live in restricted areas (sometimes called ghettos) and excluding them from participation in society
- **Terror**—threatening their very survival as individuals and as a people. By singling out Jews for blame, anti-Semitism, or the more accurate term, anti-Jewish oppression*, frightens and confuses people of all backgrounds and identities.

Historical Background

Living as a minority without a homeland for nearly two thousand years, the Jewish people had to rely on the goodwill of rulers in each country where they settled. In exchange for a promise of protection for the Jewish community, a few Jews would serve as money lenders, tax collectors, or other public officials. The majority of Jews who settled in each country remained as impoverished as the general population. Jews were also prohibited from owning land and barred from joining craft guilds, which would have allowed them to integrate with their non-Jewish neighbors.

When the people of the area were ready to resist the oppressive conditions of their lives, they were encouraged by their rulers to direct their hatred and resentment at the Jewish community—rather than at their actual oppressors, the ruling classes. Jews would be deprived of civil rights and property, subjected to individual and mass murders, and threatened with deportation and extermination. After the violence subsided, the surviving remnants of the Jewish population would be “apologized to” officially in the original country or welcomed in new places of exile as martyrs. They would be given some assistance to rebuild their communities, and once again a few

* Note: We use the terms “anti-Semitism” and “anti-Jewish oppression” interchangeably. While the term anti-Semitism is less precise (there are also Semitic peoples who are not Jews), it is the term that has been widely used and understood to refer to the specific oppression directed against the Jewish people.

Jews would be encouraged to assume the same roles in relation to the rulers. (In the Middle Ages these Jews were called “Court Jews.”) In exchange, the whole Jewish community would be given temporary protection, and the cycle of toleration followed by attack would begin again.

Why is anti-Semitism so confusing and difficult to talk about?

Anti-Semitism does not always fit neatly into classic understandings about oppression. Most of the time we think of oppressed peoples as being poor and disenfranchised. But the way anti-Semitism works is to give some Jews access to power and privilege so they can be visible, ready scapegoats when other oppressed people begin to rise up against the inequities that affect their lives.

Anti-Jewish oppression operates in a cyclical pattern. During those times when Jews seem to be free from overt persecution, it is tempting to conclude that Jews are not an oppressed group. But neither assimilation, acceptance, nor prominence for outstanding Jewish individuals, nor even economic mobility for the Jewish community as a whole, has ever been a guarantee that Jews will remain free from oppression.

The basis of many forms of oppression is economic, exploiting a particular group of people so that some groups have greater access to the resources of society and others have less. Anti-Semitism uses Jews as a scapegoat, so that when oppressed people rise up against their exploitation, they are directed to blame Jews as the cause of their problems. A small number of Jews today occupy highly visible positions in public life, which makes it appear as though Jews as a group have exaggerated economic or political power. In fact, as in the past, many Jews are not the owners of the corporations or the ones who ultimately profit from the labor of poor and working-class people.

But a large number of Jews are owners of small and medium-sized businesses. Many Jews are managers, doctors, lawyers, teachers, or social workers, and other Jews staff large corporate and governmental bureaucracies. These jobs have sometimes been called “middle agent” jobs because they can place Jews as a buffer between poor people and those in power. In these jobs, Jews exercise some degree of control over the daily lives of more visibly oppressed groups, especially poor people and people targeted by racism. When these groups are hurting, particularly during economically challenging times, they may look for someone to blame.

And who they see in their day-to-day life might be the local Jewish shopkeeper or landlord; the Jewish schoolteacher, social worker, or personnel manager. They don't see the major owners of wealth (most recently labeled “the one percent”). There is a long history of anti-Jewish attitudes and stereotypes, which many people are taught, such as all Jews are rich, all Jews are cheap, or Jews control many things. The expression “to Jew someone down” has been used to mean to get a good bargain. With these stereotypes in place, the blame for hard economic times can readily be deflected onto Jews. The frustration of poor and working-class people is thus diverted away from the underlying issues of racism and economic inequality around them and targeted instead at Jews.

In certain periods, some Jews may have more access to economic and political mobility than people in other oppressed groups, so it doesn't look like Jews are oppressed. Even in these periods of relative calm, however, most Jews still feel fear and trepidation; they have no assurance that the cycle of oppression will not be repeated. Jewish people know from their history that when economic times get worse and a scapegoat is needed, anti-Semitism will become visible and Jews will likely once again be targeted.

For example, many of the Jews targeted for extermination by the Third Reich had been highly assimilated into German society before the Nazis came to power. As Germany struggled with the devastating effects of their defeat in World War I, Hitler was able to successfully use Jews as a scapegoat, convincing people that Jews were entirely to blame for the nation's deepening economic crisis. Even though many Jews were integrated throughout German society, the historic stereotypes were still sufficiently present in the minds of the German people that the scapegoating of Jews could be effectively employed.

Anti-Semitism is not only about the Holocaust

Most people would probably agree that overt acts of anti-Semitism are wrong: the bombing of synagogues, the desecration of Jewish cemeteries, the open acts of violence against Jews. But many people only recognize anti-Semitism in its most extreme forms. When you say someone is being anti-Semitic, people sometimes think that you are saying that the person is a Nazi or that Jews are about to be sent off to concentration camps. Anti-Semitism, in most people's minds, conjures up only one set of images—pogroms, concentration camps, and the Holocaust. In their minds, if a Holocaust is not happening, then anti-Semitism is not happening. The daily impact of anti-Jewish oppression often goes unnoticed and denied. The invisibility of anti-Semitism, and the confusion about when something is anti-Semitic or when it is not, have made it almost impossible to challenge anti-Semitism effectively.

Anti-Semitism is often invisible or denied

Anti-Semitism is rarely included in the “laundry list” of oppressions and social justice issues. It is also not usually mentioned in speeches or platforms at political marches and rallies. And unlike allies' work on many other liberation issues (for example, white people working to end racism, men working against sexism, PFLAG [Parents, Families, and Friends of Lesbians and Gays], and other groups working against Gay oppression), there is not an organized allies' movement of Gentiles working to end anti-Semitism.

When anti-Semitism is invisible or denied, Jews are left feeling that their fears are not based on anything real going on in the present. Instead they assume it must be their own personal problem, often concluding, “There must be something wrong with me,” or, “I must be crazy.” Jews often blame themselves for problems and don't realize that there is a systematic oppression outside of themselves causing many of their difficulties. Without an accurate understanding that anti-Semitism exists, every struggle can become magnified as a personal, individual one. *How does anti-Semitism operate today?*

Anti-Semitism is important to understand because it continues, today, to derail the liberation efforts of many groups. When Jews are singled out for blame, the attention of other groups gets diverted from identifying, and fighting against, the real causes of their own oppression. As long as anti-Semitism exists, the work of ending economic injustice, racism, sexism, Gay oppression, and other forms of oppression is also hindered. This is why anti-Semitism is sometimes called a “divide and conquer” mechanism. Anti-Semitism divides Jews from other groups and slows down the work of many liberation movements: Black liberation, Gay liberation, the women's movement, the labor movement, and others. (Click here to see examples that illustrate how anti-Semitism slows down the work of other liberation movements. (Link to screen “Is it anti-Semitism?”))