Shooting at a Pittsburgh Synagogue

Official White House Photo by Andrea Hanks

Topic Summary

Note: In reviewing this information and sharing it with family members, be aware that some of the details and information are not suitable for younger children.

On the morning of October 27, which was a Saturday (Sabbath, or the holy day, for the Jewish community) Robert Bowers entered the Tree of Life Synagogue in Pittsburgh, PA, yelled “All Jews must die,” and opened fire on the congregants. He was armed with an assault rifle and several handguns, and killed eleven congregants and wounded six others, four of whom are police officers. The names of who were killed are: Irving Younger, Melvin Wax, Rose Mallinger, Bernice Simon,
Sylvan Simon, Jerry Rabinowitz, Joyce Fienberg, Richard Gottfried, Daniel Stein, Cecil Rosenthal and David Rosenthal. This shooting is the deadliest attack ever on the Jewish community in the U.S.

The shooter posted on Gab, a social media site frequented by right-wing extremists, which highlighted his strong anti-Semitic beliefs. Alongside his anti-Semitic comments, Bowers also posted xenophobic (anti-immigrant) content, claiming that Jews are helping to transport members of the large groups of undocumented immigrants making their way north towards the U.S. from Latin America.

It is important to understand this incident in the context of anti-Semitism in the U.S. In its annual 2017 Audit of Anti-Semitic Incidents, ADL found that the number of reported anti-Semitic incidents in the U.S. rose 57% in 2017, the largest single-year increase on record and the second highest number reported since ADL started tracking such data in 1979. There was a total of 1,986 incidents, which fall into three major categories: harassment, vandalism and assault.

The sharp rise of incidents was in part due to a significant increase (94%) in incidents in schools and on college/university campuses (87%), which nearly doubled for the second year in a row. Although the largest number of incidents typically occurs in public areas, in 2017, K-12 schools surpassed public areas as the locations with the most anti-Semitic incidents, with a total of 457 reported incidents being reported.

One way to understand violent and tragic incidents like these is through the Pyramid of Hate. The Pyramid shows that biased attitudes, behaviors and actions, grow in complexity and severity from the bottom to the top. Although the behaviors at each level negatively impact individuals and groups, as one moves up the pyramid, the behaviors have more life-threatening consequences.

Like a pyramid, the upper levels are supported by the lower levels. If people or
institutions treat attitudes and behaviors on the lower levels as being acceptable or “normal,” it results in the behaviors at the next level becoming more accepted. The Pyramid of Hate demonstrates the way that biased attitudes and behaviors can escalate if they are unchecked or unchallenged by others. It also illustrates how systemic oppression and genocide is built upon the acceptance of behaviors described in the lower levels of the pyramid. Conversely, when those lower levels are addressed and confronted, the escalation gets interrupted and the more serious levels of oppression and hate are halted.
Questions to Start the Conversation

- How did you feel when you first heard about the shooting at Tree of Life Synagogue in Pittsburgh, PA?
- What questions do you have about what happened?
- How do you think anti-Semitism played a role in the shooting incident at the Synagogue?
- How do you think members of the Synagogue, neighborhood and community feel in the aftermath of this deadly shooting?
- What can we do to help the families, friends and community of the victims? Is our own community in need of support as well?

Questions to Dig Deeper

(See the Additional Resources section for articles and information that address these questions.)

- To what extent do you think biased and hateful speech contributes to these kinds of incidents?
- What are the differences between bias and hateful speech in-person versus that online?
- Are you witnessing anti-Semitism in school, among people you know or online?
- What other type of biased and hateful speech are we hearing about in our schools, communities and country?
- What can we do about the hate, bias and discrimination we see in our world?

Ideas for Taking Action
Help to organize an educational forum in school to discuss what happened in Pittsburgh, anti-Semitism and gun violence. Make connections to hateful rhetoric and speech in digital spaces or your own school, communities and the nation.

Write a letter to your members of Congress (or to the school/community newspaper) that expresses your views about this incident, anti-Semitism, gun violence and/or hate speech.

Learn more about and connect with national organizations such as ADL, HIAS, and the U.S. Holocaust Memorial Museum or connect with your local Jewish Community Relations Council, local Jewish Federation or your local ADL office.

**Additional Resources**

- Deadly Shooting at the Tree of Life Synagogue (ADL Lesson Plan)
- 5 Tips for Talking with Children about the Shooting at the Tree of Life Synagogue
- Empowering Young People in the Aftermath of Hate (In English and Spanish)
- Pyramid of Hate
- Gun Violence and Mass Shootings (Table Talk)
- Talking to Young Children about Bias and Prejudice

BACK TO TABLE TALK