

Deadly Shooting at the Tree of Life Synagogue

Compelling Question: Is the recent deadly shooting at the Tree of Life Synagogue a reflection of the rise in anti-Semitic incidents in the U.S.?

Grade Level		Time	Common Core Standards
K-2	3-5	45 Minutes	Reading: R1, R4 Speaking & Listening: SL1, SL2 Language: L4, L6
MS	HS		



Web Related Connections

Lessons

- [Anti-Semitic Incidents: Being an Ally, Advocate and Activist](#)
- [Challenging Anti-Semitism: Debunking the Myths and Responding with Facts](#)
- [Anti-Semitism Around the World: Global 100™](#)
- [Swastikas and Other Hate Symbols](#)

Table Talk

- [Gun Violence and Mass Shootings](#)

Other Resources

- [10 Ways Youth Can Engage in Activism](#)
- [Empowering Young People in the Aftermath of Hate \(In English and En Español\)](#)
- [Helping Students Make Sense of News Stories About Bias and Injustice](#)
- [2017 Audit of Anti-Semitic Incidents](#)

Key Words

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

- | | |
|-------------------|--------------------|
| allyship | neo-Nazis |
| animus | offensive |
| anti-Semitism | opprobrium |
| condemnation | permissive |
| de-humanization | pipe bomb |
| discrimination | platitudinous |
| disparage | sacred |
| empathy | systematic |
| free speech | unequivocally |
| genocide | white supremacists |
| microaggressions | xenophobic |
| moral equivalency | |

LESSON OVERVIEW

On the morning of October 27, at Sabbath services—the holy day of the week for the Jewish community—Robert Bowers entered the Tree of Life Synagogue in Pittsburgh, PA and yelled “All Jews must die,” then opened fire upon 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. When surrendering to law enforcement, Bowers told an officer that he “wanted all Jews to die” and that Jews “were committing genocide against his people.” This shooting is the deadliest attack on the Jewish community in the U.S.

This lesson provides an opportunity for students to analyze this incident in the context of the shooter’s background and history of anti-Semitism, as well as the nationwide rise of anti-Semitic incidents over the last year. In this lesson, students will learn more about the incident, understand and consider the larger context of anti-Semitism in the U.S., explore how the escalation of hate operates and how allyship can make a difference.

[Note to Teacher: Because this lesson is specifically about anti-Semitism, 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 understand more about the deadly shooting at the Tree of Life Synagogue in Pittsburgh, PA that took place on October 27, 2018.
- Students will reflect on the larger context of the recent increase in anti-Semitic incidents and crimes.
- Students will explore the escalation of bias into hate and understand how this incident fits into that concept.
- Students will identify ways to act as an ally to those targeted and victimized by the attack and by anti-Semitism in general.

MATERIALS & PREPARATION

- [Background Information: Tree of Life Synagogue Shooting Incident](#) (for teacher)
- “The Hate Poisoning America” article (*The New York Times*, October 28, 2018, www.nytimes.com/2018/10/28/opinion/pittsburgh-shooting-synagogue-bowers.html, one copy for each student)
- [Pyramid of Hate](#) (one for each student)
- [Pyramid of Allyship Worksheet](#) (one for each student)
- Index cards (one for each student)
- Several pieces of chart paper and markers (optional)

PROCEDURES



Information Sharing

1. Begin the lesson by asking students: *Does anyone know what happened at the Tree of Life Synagogue in Pittsburgh, PA recently?*
2. Share some or all of the [background information](#) on the incident.
3. If students don't know the definition of **anti-Semitism**, elicit/provide the following definition:
Anti-Semitism: Prejudice or discrimination that is directed towards Jews. Anti-Semitism is based on stereotypes and myths that target Jews as a people, their religious practices and beliefs, and the Jewish State of Israel.
4. Engage students in a brief discussion by asking:
 - When you first heard about what happened at the Tree of Life Synagogue, what were your thoughts and feelings about it?
 - What did you learn now that you didn't know before?
 - Why do you think there has been an increase in anti-Semitic incidents?
 - How does the increase in anti-Semitism impact our society?
 - Do you think the increase in reports of anti-Semitism is related to this recent incident? Please explain.



Reading Activity

1. Distribute a copy of the article, “[The Hate Poisoning America](#)” to each student. Explain that the article is a New York Times editorial article. Explain that an editorial is an article that is written by the senior editorial staff of a newspaper/publication and it expresses a point of view or opinion on an issue. Give students ten minutes to read the article.

Note: As an alternative to reading in class, you can provide the article for students to read for homework the evening before you teach this lesson.

2. Engage students in a class discussion by asking the following questions:
 - What is *The New York Times*' editorial staff's point of view about “the hate poisoning America?”
 - What evidence do they give for their position that hate is on the rise?
 - What did you learn about the shooter, his background and his motivation to engage in the deadly shooting spree in the synagogue?
 - Besides anti-Semitism, what other forms of bias does the article reference and how are these biases connected?
 - What do you think about the editorial's ideas for solutions?

- What did you learn that you didn't know before?
- If you could, what would you add to their editorial or how would you respond in your own editorial?

Examining Levels of Bias Activity: Pyramid of Hate

1. Distribute the [Pyramid of Hate](#) handout to each student. Go over the different categories in the Pyramid of Hate, defining any words that the students do not know. Review the following points:
 - The Pyramid shows biased attitudes, behaviors and actions, growing in complexity 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 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 hate are halted.
 - Many people describe the behaviors at the bottom level of the pyramid as being “subtle and insignificant.” Like a pyramid, however, the levels above are supported by the lower levels. If people or institutions treat behaviors on the lower level as being acceptable or “normal,” it may not be long before the behaviors at the next more serious and potentially violent levels become more accepted. While the “higher” levels of the pyramid are more life-threatening (e.g., violence, genocide), the impact on the individual of experiencing the lower levels should not be underestimated—particularly if they experience them over a long period of time.
2. Engage students in a discussion using the following questions:
 - How does the Pyramid of Hate relate to the recent shooting at the Tree of Life Synagogue in Pittsburgh, PA?
 - Where would you place this incident on the Pyramid of Hate?
 - If we look at the Pyramid of Hate through the lens of anti-Semitism, what behaviors and attitudes might be at the bottom levels of the pyramid?
 - What is the value of the Pyramid of Hate when learning about bias, prejudice, discrimination and specific forms like anti-Semitism?
 - What new information did you learn through exploring the Pyramid of Hate?
 - At what level of the pyramid do you think it would be easiest for someone (or an institution) to intervene with biased behaviors?

Ally Behavior Activity: Pyramid of Allyship

1. Explain that there are ways we can address and prevent bias, hate and discrimination in our lives. Ask students: *What does it mean to act as an ally?* Elicit a definition of **ally** as follows:

Ally: Someone who speaks out on behalf of someone else or takes actions that are supportive of someone else.
2. Briefly brainstorm some ways that people acted as allies (or could) in relation to the deadly shooting at Tree of Life Synagogue. Keep this short because students are going to engage in a more in-depth exploration of allyship in their small groups.
3. Divide students into small groups of 4–5 students each. Distribute the [Pyramid of Allyship Worksheet](#) to each student or give them one piece of chart paper and markers for their whole group. Have the students assign a reporter and recorder. Have the small groups work together to identify actions that individuals, groups or institutions can take to address bias and in this specific case, anti-Semitism. Instruct students to refer to their

Pyramid of Hate handout and use it as a guide for identifying actions and ally behavior at each level. They should record their groups' responses in the appropriate level on the Pyramid of Allyship in the categories listed below. If you want to provide an example for each level, some general ideas are provided below. Explain to students that they should come up with at least two ideas per section of the Pyramid.

Biased Attitudes: Reflecting on my own stereotypes about different groups of people

Acts of Bias: Interrupting an offensive joke

Discrimination: Attending a rally or demonstration to highlight institutional discrimination

Bias-Motivated Violence: Helping to repair a mosque or synagogue that has been vandalized

Genocide: Holding a fundraiser to support organizations dedicated to ending the crisis to the Rohingya people in Myanmar

4. Reconvene the class and have the recorders from each group share their group's Pyramid of Allyship.
5. Engage students in a discussion by asking the following questions:
 - Was it difficult or easy to come up with specific action to act as an ally?
 - Can you describe a time you acted as an ally? What motivated you to do so?
 - Are there times that you have not acted as an ally when you had the opportunity to do so? What factors led to your decision not to act as an ally?
 - Has anyone ever acted as an ally on your behalf? How did that make you feel?
 - How can you tell what someone wants you to say or do to be their ally?
 - What is one ally behavior you will consider acting upon as a result of this discussion?
 - What did you learn by doing this activity?

Closing

1. Distribute index cards to each student. Have them complete the following sentences about today's lesson.
I feel ...
I learned ...
I will ...
2. When finished, do a go-round and have each student share what's on their card. If time is limited, have each student read one of their sentences.

ADDITIONAL READING AND RESOURCES

- ["11 people were gunned down at a Pittsburgh synagogue. Here are their stories"](#) (CNN, October 30, 2018)
- [A Brief History of Anti-Semitism](#) (ADL)
- [Deadly Shooting at Pittsburgh Synagogue](#) (ADL blog, October 27, 2018)
- ["Synagogue shooting 'will not break us. It will not ruin us,' rabbi says at vigil"](#) (CNN, October 29, 2018)
- ["The terrible numbers that grow with each mass shooting"](#) (*The Washington Post*, October 29, 2018)
- ["Trump laments Pittsburgh synagogue shooting, then suggests victims should have protected themselves"](#) (Vox, October 27, 2018)
- ["When Hate Goes Mainstream"](#) (*The New York Times*, October 28, 2018)

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.
R4: Interpret words and phrases as they are used in a text, including determining technical, connotative, and figurative meanings, and analyze how specific word choices shape meaning or tone.
Speaking and Listening
SL1: 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.
SL2: Integrate and evaluate information presented in diverse media and formats, including visually, quantitatively, and orally.
Language
L4: Determine or clarify the meaning of unknown and multiple-meaning words and phrases by using context clues, analyzing meaningful word parts, and consulting general and specialized reference materials, as appropriate.
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.

Background Information: Tree of Life Synagogue Shooting Incident

- 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 and 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. When surrendering to law enforcement, Bowers told an officer that he “wanted all Jews to die” and that Jews “were committing genocide against his people.” This deadly shooting is the deadliest attack on the Jewish community in the U.S.
- The shooter, Robert Bowers posted on Gab, a social media site frequented by right-wing extremists, which highlighted his [virulent anti-Semitism beliefs](#). The vast majority of his posts are anti-Semitic in nature. 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. The last of his social media posts claimed that “HIAS (Hebrew Immigrant Aid Society) likes to bring invaders in that kill our people. I can’t sit by and watch my people get slaughtered. Screw your optics, I’m going in.” ([HIAS](#) is a Jewish organization that provides humanitarian aid and assistance to refugees.) The post, made just a short time before the attack on the synagogue began, may help explain the shooter’s motivation for the attack.
- The names of the victims are as follows: Irving Younger, Melvin Wax, Rose Mallinger, Bernice Simon, Sylvan Simon, Jerry Rabinowitz, Joyce Fienberg, Richard Gottfried, Daniel Stein, Cecil Rosenthal, David Rosenthal. To learn more about them, use the article below.
- In its annual [2017 Audit of Anti-Semitic Incidents](#), ADL found that the number of 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. The sharp rise was in part due to a significant increase (94%) in incidents in schools and on college campuses (87%), which nearly doubled for the second year in a row.
- There was a total of 1,986 incidents, which fall into three major categories: (1) harassment, where a Jewish person or group of people feel harassed by the perceived anti-Semitic words, spoken or written, or actions of someone else; (2) vandalism, where property is damaged in a manner that indicates the presence of anti-Semitic animus or in a manner that victimizes Jews for their religious affiliations, and (3) assault, where people’s bodies are targeted with violence accompanied by expressions of anti-Semitic animus.
- Vandalism as a category saw the largest increase in 2017. With 952 incidents recorded, this is an 86% increase over the 510 incidents reported in 2016. Anti-Semitic incidents took place in a wide variety of locations, including places of business, private homes, public areas such as parks and streets, Jewish institutions like temples and synagogues, schools, and colleges/universities. **Although the largest number of incidents typically occur in public areas, in 2017 K-12 schools surpassed public areas as the locations with the most anti-Semitic incidents, at 457 incidents being reported in K-12 schools and 455 in public areas.**

Pyramid of Hate



Pyramid of Allyship Worksheet

