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## Editorial: Social Work's Role in Ending Antisemitism: If Not Us, Who?

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As Jewish Americans, we are frightened, we are angry, and we are sad. The October 7, 2023, attack on Israel and the resulting war have fueled animosity toward Jews around the world. Antisemitism long brewing beneath the surface has become more visible. Jews have been targeted to the point that some have changed their Jewish-sounding names on Uber accounts, removed mezuzahs from doors, or tucked Star of David necklaces under their shirts. However, social work programs have rarely addressed antisemitism in teaching about anti-racism, diversity, inclusion, and equity (ADEI). It is time for social workers and educators to become knowledgeable about antisemitism and speak out about it.

Today's antisemitic threats don't arise solely from violent white nationalists, like the mass shooter in 2017 at Pittsburgh's Tree of Life Synagogue. Today, antisemitic rhetoric is rising on the far left. Because Jews have often stood at the forefront of social justice issues, supporting reproductive, LGBTQ and civil rights, many now feel abandoned by those progressives who have ignored harassment or condoned vicious speech without understanding its implications.

On college campuses, some Jews say they are unsupported and unsafe (ADL Center for Antisemitism Research, 2023). Recent incidents have included:

- Nazi symbols painted on dorm room doors at American University (Fischer, 2023, October 21)
- Student-posted online death threats to Jewish students at Cornell (Watson & Andone, 2023, October 31)

## And what about social work schools?

Early findings on social work education in Canada suggest some students feared “being ‘canceled’ because of their Jewishness, were subjected to micro-aggressions or hateful course content, or felt pressured to parrot ideologies that countered their Jewish values. Several claimed Jewish identity was denigrated and grossly misunderstood in their programs” (Poizner, Love, Spindel, Primerano, Alloul, Katzman, & Walker, 2022).

What are social work programs and practitioners doing to address antisemitism? How can we better prepare ourselves and our students to be truly inclusive?

The Council on Social Work Education (CSWE) mandates adherence to ADEI standards in social work programs’ course content as well as learning environment. (Council on Social Work Education, 2022). Although infrequent in social work literature, there have been calls for attention to antisemitism (Cox & Marlowe, 2023; Cox, 2021; Gold, 1996; Reed, 1994; Soifer, 1991). Levine (2013) proposed that “anti-racist theory, education and practice needs to include a thorough understanding of antisemitism” with “an uncompromising attitude” toward it (p. 109). However, Levine notes, “there is a relative absence from social work literature of a meaningful focus on one of racism’s oldest and most pernicious forms: that of antisemitism” (p. 86). A failure to include Jewish populations seems inconsistent with accreditation standards as well as the values and ethics of the social work profession.

In western countries, prejudice against Muslims, Asians, and other marginalized groups is also widespread and destructive. Since October 7, violent attacks and harassment against Muslims have escalated. These constitute an urgent concern and likewise should be addressed in social work programs. In some ways, these prejudices share many traits. However, anti-semitism presents a unique history and dynamics, and is the purview of this editorial, with a focus on social work education, primarily in the U.S.

Even before the latest conflict, antisemitic incidents in the U.S. had reached an all-time high. In 2022, at least 2,042 hate crimes based on religion were reported. While Jews comprise about 2.4 % of the U.S. population, 55% of these crimes (1,122) were aimed at Jews. That same year, 181 hate crimes were anti-Sikh and 158 were anti-Muslim. In a separate category, racial hate crimes against blacks or African Americans numbered 3,424 (U.S. Department of Justice, 2023).

This is not to say that Jews face prejudice and discrimination in the same degree that blacks do in the U.S. Of course not. Jews are not routinely stopped while driving or worried about encounters with police. But that doesn't mean that antisemitism or bias against Jews isn't a legitimate concern.

Why is teaching about antisemitism important in a social work context?

- Antisemitic incidents, hate speech and violence are rising worldwide.
- Anti-Jewish comments and baseless conspiracy theories are mushrooming online.
- The Jewish population in North America and Europe is aging and in more need of social services.
- Social work education tends to attract Jewish students, students of color, and others who have experienced prejudice.
- Antisemitism is a common denominator and core of so many diverse extremist groups that it might be seen as a “gateway” in

the progression of violent radicalization and extremism and even as a “diagnostic factor for extremist radicalization” (Mekeagrou-Hitchins, Clifford, & Vidino, October 2020, p. 3).

## What exactly is antisemitism?

Basically, it is hostility or prejudice against Jewish people. Who exactly are the Jews? Many assume that this is simply a religious or ethnic group. However, the Jews are a people. More specifically, “a people with a language, a culture, a literature, and a particular set of ideas, beliefs, texts, and legal practices. One word for that is a civilization” (Weiss, 2019, p. 28). The “Jewish people” do not fall into a neat pre-conceived category.

Nor does antisemitism. Like a villain from fantasy fiction, it is a shapeshifter, whose outer appearance changes while its basic core remains constant. Antisemitism takes the shape of whatever a society most hates and fears.

In ancient and medieval times antisemitism was religious in nature. Jews were hated because they refused to accept Christianity and, later, Islam. In the eighteenth century, racial and political rationales were added... By the nineteenth century, those on the political right were accusing all Jews of being Socialists, Communists, and revolutionaries. Those on the political left were accusing all Jews of being wealth-obsessed capitalists... the eugenics movement posited that Jews were inferior in their genetic makeup... This toxic brew of race, religion, politics, and pseudoscience became the cornerstone of Nazi antisemitism and is today a cornerstone of the white power movement and white supremacist antisemitism (Lipstadt, 2019, pp.16–17).

The roots of antisemitism run deep. While most educated people are aware of the horrors of the Spanish Inquisition and the Holocaust, here are a few examples (chosen from a regrettably long list) of persecutions that are less widely known:

- The terms “ghetto” originated in Italy, where Jews were forced to live in a small area with gates locked at night.

- Pogroms were organized riots against Jews, often tolerated by or initiated by the government. Hundreds of pogroms swept the Russian empire. (In the city of Odessa alone, pogroms occurred in 1821, 1859, 1871, 1881, and 1905.) Thousands of Jews were murdered, raped, beaten, robbed, or made homeless. Spurred in part by pogroms, millions of Jews left Eastern Europe for North and South America, Europe, and what is now Israel.
- About 500,000 Jews fled persecution or were essentially expelled from North African and the Middle Eastern countries in the decade after Israel was established (Rosenstein, 2018, p. 365). This included at least 125,000 Iraqi Jews who escaped to Israel during 1949-1951 after Iraq launched anti-Jewish riots, arrests, and made Zionism a capital crime, effectively ending a Jewish community that had thrived there for over 2,500 years (Jewish Virtual Library (n.d.).
- Vicious falsehoods were told about Jews--that they caused the plague, that they engaged in ritual murder of Christian children, and in more modern times, that they were a part of some imagined worldwide conspiracy that secretly controlled wealth and power.

The Holocaust, which occurred within living memory, was the worst and ultimate consequence of antisemitism. The systematic slaughter of six million Jews killed one-third of all Jews in the world. That the Nazis could murder the majority of the Jews in Europe, with little outcry from the rest of the world, showed how little power Jews actually had.

These events are not listed to contend “who is the greater victim,” but to explain that inter-generational trauma dwells within many Jews. Because of a long history of persecution, Jews take seriously calls for their annihilation. After each shooting or attack, we instinctively wonder, “Could it happen again?” and “Could it happen here?”

One lesson of bigotry around the world is that hate-filled speech precedes and begets hate-fueled violence. **Words matter.**

Critics of Israel often claim their statements are not anti-Jewish, but Anti-Zionist. Zionism is a nationalistic movement encouraging Jews to return to their ancestral homeland. It asserts that Jews, like other peoples, have a right to their own land and to self-determination.

There's nothing improper with criticizing or protesting the government or policies of the State of Israel—Israelis do so vigorously. "Anti-Zionism challenges the rights of Israel to exist as a state, while antisemitism is prejudice against Jewish people. People can disagree with Israeli policy and not be antisemitic or anti-Zionist. However, often anti-Zionist sentiments are difficult to separate from anti-Semitism, with each fueling the other" (Cox, 2021, p.115).

Recent protests about Israel have morphed into verbal and physical attacks openly targeting Jews. In Sydney, Australia, a pro-Palestinian rally devolved into chants of "f\*\*\* Israel" and "f\*\*\* the Jews." At one point, cries of "death to the Jews" rang out. The police felt compelled to warn Sydney's Jewish community from entering the area over safety concerns (Aitchison, 2023, October 9). This occurred only two days after the Hamas terror attack, and before any Israeli military response.

Often those criticizing Israel promote a politicized narrative by using trigger phrases such as "white European," "settler colonial state," "nonindigenous," and "genocide." "While Israelis and Palestinians are real, localized, and specific, their narratives are often appropriated, blandly simplified, and woven into world views which serve peoples and purposes far away" (Hirsh, 2017, p.1). Well-meaning liberals may latch onto these phrases without fully understanding the implications of their epithets or without questioning their accuracy.

- Settler Colonial State? Of what mother country was Israel a colony To where would the Jews return? Can you colonize your

own homeland? What is your definition? Is it applied equally to all states? (Dowty, A., 2023, October 23; ADL, 2021, July 8).

- Indigenous? Jews are among the indigenous inhabitants of Israel. Even after their conquest and dispersal by Rome, a Jewish presence has continued ever since, whenever allowed.
- White Europeans? A visitor to Israel might have trouble distinguishing Jew from Arab without the help of identifying clothing. Over half of Israel's Jewish population is Sephardic (Mediterranean) or Mizrahi. The Mizrahi Jews were not European, but had lived for centuries in Middle Eastern and North African lands, including Egypt, Libya, Algeria, Morocco, Yemen, Syria, Iran, and Iraq (Khazzoom, L., n.d.). Israel is also home to tens of thousands of Jews whose families immigrated from Ethiopia and India.
- Genocide? Nearly half of the world's Jews live in Israel. Actually, Hamas' original Covenant proclaimed its intention to obliterate Israel and called for the killing of Jews (Yale Law School, 1988). Hamas' intentions appear unmodified, although the Covenant was recently updated (MEE Staff, 2017, May 2).

Everyone is free to disagree and challenge facts, but loaded terms fail to present the full picture.

In a sampling of 250 college students who supported the chant "From the River to the Sea," 67.8% changed their views after learning a handful of basic facts about the Middle East, including that the chant would "entail the subjugation, expulsion, or annihilation of the seven million Jewish and two million Arab Israelis." The University of California, Berkeley professor who initiated the survey opined that, "These students had never seen a map of the Mideast and knew little about the region's geography, history, or demography... It is time for good teachers to join the fray and combat bias with education" (Hassner, 2023, December 5).



For years, university administrators and educators have shied away from speaking out against antisemitism on campus, perhaps afraid of backlash or taking political sides. Should it be so difficult to condemn hate speech, harassment, and calls for annihilation of a people? Testifying before the U.S. Congress on December 5, 2023, college junior Bella Ingber stated that:

Being a Jew at NYU has meant being physically assaulted in NYU's library by a fellow student while I was wearing an American Israeli flag and having my attacker still roam freely throughout campus...Today, in 2023, at NYC, I hear calls to gas the Jews, and I am told that Hitler was right." She asserted that "diversity, equity, and inclusion is not a value that NYC extends to its Jewish students (Ingber, 2023, December 6).

One reason Jews might be excluded in discussions of diversity is because they are perceived as "white" and "privileged." Interestingly, a recent poll estimates that over 10% of Jews in the United States identify as Hispanic, Black, Asian, Native American, or multiracial. (*US Jewish Population Estimates 2020*, p.19). Contrary to stereotypes, Jews come in a wide range of colors and economic levels.

There have been reported incidences of Diversity/Equity/Inclusion (DEI) offices dismissing, or marginalizing antisemitism. In the U.S., we are well aware of those on the political right who wish to eliminate DEI offices. We should not let the perceived omissions of some DEI offices give ammunition to those who seek to destroy important protections for all diverse groups.

Teaching about Jewish populations in social work curricula should integrate content about history and culture, as well as about prejudice. Equally important is a focus on the learning environment. Social work programs need to support an inclusive environment, assuring that DEI offices provide protections for Jewish students and faculty.

Recently, NASW reaffirmed its "commitment to fight antisemitism in all its forms" (NASW, 2023, May 17). During the fall of 2023, U.S. and international

social work organizations have responded to attacks on Jews and Israel, perhaps to a greater extent than other professions. These responses include statements of condolences, support for human rights, and appreciation for social workers offering assistance.

## How do we take statements and turn them into actions?

We recommend that CSWE, NASW, and other relevant organizations develop curriculum resource guides as well as offer workshops and webinars for faculty. For specific guidelines or resources for curricula development, see Cox (2021), Daniel, Fryall, & Benenson (2019), and organizations below, such as the U.S. Holocaust Museum and Anti-Defamation League.

- <https://www.ushmm.org/teach/teaching-materials/antisemitism-racism>
- <https://www.adl.org/resources/tools-and-strategies/resources-address-and-challenge-antisemitism>
- <https://jewishstudies.berkeley.edu/antisemitism-education/antisemitism-education-resources/>

At the micro and mezzo levels, we encourage social workers to support and be sensitive to the needs and concerns of Jewish clients and colleagues. Social workers have a duty to practice cultural humility and self-reflection in examining personal biases. We hope students would be prepared to support the Jewish client encountering the social services or health care systems. Such clients might include immigrants, nursing home residents, Orthodox Jews, those seeking mental health care, and those going through terminal illness or the grieving process. Keep in mind that some clients may be hesitant to reveal their Jewish identities, unsure of how they will be treated.

At the macro level, we call upon social workers to be leaders in the fight against antisemitism. Our profession can “foster a societal culture in which

Jews and people of other faiths are free to exercise their human rights without fear of repercussions” and include content on religious literacy as well as antisemitism (Hodge & Boddie, 2022, p. 103).

We urge social workers to become knowledgeable about antisemitism and to call it out – name it, recognize it, confront it, condemn it, and take action to eliminate it. When anti-Zionist or antisemitic speakers appear on college campuses who invoke their right to free speech or academic freedom, insist that others have the right to present opposing views. And when speakers cross the line to support violence, we should not be afraid to denounce that as unacceptable.

It is OK to fight against hatred of Jews, to support the existence of Israel, to denounce terrorism or efforts to “kill all the Jews,” while at the same time to vocalize criticism of government policies and to advocate for Palestinians to have better living conditions and live in freedom. One can have empathy for both groups. These are not mutually exclusive positions.

Diversity and equity categories have expanded over time. It's time to broaden social workers' education by acknowledging that many groups, not previously considered, might be the victims of threats and exclusion. To broaden our definitions is not to negate the pain of others. In fact, all groups who have experienced exclusion and oppression should be able to empathize with and support each other.

It's time to work together to broaden our curricula and our minds to end antisemitism.

**“If not us, who? If not now, when?”**

If you would like to respond to this editorial, you are encouraged to submit your commentary to [journal@ifsw.org](mailto:journal@ifsw.org). Your contribution will be published in the “Letters to the Editor” section of our next issue.

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