

Fighting Antisemitism Together

“The opposite of love is not hate; it’s indifference.”
– Eli Wiesel,
author/Holocaust survivor

By Jodi Derkson, BC Regional Director, Educational Programs, Fighting Antisemitism Together



HAVE YOU EVER walked by a desk with a swastika scrawled on it? You may think that it’s either a student testing their boundaries through rebellion or someone with more profound issues. Regardless, what do you do? Grab an eraser, destroy the evidence, and let it go? Or, do you discuss your discovery with your class?

How about when you hear a student off-handedly remark, “Don’t try to Jew me down!” Does the student understand that using Jew as a pejorative verb is antisemitic? Do they even care? Or are they ignorant to the origin of the expression? I’ve found that most young people don’t quite grasp how pervasive and hurtful these comments and actions are to the Jewish people.

Students need to be called out on their racist behaviour. If we don’t discuss our observations, we run the risk of these minor infractions becoming unconscious biases, leading to prejudice, hatred, and violence. There’s a slippery slope when we accept stereotypes as truths about people “different” than ourselves. Throughout history the Jewish people have been considered outsiders, and today antisemitism is on the rise. It’s the right time to teach about the history of antisemitism so that all students learn that, as innocuous as it may seem, discriminatory speech targeting Jews can lead to heinous actions.

Historically, Canada has not been welcoming to the Jewish people. In fact, in 1939 an immigration agent was asked how many Jews would be allowed in Canada after the war, to which he replied, “None is too many.” Antisemitism was rife last century with denial of Jews applying for jobs, club memberships, and university acceptance; and today it is rearing its ugly head again. At a recent Fighting Antisemitism Together (FAST) event, Human Rights Commissioner Marie-Claude Landry reported that 2018 saw more recorded hate crimes than any other year, with over 1,129 complaints reported. Of those reported hate crimes, 19% targeted Jews—more than any other group. Michael Morstyn, CEO of B’nai Brith Canada, commented, “We are experiencing a disturbing new normal when it comes to antisemitism in this country, with expressions of anti-Jewish hatred surfacing in regions that are typically less prone to such prejudices.”

Recent antisemitic incidents include a group of teens shooting fireworks at Hasidic Jews in Quebec and a group of Orthodox students being violently assaulted in Toronto. Because of incidents at York University, University of Toronto, McGill, and other institutions, Jewish students report hiding their identity as they feel unsafe on campus.

Recently, I led a workshop for Jewish youth who will travel to Poland to visit Auschwitz and other Holocaust sites, a program offered by March of the Living. I learned how pervasive

antisemitism is for them. One teen revealed how a member of his baseball team told him to burn in Auschwitz with his family. We also learned of one boy who boasted about wearing a Hitler mustache at his school, and another told us about a group of boys doing a Nazi salute at a school assembly. Many mentioned becoming inured, though still hurt, by these events.

Social media maximizes the hate circulating, and lonely youth are recruited by online hate groups. Considering how violent antisemitism worldwide has grown, we should take these incidents seriously.

To refresh students’ memories about the Holocaust and the dangers of antisemitism, teachers can play short videos available at www.voicesintoaction.ca that explain the actions that led up to the Holocaust. Would they still draw swastikas once looking into the eyes of Holocaust survivor Max Eisen? Let’s all do more to broach this topic and to speak up when we bear witness to antisemitism occurring in our inclusive places of learning. 🗣️

FURTHER INFORMATION

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Teachers can access free, bilingual teaching resources at www.voicesintoaction.ca.