

ANTISEMITISM: AN OVERVIEW

Introduction

During the January 2024 ice storm in western Oregon, and since, Eugene’s Temple Beth Israel was defaced multiple times, including a January 14, 2024, graffiti tagging incident with a clear white-supremacist message. Hate speech and bias incidents are on the rise in our community, elsewhere in Oregon, and across the country.

Antisemitism threatens democracy. In this brief paper, we attempt to define antisemitism, present information on the roots and early history of antisemitism, outline the impact of social media, describe hate and bias incidents, offer tips on countering hate, and share resources. For over 100 years, the League of Women Voters of the United States (LWVUS) has worked with individuals, households, communities, and policymakers to create a more perfect democracy through advocacy, collaboration, education, and litigation. Hate speech, bias incidents, and bigotry stoke fear and division, harm individuals and communities, and weaken our bonds in a pluralistic society.

Why Study Antisemitism?

As the Biden-Harris administration’s national strategy to counter antisemitism notes: “While antisemitic incidents most directly and intensely affect the Jewish community, antisemitism threatens all of us. Antisemitic conspiracy theories fuel other forms of hatred, discrimination, and bias—including discrimination against other religious minorities, racism, sexism, and anti-LGBTQI+ hate. Antisemitism seeks to divide Americans from one another, erodes trust in government and nongovernmental institutions, and undermines our democracy.”¹

LWVUS Statements and Policy

In June 2021, the League, with more than 50 other organizations affiliated with the Leadership Conference on Civil and Human Rights, issued a statement addressing antisemitic hate crimes. This statement read in part: “Antisemitism is at the core of white nationalism, and white nationalism thrives on division. We, as diverse organizations, remain united in confronting the legacy and present-day effects of white supremacy and all acts of hate, including hate crimes against Jews, in our country.”²

This statement reflects LWVUS policy. Our commitment to diversity, equity, and inclusion was updated in January 2024 to reiterate that “...discrimination or harassment of any kind will not be accepted within the League, including but not limited to race, socio-economic status, age, ability status, religion, sexual orientation, national origin, gender, or marital status. The League is committed to fostering, cultivating, and preserving a culture of diversity, equity, inclusion, access, and belonging for all people.”³

Note: We do not, in this paper, examine the October 7, 2023 attack on Israel by Hamas, the Israeli government’s response and war in Gaza, or Israeli-Palestinian relations. While important matters, this paper focuses on antisemitism as a dangerous, anti-democratic force.

What Is Antisemitism?

The Jewish Federation of Lane County defines antisemitism as the hatred, discrimination, fear, and prejudice directed toward Jews as individuals or as a group. Antisemitism is based on age-old

stereotypes and myths that target Jews because of their religious beliefs, religious and cultural practices, identity as a people, or connection, real or perceived, to the State of Israel. Simply stated - antisemitism is the conspiracy that blames Jewish power for whatever is most hated and or feared. (Adopted from the IHRA - International Remembrance Holocaust Alliance).⁴

The Jerusalem Declaration on Antisemitism, developed by a group of scholars in the fields of Holocaust history, Jewish studies, and Middle East studies, offers an additional definition: "Antisemitism is discrimination, prejudice, hostility, or violence against Jews as Jews (or Jewish institutions as Jewish)."⁵

Roots of Antisemitism and Early History

Erich Gruen, in *Antisemitism in the Pagan World*, states that there is little evidence that Jewish beliefs, customs, conduct, ethnicity, or isolation prompted wide-scale hatred, persecution, or oppression before the Christian era. While he notes hostile Jewish-pagan encounters (such as the fight for religious liberty and political independence from the Seleucid Greeks by the Maccabees (167-164 BCE); calamitous mob attacks against Jewish communities in Alexandria, Egypt in 38 CE, and Caesarea in Roman Palestine in 59 CE; the destruction of the Second Temple by Rome in 70 CE during the First Jewish War; and the Bar Kochba revolt, or Second Jewish War against Rome between 132-135 CE) he attributes these conflicts to regional crises as well as social, political, and economic breakdowns in the society. He concludes that the dominant empires of the time, especially the early Roman Empire, felt no need or advantage in persecuting peoples on theological grounds. Ironically, the major exception to this prevailing attitude was Rome's hostility to early Christianity.⁶

Christianity's anti-Judaism is embedded in its theological claims. At the time Jesus lived, there were no Christians. Jesus and his followers were Jewish. They formed a small sect that accepted Jesus as the Messiah. Toward the second half of the first century, the separation between Judaism and Christianity began, as Paul turned his conversionary efforts away from Jews and toward the gentiles of the Roman Empire.⁷

Christianity's anti-Judaism begins with writings of the early church, which initially saw Jews as rivals. At the heart of this struggle is supersessionism or replacement theology. "This is the declaration that Christianity is the one true faith, the true Israel, and supersedes Judaism, both in belief and in deed."⁸ According to this theology, the Torah (Hebrew Bible) is only one part of divine revelation. It serves a preliminary role in the divine plan for human salvation because it foretells through its prophecies the coming of a Messiah whom the early Christians believed to be Jesus. As expressed in the New Testament, Christianity is the completion of divine revelation. Faith in Christ and not obedience to the ritual laws of the Torah defines one's relationship with God. Those who believe in Christ are part of the new Christian covenant, which replaces the old Judaic covenant. Because Christians have replaced Jews as God's covenantal people, Israel no longer refers to the Jewish people but only to those who believe in Christ and his power of salvation.⁹

Early church members believed that due to the Jews' rejection of Jesus as the Messiah and their rejection of his divinity and resurrection, they stood in opposition to God's salvation plan and became the enemy of man and God. This belief rendered Judaism more than just a competing religion and

construed it as a source of evil associated with demonic forces. With the additional charge of deicide, which blamed Jews for the crucifixion of Jesus, Jews became the ultimate enemy.¹⁰ *Adversus Judaeos*,

“Against the Jews,” refers to a popular genre of early Christian literature that aimed to demonstrate Jewish inferiority and negate the Jewish understanding of Hebrew Scriptures as a means of asserting Christianity.¹¹

Christianity’s dominance over Jews and pagans began with the patronage and later conversion of Emperor Constantine to Christianity in the first half of the fourth century CE and was completed when Emperor Theodosius I made Christianity the Roman Empire's official religion in 380 CE. This fourth-century coalescence of church and state meant for Ambrose, Bishop of Milan, that “the defense of the Empire coincided with the defense of the faith,” and that civil law became secondary to religion. Ambrose saw Christianity locked in a “mortal struggle with its eternal enemy, the Jew,” and advocated using “just violence” and the power of the state to vanquish them.¹²

Augustine (354-430 CE), Bishop of Hippo, and an authoritative voice for centuries to come, insisted that the Jews must be protected because they were needed to prove the truth of Christianity. Since he believed that the Hebrew Bible foretold the coming of Christ, he saw their dispersal throughout Christian realms as part of a divine plan to facilitate the ultimate triumph of Christianity. According to Augustine, Jews had a right to live and practice their rituals, but they were to live in a state of degradation and servitude because they refused to recognize Christ as the Messiah.

As the centuries went on, laws were passed to make sure that Jews did not exercise authority over Christians, and restrictions were applied to other aspects of Jewish life. Jews were, in the words of one early medieval church counsel, “subject to perpetual serfdom” until their predicted conversion at the time of the Second Coming of Christ. Various Popes restated Augustine’s policy, which was largely followed despite sporadic massacres, forced conversions, and the burning of synagogues, until the beginning of the Crusades, a turning point for the worse in Jewish-Christian relations.¹³

In the European Middle Ages, particularly after 1100, fear and demonization of non-believers played an increasingly significant role in Christian antisemitism. “Economic downturns, political tensions, unsuccessful military actions, and a myriad of other crises were explained away by attributing them to the interference of Jews. This blaming of the Jews, for the suffering of others, served only to further reinforce the power of antisemitism.”¹⁴ Manifestations of hostility towards Jews, despite opposition from both church and secular authorities, included mob violence and attacks by crusaders. In other instances, murderous assaults on Jewish communities were prompted by accusations that Jews used the blood of Christian children for ritual use or were to blame for the Black Death of the 14th century.

The lasting and damaging trope of the Jewish usurer also originated in the medieval era. Many Jews were involved in moneylending because they were forbidden from participating in agriculture and most craft guilds. However, the majority of professional moneylenders, bankers, and money changers during this era were Christian. Still, Jews played an important role as Europe moved from a feudal to a money-based economy. When Jews were no longer considered useful to rulers, often because their resources had been drained by unscrupulous state taxation or money-lending income, religious reasons were given to justify their expulsion from regions where they had long lived, beginning with England in 1290 and culminating in the expulsions from the Iberian Peninsula at the end of the 15th century.¹⁵

While this summary does not allow for a fuller discussion of the complicated factors at play in the early development of Christian antisemitism, the reference material cited in the resources section provides a range of well-informed and thoughtful points of view.

Christian theology and practices that promoted hatred, distrust, and marginalization of Jews helped seed antisemitism. It also is true that in the 20th century, many Christian church leaders instructed followers differently. Vatican II in 1965 cleared Jews of the charge of deicide and warned Catholics against believing that scriptures taught that Jews were cursed or rejected. Interfaith groups also have promoted mutual respect, shared values, and reconciliation.¹⁶

Impact of Social Media

Antisemitism continues to be a problem globally and tends to increase in overt acts of hate and intimidation as a response to real-world events. The proliferation of online threats to Jews and Jewish communities jumped dramatically three days after the October 7, 2023, Hamas assault on Israel. Of the many alternative platforms that regularly post antisemitic propaganda and threats, 4Chan had the most significant rise in anonymous users who post imagery and violent threats against Jews, as cited in a recent study of antisemitism on 21 alternative social media platforms by the Institute for Strategic Dialogue (ISD), a global organization dedicated to human rights and resiliency against extremism and hate. When analyzing five million comments from 11,000 videos, their findings showed a 4,693 percent increase in antisemitic comments compared to three days previous to the attack.¹⁷

According to the FBI, hate crimes spiked after September 11, 2001, and have been rising since 2016. U.S.-based advocacy groups are reporting a sustained spike in hate incidents against Jewish and Muslim individuals since October 2023.¹⁸ A December 2023 report in *Scientific American* noted that both anti-Jewish and anti-Muslim hate is on the rise in the United States, surging most dramatically online. The article cites analyses suggesting the same extremist organizations may be stoking hatred for both groups.¹⁹

Although many watchdog groups monitor hate around the internet, antisemitism has been allowed to grow in the digital world from inadequate oversight by social media platforms. Trying to counter an antisemitic post by bringing attention to it can sometimes have the opposite effect by emerging as a hashtag or trending topic. Users wanting to bring attention to a threatening or hateful post are advised to report it to the media platform rather than respond to or share it.

X, formerly known as Twitter, relied on its Safety and Trust Council, composed of 100 global volunteers and organizations, to help monitor online hate and offer recommendations from 2016 until 2022, when Elon Musk took over the platform and dissolved the Council. One former member of the Safety and Trust Council was the Anti-Defamation League (ADL), which combats antisemitism. Of his many critics, Musk blamed the ADL for a 60 percent decline in advertising revenue and threatened to sue, engaging in a long-used ploy to make Jews the scapegoat.²⁰

A troubling social media phenomenon that emerged in 2017 is the QAnon movement, now considered a cult that has used antisemitic conspiracy theories to target global Jewish financiers George Soros and the Rothschilds. QAnon also frequently references pedophilia, which one researcher cites as an

indirect reference to blood libel, an ancient belief that Jews sacrificed gentile children for their blood.

QAnon followers began to use multiple platforms to aggregate its popularity, leading to sales of books and merchandise but also threats of violence and lies about political figures.

Another looming threat is TikTok, which has over one billion global users, a social media platform popular with tweens and teenagers. Researchers note that TikTok is exposing younger users to increasingly frequent antisemitic and violent content. On November 20, 2023, the ADL published findings for antisemitic content on TikTok, showing that its feature, Photo Mode, allows users to evade video content moderators for videos by posting slideshows with sound effects and music. The ADL has recommended that TikTok improve moderation by utilizing an Application Programming Interface (API) which provides access to a platform's data, allowing researchers to evaluate how much hate is on the platform and whether it is enforcing its rules. Currently, there is no straightforward way to gather data on TikTok.²¹

Meta, which owns and operates Facebook, Instagram, Threads, and WhatsApp, uses its independent oversight board to make recommendations and decisions on users' appeals. Since October 2023 Meta has employed more content moderators fluent in Hebrew and Arabic.²²

Legislation also is being used to rein in hate on social media. The California legislature signed the Social Media Transparency Bill (AB 587) into law on September 1, 2022. This legislation, also being considered by New York State as the Stop Hiding Hate Act, requires social media platforms to disclose their public safety parameters and report data related to their policy enforcement for hate speech, harassment, foreign interference, and mis- and disinformation, thus avoiding running afoul of the First Amendment.²³

A proactive approach to countering online harassment and hate is Moonshot, a global tech company that offers risk assessment protection and intervention for online hate. Perpetrators are identified and lured with ads to links that redirect them to counternarratives challenging hateful beliefs.²⁴

Hate and Bias Incidents

Antisemitism is deeply tied to anti-democratic movements and poses a threat to all communities and free societies. Neo-Nazis and other white supremacist groups were among those in the attack on the U.S. Capitol on January 6, 2021. Such groups see Jews as a threat, according to Heidi Beirich, a former intelligence project director for the Southern Poverty Law Center (SPLC). They believe that Jews are the central cause of white disempowerment and the undermining of white hegemony. Followers of these groups believe that Jews have created Zionist-occupied governments around the world, manipulate governments, and are responsible both for capitalist exploitation and communism. They continue the tropes that a Jewish cabal runs the world, and that Jews are globalists with no regard for country or heritage.

These far-right extremist groups are fueled by the Great White Replacement Conspiracy Theory, Beirich says. In this xenophobic, white supremacist concept, white people are being replaced by immigrants, Muslims, and other people of color in their "home countries." The concept blames Jews and so-called elites for orchestrating these changing demographics.²⁵

According to the Bias Crimes (2022) Report published by the Oregon Criminal Justice Commission, “anti-religion bias-motivated reports increased from 66 (7% of bias-motivated reports) in 2020, to 208 (14%) in 2021, and to 251 (10%) in 2022, the vast majority of which were motivated by anti-Jewish bias.”²⁶

The Jewish Federation of Lane County reports that in Lane County there has been a variety of antisemitic actions in recent years. Within months, examples of antisemitic actions include:

- Swatting - groups call police to make a false report of a bomb threat at a synagogue. They prefer to target a synagogue during services, particularly when events are video streamed so that the perpetrators can watch police show up and disrupt the service.
- People from the Goyim Defense Response (GDR) falsely claim to be Jews when they speak at public meetings and state that Jews are responsible for the world’s problems, such as climate change, gun violence or gun control, abortions, capitalism, government corruption, political polarization, etc.
- Leafleting (e.g. by the GDR) similarly blames Jews for the world’s problems.
- Bullying occurs in schools, on social media, and in person.
- Graffiti appears in public places.²⁷

Countering Antisemitism, Bigotry and Hate

The League of Women Voters of Lane County (LWVLC) members in February 2020 produced Everymember Material on hate crimes and hate speech, and the paper, *Hate Crimes*, provides an overview of efforts in schools and the larger community—as well as protocols for reporting and remediation. Efforts include some Oregon teachers combatting white nationalism with the help of a toolkit developed by the nonprofit Western States Center. The Rural Organizing Project (ROP) in 2018 worked with Cottage Grove Community United to respond to a neo-Nazi gathering place in town. The group focused on sending a visible message of unity and promoting Cottage Grove as a safe, welcoming community for everyone. Members also worked with the school board and teachers to build a curriculum covering the Holocaust.²⁸

Reporting incidents, speaking up, actively offering direct and timely support to victims of hate speech and hate crimes, and government agency alerts are common strategies in countering bigotry and hate. In January and February 2023, following three reported incidents of antisemitic flier distribution in Lane County, volunteers pushed back with counter-flyers and a door-knocking campaign. The Community Alliance for Lane County (CALC), Showing Up for Racial Justice (SURJ), and multiple neighborhood associations led the effort in Eugene. The goals were to spread more inclusive messages and let people know how to report bias and hate incidents.²⁹

In Portland, several organizations in May 2023 came together to discuss antisemitism. Among the panelists was Ryan Nakade, with Cure-PDX. According to the organization, it is important to change community norms, which means recognizing that we all have a role in combating extremism through relationship-building and respectful dialogue with people with potentially problematic views.³⁰

Other tips, adapted in part from the book, *We Need to Talk about Antisemitism*, by Rabbi Diana Fersko of the Village Temple, Manhattan, include:

- *Just call it antisemitism.* Call out hate – let targeted communities know they have mainstream support and that hate is not tolerated. When hate speech and acts target Jews because they are Jews, name it.
- *Avoid groupthink.* Take time to analyze and consider calls for action and support before acting upon them. Social media, in particular, can invite hasty responses.
- *Watch out for “lesser” offenses.* Tolerating jokes about Jews and assuming everyone around us is of a particular religious faith or heritage are among everyday acts that can contribute to the larger problem.
- *Don’t use Jews as a proxy for other issues.* Invoking the Holocaust is not a useful way to talk about free speech, masking requirements, immigration, and other matters. And, when talking about Israel, talk about the State of Israel and not Jewish members in our community and country.
- *Allow Jewish to be an identity.* Jews are a diverse group and don’t always fit neatly into religious, cultural, ethnic, racial, and national categories. The fluidity of Jewish identity should not be mistaken for the absence of identity.
- *Celebrate Jewish life.* Support and celebrate living Jews—observing Jewish holidays and events, learning about Jewish traditions, and, if Jewish, through visibility.³¹

Institutional Responses

State of Oregon

In June 2019, then-Governor Kate Brown signed into law SB 664, adopted by the Oregon Legislature earlier that year. Beginning in the 2020-2021 school year the law required school districts to provide students with instruction on the Holocaust and other genocides. Among the learning concepts: *Stimulate students’ reflection on the roles and responsibilities of citizens in democratic societies to combat misinformation, indifference, and discrimination through tools of resistance such as protest, reform, and celebration.*³²

In recent years, Oregon also has strengthened laws, practices, and support services for victims and survivors of bias crimes and incidents. Oregon’s Non-Emergency Bias Response Hotline 1-844-924-BIAS is one way to report hate incidents or file a report online at StandAgainstHate.Oregon.gov. The hotline, which became operational in 2020, is run by the Oregon Department of Justice.³³

Lane County

In 2020, the Lane County Board of Commissioners approved a resolution unanimously denouncing white nationalism. The resolution stated that the Board of Commissioners supports the county as a welcoming, inclusive, and safe community for all who live, learn, work, and play in Lane County. It also condemned actions that promote hate, including xenophobia, white supremacy, racism, and antisemitism, as well as other forms of bigotry.³⁴

City of Eugene

The Eugene Office of Equity & Community Engagement tracks hate and bias activity and provides

support to survivors of hate or bias crimes, incidents, and discrimination. The City also offers a “Hate and Bias Prevention and Response Toolkit” on its website, with information about statements to action,

education, lawn signs, door-knocking campaigns, ways to support people who experience hate, and bystander/upstander interventions.³⁵

City of Springfield

Springfield Alliance for Equity and Respect (SAfER) is a CALC program that aims to promote human rights, respond when human dignity abuses occur, and urge public institutions to address social justice concerns. SAfER works with the leadership and staff of the public schools and Springfield City officials to advocate for greater diversity and cultural understanding.³⁶

FBI in Oregon

On March 10, 2023, the Eugene City Club hosted the program *Antisemitism and How to Fight It*. Guest speakers were Supervisory Special Agent Ryan Dwyer, Rabbi Meir Goldstein, and Rabbi Yitzhak Husbands-Hankin. Agent Dwyer shared what the FBI is doing in Oregon to combat antisemitism and hate acts. The video is available at: <https://cityclubofeugene.org/forum/antisemitism-and-how-to-fight-it/>.

Conclusion

Deborah Lipstadt is the U.S. special envoy to monitor and combat antisemitism and author of *Antisemitism, Here and Now*. In a November 2023 interview, she was clear, “Never has a society tolerated overt expressions of antisemitism and remained a democratic society ... What to do? Governments alone can't solve the problem...I know it sounds ludicrous, but a lot comes down to what happens at the dinner table.”³⁷

Discussion Questions

1. Were you aware of negative attitudes toward Jewish people in your community and elsewhere when you were growing up?
2. How do antisemitism and other forms of hate speech and actions threaten democracy?
3. What actions should government agencies and businesses take, if any, to monitor and moderate social media to address hate and bias?
4. What actions could the League of Women Voters take to address bigotry?
5. Where, beyond the dinner table, can we influence attitudes that lead to bigotry and hate?

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Footnotes

- ¹<https://www.whitehouse.gov/briefing-room/statements-releases/2023/05/25/fact-sheet-biden-harris-administration-releases-first-ever-u-s-national-strategy-to-counter-antisemitism/>
- ²<https://www.lwv.org/league-denounces-increase-antisemitic-hate-crimes>
- ³<https://www.lwv.org/league-management/diversity-equity-inclusion/diversity-equity-and-inclusion-policy>
- ⁴<https://www.jewishfedlc.org>
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- ¹² Carroll, James. *Constantine's Sword. The Church and the Jews*. New York: Houghton Mifflin, 2001.
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- ²¹<https://www.brandeis.edu/jewish-experience/social-justice/2022/may/antisemitism-social-media.html>
- ²²<https://nysba.org/how-a-new-york-law-can-help-stop-hate-speech-on-the-internet/>
- ²²<https://about.meta.com/actions/oversight-board-facts/>
- ²³<https://nysba.org/how-a-new-york-law-can-help-stop-hate-speech-on-the-internet/>
- ²⁴<https://moonshotteam.com/>
- ²⁵ *The Antisemitism of Today's Right*, Dr. Heidi Beirich, Temple Emanu-El Streicker Center, February 26, 2024
- ²⁶<https://www.oregon.gov/cjc/SB577ReportJuly2020Exec.pdf>
- ²⁷<https://www.jewishfedlc.org>
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- ³¹ *We Need to Talk about Antisemitism*, Rabbi Diana Fersko of the Village Temple, Manhattan, Seal Press, 2023, New York.
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- ³³<https://www.doi.state.or.us/oregon-department-of-justice/civil-rights/bias-and-hate/>
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³⁷*The Hate That Doesn't Know Its Own Name*, Bret Stephens' Interview of Deborah Lipstadt, New York Times, November 14, 2023.

Resources

*[Bias Crimes \(2022\) Report Per Senate Bill 577 \(2019\) July 1, 2023](#)

*<https://encyclopedia.ushmm.org/content/en/article/antisemitism> US Holocaust Memorial Museum

*<https://www.tbieugene.org> Temple Beth Israel, Eugene

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Video

<https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=FrcghMwYmh0> (discussion features Eric K. Ward, Executive Director of the Western States Center)