

Why Respond?

Many people in the United States, both within and outside of the Jewish community, see anti-Semitism as a thing of the past. Or they see anti-Semitism as a minor problem that does not limit the life choices of Jews in significant ways or in the same way that it did in the past. The Jewish people are perceived to be affluent, prosperous and successful. Like all stereotypes, this assumption may hold true for some Jews, but is not true for all Jews. However, regardless of the life experiences, successes or achievements of individual members of the Jewish community, the hatred and intolerance of anti-Semitism remain powerful and significant realities today.

Anti-Semitism is often referred to as the longest hatred, a virulent form of bigotry that resulted in the death of six million Jews during the Holocaust.

Abraham H. Foxman, the National Director of the Anti-Defamation League, often shares with audiences that “the gas chambers of Auschwitz did not start with bricks; they started with words.” When anti-Semitic words go unchecked, they can escalate to more serious acts of violence and hatred. When no one speaks out against anti-Semitism, the persistent stereotypes and myths can become building blocks, forming a strong foundation for hatred and intolerance.

The manifestations of anti-Semitism that Jewish youth in the U.S. experience on a daily basis today include crude remarks and slurs, demeaning jokes and comments based on anti-Semitic stereotypes, as well as anti-Semitic graffiti, including swastikas, scrawled across the walls of buildings and the desks in their schools. Occasionally, news reports in their communities may also make them aware of hate incidents motivated by anti-Semitism, such as the desecration of a Jewish synagogue or cemetery.

Many young people are unaware that Jews are frequent targets of the anti-Semitic rhetoric and ideology of hate groups and extremists and continue to be scapegoated for a variety of world problems, including acts of terrorism. What most often touches students' lives are the daily acts of subtle anti-Semitism, sometimes unintentional, sometimes overt. In the face of this prejudice and discrimination, many youth remain silent, unsure how to respond to the insensitive, anti-Semitic words or actions of others. Research and experience have proven, however, that hatred escalates when it is unchecked. To break this cycle of hatred, a collective ending of the silence is required. The insensitive and intolerant words and actions that Jewish youth experience daily demand a response that is both effective and appropriate.

Learning to confront anti-Semitism requires commitment, knowledge, motivation and skills. Effective response strategies do not always come naturally. Youth need opportunities to better understand anti-Semitism and the ways it manifests itself. This increased understanding brings



heightened awareness to the anti-Semitism that occurs around them. By learning about the tendency of hate to escalate when unchecked, Jewish youth will better understand the necessity to confront anti-Semitism wherever and whenever it occurs.

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