

Antisemitic Incidents: Being an Ally, Advocate and Activist

Compelling Question: Why is there an increase in antisemitic incidents and what can we do about it?

Grade Level		Time	Common Core Standards
K-2	3-5	45 Minutes	Reading: R1 Speaking & Listening: SL1, SL3 Language: L6
MS	HS		



Web Related Connections

Lessons

- [Challenging Antisemitism](#)
- [Antisemitism Around the World: Global 100](#)
- [On the Rise: Antisemitism in Europe](#)
- [Anti-Muslim Bigotry and Being an Ally](#)

Other Resources

- [6 Ways to Be an Ally](#)
- [Hate on Display™ Hate Symbols Database](#)
- [ADL Deeply Disturbed Over Additional Bomb Threats Directed at Jewish Community Centers Across the Country](#)
- [Deadly Shooting at Pittsburgh Synagogue](#)

Key Words

(See ADL's [Education Glossary Terms](#).)

activist
advocate
ally
antisemitic
appalling
confronted
decent
graffiti
simultaneously
skepticism
suspicious
swastika
symbolism
transformed

LESSON OVERVIEW

The surge of antisemitic incidents in the United States is alarming to many. Several reported incidents include graffiti using swastikas, bomb threats, vandalism and shootings, targeting Jewish Community Centers (JCC) and institutions across the country. At the Chesed Shel Emeth Society cemetery, a historic century-old Jewish cemetery in University City, a suburb of St. Louis, MO., vandal(s) toppled and damaged more than 170 headstones at the cemetery. A gunman armed with an assault rifle and several handguns, entered the Tree of Life synagogue in Pittsburgh, PA and opened fire killing at least 11 congregants and wounding others. In the face of these incidents, it is important to reflect upon how people act as allies, advocates and activists to do something on large and small scales to make a difference.

This lesson provides an opportunity for students to learn about and reflect on current antisemitic incidents, understand how people and groups can make a difference, and explore the various ways different people and groups can act as allies, advocates and activists in order to enact change.

[Note to Teacher: It is important to consider that you may have students in your classroom who are Jewish. Be prepared and sensitive to those students, taking into account the extent to which they are a minority or majority of your classroom and plan accordingly. Some students who are Jewish may feel relieved and comfortable discussing these issues in class and others may feel nervous, uncomfortable or angry to be talking about a topic so close to home. You may want to talk with those students in advance and determine how they can discuss this topic while feeling comfortable and safe.]

LEARNING OBJECTIVES

- Students will define and provide examples for incidents of antisemitism.
- Students will read and reflect upon a story of how a small group of people can make a difference when faced with antisemitism.
- Students will explore the different ways to be an ally, advocate and activist and what roles different people can play in making a difference.

MATERIALS & PREPARATION

- “Subway Riders Scrub Anti-Semitic Graffiti, as ‘Decent Human Beings’” (*The New York Times*, February 5, 2017, www.nytimes.com/2017/02/05/nyregion/swastika-nyc-subways.html?_r=2)

PROCEDURES



Information Sharing: What is Antisemitism?

1. Ask students: *What is antisemitism?* Elicit and define **antisemitism** as follows:

Antisemitism is the marginalization and/or oppression of people who are Jewish based on the belief in stereotypes and myths about Jewish people, Judaism and Israel.
2. Ask students to share any examples of antisemitism they have seen or heard about. Explain that antisemitism can include attitudes, stereotypes, of acts of discrimination or bias. Explain that a stereotype is a belief about a person or group of people, prejudice is an attitude about a person or group of people and discrimination is an action that can follow prejudicial attitudes. Record the examples that students share and include the following on the list:
 - Swastikas
 - Nazi symbols
 - Throwing a penny at a Jewish person
 - Thinking that all Jews are rich and/or cheap
 - A Jewish person being assaulted or attacked
 - Jokes about the Holocaust
 - Denying housing to a Jewish family
 - Anti-Jewish graffiti
 - Vandalism in synagogues and Jewish cemeteries
 - Antisemitic comments made on social media (e.g., Facebook, Twitter, Instagram)
3. Ask students if they have heard about any recent incidents of antisemitism in the news. Share the following incidents or other recent incidents at the time of conducting this activity:
 - ADL [tracks hate incidents](#), including assaults, harassment and vandalism such as graffiti of swastikas. In 2019, ADL recorded 2,107 antisemitic incidents in the U.S., the highest number recorded since tracking began in 1979. Of these recorded incidents, 411 occurred in K-12 schools (up 19% from 344 in 2018), and 186 occurred at colleges and universities (down 10% from 201 in 2018). Since 1945, the swastika has served as the most significant and notorious of hate symbols about antisemitism and white supremacy for most of the world outside of Asia. In addition, we have seen a recent outpouring of antisemitism on social media through imagery and direct harassment of Jewish people.
 - There were three major attacks on the Jewish community in 2019, all resulting in fatalities. On April 27, a white supremacist opened fire at a synagogue in Poway, CA. A Jewish grocery store in Jersey City, NJ was attacked on December 10. And on December 28, an individual entered a rabbi's home in Monsey, NY during a Hanukkah party injuring five people, one of whom died.
 - On October 27, 2018, a gunman, identified as Robert Bowers, armed with an assault rifle and several handguns, entered the Tree of Life synagogue in Pittsburgh, PA and opened fire. Described as the deadliest attack on the Jewish community in the U.S., at least 11 congregants were killed, and four police officers and two others were wounded.
 - There have been several waves of bomb threats targeting Jewish Community Centers (JCC) across the U.S. JCCs are general recreational and social organizations serving the Jewish community in a number of cities and they are open to everyone in the community. JCCs offer a wide range of services and resources to provide educational, cultural, social and recreational programs for people of all ages and backgrounds and support the largest network of Jewish early childhood centers and Jewish summer camps in North America. In total, there have been 69 threats at 54 JCCs, in 27 states and a Canadian province—including previous threats on Jan. 9, 18 and 31 of 2017 as well as 11 threats by telephone on February 20.

- It was reported during the week of February 20, 2017 that at the Chesed Shel Emeth Society cemetery, a historic century-old Jewish cemetery in University City, a suburb of St. Louis, MO, vandal(s) toppled and damaged more than 170 headstones. About a week later, more than 100 headstones were overturned and damaged at Mt. Carmel Cemetery, a Jewish cemetery in Philadelphia, PA. The incident was classified as an act of vandalism, and the FBI joined the investigation to determine whether a hate crime occurred.
4. Engage students in a discussion by asking:
- Why do you think these incidents are happening now?
 - Who are the targets of these incidents and do you think it involves Jewish and non-Jewish people? Explain.
 - What do you think the perpetrators of these incidents are trying to accomplish?
 - What impact does it have on the Jewish community?
 - What impact does it have on the larger society?
 - What should we, as a society, do about it?

Reading Activity

1. Distribute one copy of the article "[Subway Riders Scrub Anti-Semitic Graffiti, as 'Decent Human Beings'](#)" to each student. Give students ten minutes to read silently.
2. After reading, engage students in a discussion by asking:
 - What happened?
 - What do you think Gregory Locke and Jared Nied were thinking when they saw the antisemitic graffiti on the subway?
 - Why do you think the other New Yorkers joined in when they started using hand sanitizer to erase the graffiti?
 - Why do you think so many people responded to and shared Gregory Locke's Facebook post about the incident?
 - What do you think is meant by the quote: "Everyone kind of just did their jobs of being decent human beings?"
 - What do you think you might have done in this situation?
 - What is the message in this story?

Defining Terminology: Ally, Advocate, Activist

1. Explain to students that in addition to what happened with the subway incident in New York City where the subway passengers removed the antisemitic graffiti, there have been other situations where people acted as allies, advocates and activists.
2. Ask students to define the words: **Ally**, **Advocate** and **Activist** and come up with the following definitions, asking students to come up with an example for each. (There are examples in the definitions but first see if students can come up with examples.) Explain that there is overlap between the three; sometimes a person or group is acting as an ally and an advocate at the same time.

Ally: Someone who speaks out on behalf of someone else or takes actions that are supportive of someone else. *Example:* Hearing someone use an antisemitic slur and reaching out to that person and telling them you think that was wrong.

Advocate: Someone who publicly supports or recommends a particular cause or policy. *Example:* Writing a letter to your Congressperson to urge her/him to support legislation about antisemitism.

Activist: Someone who gets involved in activities that are meant to achieve political or social change; this also includes being a member of an organization which is working on change. *Example:* Participating in a demonstration that is focusing on antisemitic hate crimes.

3. Explain that what the three roles have in common is that they involve people who stand up to bias, bullying or hate in some way.
4. Remind students about the vandalism at a Jewish cemetery discussed earlier. Explain that as a result of this vandalism, Muslim groups raised thousands of dollars to help. A crowd funding campaign started by social justice activists with MPower Change and Celebrate raised more than \$20,000 within a few hours to help the Chesed Shel Emel Cemetery. As of 2/21/17, the campaign raised more than \$70,000, which will be directed to help with increased security for Jewish cemeteries and institutions in the region.
5. Engage students in a brief discussion by asking:
 - Why do you think the Muslim groups organized the fundraiser to repair the headstones?
 - Why do people engage in ally, advocacy and activist behavior?
 - What impact does being an ally, advocate and activist have on the people engaging in it?
 - What message does it send to others?

Small Group Activity: Being an Ally, Advocate or Activist

1. Explain to students that now that they have learned about some of the recent incidents of antisemitism in the U.S., they are going to think together about what can be done about it by engaging in role playing around being an ally, advocate or activist.
2. Divide students into eight small groups based on these constituency groups:
3. Individual citizen
 - School principal
 - Legislator (senator, congressperson, city council)
 - Community-based organization
 - Social justice activist group
 - Small business
 - Faith based organization
 - News reporter
4. Playing the role of the group/person assigned to them, have students brainstorm what they can do about incidents of antisemitism from the perspective of their assigned role. For example, if they are in the faith-based organization group, one of their ideas may be to go as a congregation and paint over a swastika that was painted on a neighboring synagogue. Ask the groups to come up with 3–5 ideas that will be shared later with the rest of the class. Give students 10 minutes to complete this task.
5. Have each small group share their ideas with the whole class.

Closing

Do a go round where every student shares one way they can be an ally, advocate or activist in the future.

ADDITIONAL READING

- [“With white supremacists driven online by the pandemic, anti-Semitism trackers watch for new threats”](#) (Jewish Telegraph Agency, April 23, 2020)
- [“Jewish communities face ‘enduring threat’ in the US, federal authorities warn”](#) (ABC News, January 4, 2020)

- [Audit of Antisemitic Incidents 2019](#) (ADL)
- [“Hate crime charges filed in Pittsburgh synagogue shooting that left 11 dead”](#) (CNN, October 29, 2018)
- [“Another Wave Of Bomb Threats Targets Jewish Community Centers”](#) (NPR, February 21, 2017)
- [“Anti-Defamation League Honors New Yorker Who Led Fellow Passengers to Scrub Swastikas from Subway Car”](#) (*People*, February 16, 2017)
- [“Bomb threats called into more than 30 Jewish organizations across the nation”](#) (*The Washington Post*, January 18, 2017)
- [Man who scrubbed swastikas from subway train honored](#) (PIX, February 16, 2017, includes video)
- [“Muslim groups raise thousands of dollars for Jewish community in aftermath of cemetery vandalism”](#) (*St. Louis Post-Dispatch*, February 21, 2017)

Common Core Standards

CONTENT AREA/STANDARD
Reading
R1: Read closely to determine what the text says explicitly and to make logical inferences from it; cite specific textual evidence when writing or speaking to support conclusions drawn from the text.
Speaking and Listening
R1: Prepare for and participate effectively in a range of conversations and collaborations with diverse partners, building on others’ ideas and expressing their own clearly and persuasively.
R3: Evaluate a speaker’s point of view, reasoning, and use of evidence and rhetoric.
Language
L6: Acquire and use accurately a range of general academic and domain-specific words and phrases sufficient for reading, writing, speaking and listening at the college and career readiness level; demonstrate independence in gathering vocabulary knowledge when encountering an unknown term important to comprehension or expression.