

Humanistic Psychology and Antisemitism

Against Hate; Against Antisemitism

By Ilene Serlin

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For February 25, 2023, neo-Nazis and white supremacists had planned a day of hate against Jews. That day, the American Psychological Association (APA) issued a statement condemning “antisemitism and hate in all forms.” The statement was a welcome milestone, putting APA on record as taking a stand against an alarming rise of antisemitism—one that is taking place alongside a simultaneous rise of white supremacy and neo-Nazi violence.

What Can APA and Humanistic Psychology Do to Build On This Resolution?

First, it is important to understand why this issue is of such pressing concern. In 2021, the audit from the Anti-Defamation League showed that antisemitic incidents were at the highest rate ever recorded and included physical assaults and over 1,500 incidents of harassment and vandalism (Algemeiner, 2022). Currently, more than 4 out of 10 Jews in the U.S. feel less secure than before, and 4 out of 5 said they thought antisemitism was taken less seriously than other forms of hate (Associated Press, 2023). Dramatic incidents of hostage-taking in Colleyville, Texas in January 2022, and social media posts by celebrities, escalated the spread of antisemitism. At the United Nations, first gentleman Doug Emhoff said, “Silence is not an option.”

Why is it important to speak up during this rising rate of antisemitism? The recent documentary by Ken Burns on the U.S. involvement in the Holocaust showed with alarming clarity how, overnight, German Jews (who had been secure and assimilated before World War II) became tragic and extinguished victims. For thousands of years, Jews have been evicted from countries, especially when they rise to top levels of government and society (Karsh, 2023). The slogans shouted recently by celebrities echoed age-old stereotypes that Jews caused the death of Jesus Christ, drink the blood of Christian children, are taking over the world and replacing everyone else. Antisemitism is also a social psychological issue. A belief in conspiracy theories, for example, has been shown to be the strongest predictor of antisemitic behavior (Cohen et al., 2009). In addition, the rate of U.S. mass killings associated with extremism was over 3 times higher than any other time since the 1970s. All of these were linked to right-wing groups, especially to white supremacists. These killings include the shootings in Buffalo that killed 10 Black shoppers and 5 people at an LGBT nightclub in Colorado (Whitehurst, 2023).

On the other hand, antisemitism is also coming from the left, from progressive organizations. It is obvious, therefore, that extremism threatens all groups and is a sign that the middle of society is falling apart. When societies, including the U.S., turned on

their Jewish neighbors and friends in the past, it was at a time when that society was already showing signs of splitting apart and polarizing, with emerging totalitarian governments around the world. The world today is at a similar inflection point with rising fascism, ultranationalism, and polarization. Jews have been the historic scapegoat that conveniently allows other groups to find a group lower on the totem pole and vent their fear of annihilation as aggression turned outward (Greenberg, 2015). I fear the rising antisemitism is both a problem to be confronted in and of itself, and it is also a symbol and harbinger of approaching global conflicts. Jews have been the canaries in the coal mines. Therefore, this mechanism must be brought to the surface, named, and confronted.

For this purpose, therefore, we will use the definition of the International Holocaust Remembrance Alliance (IHRA):

Antisemitism is a certain perception of Jews, which may be expressed as hatred toward Jews. Rhetorical and physical manifestations of antisemitism are directed toward Jewish or non-Jewish individuals and/or their property, toward Jewish community institutions and religious facilities. ... Contemporary examples ... include, but are not limited to:

- Denying the Jewish people their right to self-determination, such as by claiming that the existence of a State of Israel is a racist endeavor.
 - Applying double standards by requiring of it a behavior not expected or demanded of any other democratic nation.
 - Using the symbols and images associated with classic antisemitism (for example, claims of Jews killing Jesus or blood libel) to characterize Israel or Israelis.
 - Drawing comparisons of contemporary Israeli policy to that of the Nazis.
 - Holding Jews collectively responsible for actions of the state of Israel.
- (International Holocaust Remembrance Alliance, 2020)

Frightening rates of antisemitism also are being reported in academia and even in psychology training programs. For example, a Title VI complaint was recently filed against George Washington University for not protecting its students in a required course on diversity in their professional psychology degree program. The issue here was not an academic discourse about political differences; rather, it was about how the course content was delivered (Nelson, 2023). Students reported feeling unsafe to identify as Jewish or Israeli, as have students in high schools and colleges around the country (Kressel & Kressel, 2016). They claim to have been attacked verbally, their complaints ignored, and bullied. Psychologically, we know that experiences of antisemitism have been correlated with increases in depression and anxiety, difficulties with concentration, reduced self-esteem and identity problems (Jaspal, 2023). After a rash of antisemitic flyers that were posted around the Bay area, Teresa Drenick, ADL's Deputy Regional Director for the Central Pacific Region, said, "There's psychological damage... there's intimidation, and there's fear that is stirred within the neighborhood, within the community, within the city" (Gordon, 2023). In fact, awareness of antisemitism is growing among psychologists at APA. Some of us have just founded the

Association for Jewish Psychologists specifically to consider issues of education and research about Jewish values and antisemitism.

What Can Humanistic Psychologists Do to Build On This Resolution?

One first step is education. Although the Holocaust has been the subject of research, research into historical and current forms of antisemitism is lacking (Kressel & Kressel, 2016). A 2020 survey found that, in the United States, more than 63% of respondents between 18 and 35 did not know that more than 6 million Jews were killed during the Holocaust, and almost half of those had read Holocaust denial posts on social media (Claims Conference, 2020).

Second, while diversity courses and trainings have become mandatory in many curricula in all levels of education, there has been almost no shared understanding of outcome or assessment. These courses have become a political football in identity politics, splitting right and left political positions. Students are being taught political rhetoric and dogma instead of critical thinking, as intellectual discourse is hijacked by polemics and easy slogans. Some schools have even cancelled events or adopted anti-Israeli policy statement. Diversity courses, created and executed to include all ethnic groups, can be very valuable for the education of a psychologist. Can psychologists, with our expertise in assessment and objective inquiry, make diversity courses that are more balanced and constructive? Can we build on APA's (2005) statement about hate crimes? Can we train trainers to be more objective, and avoid demonizing any one group? We have a history of humanistic psychologists like Carl Rogers, who worked to build bridges and create constructive and healing dialogue. As humanistic clinicians, can we be the psychologist we study about becoming? Psychological maturity used to be measured in terms of the ability to hold multiple perspectives, to tolerate ambiguity, to listen non-judgmentally and compassionately, and not to project our emotions onto others (Loevinger, 1966; Maslow, 1971). Can we practice our ethics and be fair and even healing as we address conflict? Can we build on this statement by APA President Thema Bryant-Davis (APA, 2023)?

APA's (2005) *Resolution on Anti-Semitic and Anti-Jewish Prejudice* (click on the link to access the full text) specifically calls on all psychologists to act to eliminate all discrimination of an antisemitic nature. It also commits APA to use its influence to promote fairness, respect, and dignity for all people, across religious and ethnic identities, in all arenas in which psychologists work and practice, and in society at large.

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