

We Need to Talk About Antisemitism

by Rabbi Diana Fersko

Discussion Guide

***This guide was created in partnership with Pamela Barkley, MSW, Chief Growth Officer at Moving Traditions.

How to approach this conversation: You probably agree with some of the ideas in this book. You probably disagree with others. For the purposes of this discussion, that's a good thing. Dialogue, discourse, and debate are values that rest at the heart of Judaism. You don't have to agree with everything in the book or everything said in this conversation about the book and that's ok. You may even find moments of this conversation frustrating and unresolved.

We Need to Talk About Antisemitism is an accessible guide to identifying and combating Jew hatred today. But it's a guide that is intended to make you think. So give your fellow book club members the respect of telling them what you really think. And listen to what they really think as well. We might not be able to solve antisemitism in one conversation, but every step we make in identifying and diminishing the Jew hatred of today can make the world just a little bit better. Here we go!

This discussion guide is a companion to the book, organized by chapter. There are activities, prompts and instructions for the facilitator in each plan.

In each section you'll find an opening icebreaker question meant to introduce your participants to one another so that they are comfortable sharing. If your participants are already a cohesive group, you can skip these opening questions.

Chapter 2: Microaggressions

Materials List:

Write the following words each on its own piece of paper, as large as possible:

WORK, GROWING UP, SOCIAL LIFE, NEVER

Tape each one up in one of the four corners of the room

Optional Icebreaker: Go around the room and ask everyone to introduce themselves by saying their name and completing the sentence: "I decided to read Rabbi Fersko's book because _____."

SAY: In the book, Rabbi Fersko writes that someone once said to her: "*She's Jewish but you know, pretty...*"

Microaggressions against Jews, which Rabbi Fersko calls "narrowing," are the everyday insults, the vaguely negative anti-Jewish sentiments that we feel but don't always name. They are casual but hurtful comments that can happen in the workplace, at school, in our social lives, and even in our families. Taken one at a time, these small insults are easy to ignore. But the cumulative effect is real - add them up over a lifetime, and you start to get the feeling that showing up as a Jew in mainstream culture is increasingly difficult.

SAY: Let's see what microaggressions we have all come into contact within our own lives. I am going to read a list of things people commonly say about Jews. As I read each of these microaggressions, stand in the corner of the room that best matches your experience. One corner is if you have heard this idea at work; one corner is if you heard it growing up, one corner is if you heard it somewhere in your social life and one corner if you've never heard this idea at all.

INVITE everyone to stand up to get started

Pause in between reading each prompt and ask participants from each corner to share a story out loud. What happened? How did it make you feel when you heard it? Did you consider it a microaggression at the time? Do you now, after reading this book? Alternately, allow a few minutes for the participants standing in each corner to have a small group conversation and then report out.

READ the following examples of how Jews are narrowed in our culture:

1. Jews are funny
2. Jews love to eat
3. Jews are smarter than others
4. Jews are not particularly attractive
5. Jews are better with money
6. Jews love money
7. Jews are liberal
8. Jews are not good at sports
9. Jews are stingy

INVITE participants to sit down again.

ASK

- Which of these microaggressions bothers you the most and why? (*re-read the list above if needed*)

- How do these kind of microaggressions contribute to your overall Jewishishness?
- Should we respond to microaggressions? How? And what can get in the way of responding?

Chapter 3: Christianity

Optional Icebreaker: Go around the room and ask everyone to introduce themselves saying their name and the best Chanukah present they ever received.

SAY: In the book, Rabbi Fersko writes that she once heard someone say the following to a Cantor in a synagogue: *"You're so lucky Chanukah comes early this year so that you have time to prepare for Christmas!"*

This statement typifies "the Christmas assumption." The "Christmas assumption" is the assumption that everyone celebrates Christmas. Or that everyone should celebrate Christmas. Or that somewhere, deep down, even though Jews don't celebrate Christmas, we really kind of want to. The Christmas assumption can be a way of denying the Jewish experience.

SAY: I am going to read a statement and if it has ever happened to you, I want you to raise your hand. For example, if I said, "someone held a door open for me," how many of you would now be raising your hands? *(have them do so)*

After each prompt, ask 1-2 people who raised their hands to elaborate and/or ask, how did you respond, if you did?

- Someone asked my Jewish child what they wanted from Santa this year
- Someone asked me what church I go to
- Someone wished me a Merry Christmas

SAY: Okay, now I am going to say this side of the room (gesture to one side) "strongly agree" and the other side (gesture again) is "strongly disagree." I'm going to ask you all to stand up. As I read the next prompt, move towards the side of the room that best represents your answer. Remember, it's a spectrum and so you can stand anywhere in between the "Strongly agree" and "strongly disagree" as well! *(If you think your group needs to practice, try "mint chocolate chip is the best ice cream flavor" and allow participants to move in the room)*

- I think it's fine to go to the Rockefeller Center Christmas Spectacular, drive to see Christmas lights or Christmas windows.
- I think it's fine for Jews to go around singing Christmas carols.
- I'm ok when at a Christian wedding they dance the hora at their wedding
- I'm ok when non-Jews have B'nai Mitzvah or Passover seders

After each prompt, ask 1-2 people along the spectrum to elaborate on why they are standing where they are on the spectrum. Or, you can have them speak in small groups with the people they are standing closest to and then debrief with the larger group.

INVITE participants to return to their seats.

ASK:

- The first set of prompts was all about people assuming that everyone is Christian. Do you assume most people you meet are Christian? Do you assume they're Jewish?
- If it's true that Christianity is the default in our culture, how might that be harmful to Jews, if you believe it is?

Chapter 4: Holocaust:

Materials

Write each of these sentences on its own flip chart paper/board and only show it as you read.

- 6 million people died in the Holocaust
- 6 million Jews died in the Holocaust
- 6 million Jews were murdered in the Holocaust
- 6 million Jews were murdered by the Nazis over open graves and in gas chambers in concentration camps in the Holocaust

Optional Icebreaker: Go around the room and ask everyone to introduce themselves saying their name and what generation American they are.

SAY: In the book, Rabbi Fersko recalls a text she once received saying: "Why are people voluntarily wearing a yellow star? That's insane, right?" The book describes a practice it calls "Flat Holocaust." Flat Holocaust is the culturally aggressive miniaturization of the genocide against the Jewish people. It means reducing history's greatest crime against humanity - a crime both intimate and individual, and one

incomprehensibly vast - and turning it into a vehicle, an analogy. It's making the Holocaust into a metaphor rather than a distinct, horrifying event in Jewish history.

I am going to show you what this means. I am going to read four different sentences about the Holocaust, one at a time.

READ the following four sentences (*display the flip chart pages or write on the board as you say them*)

- 6 million people died in the Holocaust
- 6 million Jews died in the Holocaust
- 6 million Jews were murdered in the Holocaust
- 6 million Jews were murdered by the Nazis over open graves and in gas chambers in concentration camps during the Holocaust

ASK:

- What are the differences between these sentences?
- Which sentence best represents how we talk about the Holocaust in today's world?
- Which sentence best represents how you would like us to talk about the Holocaust?
- Have you seen comparisons of present day events to the Holocaust? How does that make you feel?
- What are ways to fight against Flat Holocaust?

Chapter 5: Race:

Optional Icebreaker: Go around the room asking everyone to introduce themselves saying their name and one country that their family is from.

SAY: A congregant once explained to Rabbi Fersko that: "I can't talk about antisemitism because I'm white and racism is so much worse." In the book we learn about Replacement Theory. Replacement theory is the racist and antisemitic Nazi idea that Jews are the puppet masters behind policies designed to replace white people with people of color.

ASK: What have you heard or seen that fits into this theory? (*possible answers include: Charlottesville, white supremacist marches, swastikas, conspiracy theories about Jews*)

SAY: On the other side of the political spectrum, we see the antisemitic theory that Jews are hyper-white oppressors intentionally holding people of color down.

ASK:

- Have you heard or seen anything that fits into this theory?
- In what ways have you seen Jews be defined as only White? (*possible answers include: Jews are described as privileged, victims of the Holocaust being described as white Europeans, Israelis being described as white colonialists, your children learning they are white at school, etc.*)

SAY: So on the one hand we have this idea of Jews as “others” trying to replace white people, and in another version we have Jews as white people trying to oppress people of color.

ASK: Which narrative is more troubling to you? And why?

SAY: I am going to break you up into small groups (3-4 people) to discuss how you see yourself personally and then we will join back together. In your small groups, consider the following two questions:

- How do you see yourself? How do you relate to the idea of race?
- What's the narrative you'd like to write about who you are?

Allow small groups to talk for a few minutes and then bring the group back to debrief.

Chapter 6: Israel

Materials

3 large pieces of flip chart paper (or a board and markers)

Optional Icebreaker: Go around the room and ask everyone to introduce themselves saying their name and one word that comes to mind when they think of “Israel.”

SAY: A college student asked Rabbi Fersko: "How am I supposed to be Jewish on Campus, I can't take this..." Maybe you think the way we talk about Israel is appropriate and deserved. Or maybe you think the way we talk about Israel is wildly antisemitic. Maybe you are somewhere in between or completely unsure. For our purpose, that's not what matters right now. Instead, at this moment we are not going to focus on the quality - or lack thereof - of our Israel discourse. Instead, we are going to focus on the

outcome of our Israel discourse. The book argues that the outcome of the negative ways we talk about Israel creates more antisemitism against American Jews.

Facilitators note: Talking about Israel can be contentious, emotional, and intimidating. Remember, it's ok to disagree. And if you do disagree with something, I hope you feel comfortable saying so. Let's try not to engage in a spirit of shared respect and commitment to the Jewish way of thinking – which can hold multiple, sometimes conflicting opinions.

SAY: Let's do a little experiment! I am going to write the name of a country on a piece of paper. What are the first things you associate with this country? There are no right or wrong answers – whatever comes to mind just call out and I will write your answers as fast as I can!

WRITE “Italy” on the first paper. **WRITE DOWN** the words they call out. (*Encourage participants to just brainstorm. Ask what are the first things you think of? What do you associate with Italy? What is Italy known for? What do you hear about Italy in the news? Spend 2 minutes on this. Possible answers – pasta, Italian, pizza, Florence, the Pope, etc.*)

SAY: Okay! Let's try another one!

WRITE “Holland” on the second paper. **WRITE DOWN** the words they call out. (*Encourage the brainstorm using the same questions as above*)

SAY: Okay now it's time for our third one.

WRITE “Israel” on the third paper. **WRITE DOWN** the words they call out.

Which country has the most positive words?

Which country has the most negative words? (When we do this exercise with teens, we often get words like “intense,” “scary,” and “stressful” along with more positive phrases)

How does that make you feel?

What impact does that have on you, if any, as a Jewish American?

What impact does it have, if any, on the Jewish people as a whole?

Chapter 7: Accountability:

Optional Icebreaker: Go around the room and ask everyone to introduce themselves saying their name and their favorite Jewish/Hebrew song.

SAY: After Kanye West's antisemitic rant, Rabbi Fersko heard congregants and friends torn about listening to his music. "But I love Kanye's music," they said. This chapter explores how we do or don't hold people who say antisemitic things accountable. Can we still listen to Kanye? Should you play his music at your daughter's bat mitzvah? What should the consequences be for someone who shares antisemitic ideas?

What about people like Wagner, Voltaire, or Alice Walker whose work is embraced by high culture.

Let's see what this room thinks because there are no clear right or wrong answers here and we all may draw lines in different places. Everyone stand up for a minute. If you think Kanye should lose his job – no endorsements, no more spotify, all statements removed from social media - if you feel this way, sit down
(pause and ask anyone who sat down for their reasoning)

SAY: Okay, what about some sort of suspension? Should Kanye's music temporarily be suspended from spotify? If you think so, sit down
(again, pause and ask anyone who sat down to explain their reasoning)

SAY: Okay, should Kanye have to publicly apologize? If you think he should be made to do so, sit down. *(again, pause and ask for reasoning and perhaps ask, "who should he apologize to? And how?")*

ASK: For those of you still standing, what do you think would be an appropriate consequence, if any, for Kanye's behavior? *(Allow for a few answers)*

SAY: So clearly we do not all agree on what the consequences should be for Kanye's antisemitic behavior. In thinking through how to hold antisemites accountable, does it matter if the person is alive or deceased?

I am going to have you break up into small groups to talk about the following questions:

- Do we think our culture is doing a good job of holding antisemites accountable? In what ways, yes or no?
- Do you think the Jewish community has influence over what is considered antisemitic? Should we? If you think we should, how can we make that happen?

Allow for a few minutes of discussion and then bring everyone back to hear a little about the small group conversations.

Chapter 8: The Future:

Materials

Flipchart paper or board and marker

Small post it notes and pens for every participant

Large cup or basket

Optional Icebreaker: Go around the room and ask everyone to introduce themselves saying their name and to complete the following sentence: “One reason I really like being Jewish is _____”

Facilitator Note: Because antisemitic ideas turn into physical violence, we need physical security measures. This conversation assumes those measures are in place. If they are not, please speak to a Jewish leader in your community to begin that conversation.

Rabbi Fersko asserts that one way to combat antisemitism is to be “Jewish visible.” For some of you, that may be quite natural and easy. For others, perhaps less so. Think about the people you work with. Do they know you're Jewish? What about your neighbors? Do they know? These were all rhetorical questions, but let's think some of this through together.

I am going to say this side of the room (gesture to one side) is “strongly agree” and the other side (gesture again) is “strongly disagree.” I'm going to ask you all to stand up. As I read a sentence, move towards the side of the room that best represents your answer. Remember, it's a spectrum and so you can stand anywhere in between the “Strongly agree” and “strongly disagree” as well! *(If you think your group needs to practice, try “mint chocolate chip is the best ice cream flavor” and allow participants to move in the room)*

READ statements one at a time, pausing in between to ask participants to explain why they are standing where they are standing. Note any times that there is a clear majority on one side of the room.

1. I wear a Jewish star, chai, kippah or some other Jewish symbol most of the time
2. Most of my colleagues know I am Jewish
3. Most of my friends know I am Jewish
4. People who follow me on social media know I am Jewish

5. I tell people I am taking off work for Rosh Hashanah/Passover
6. I use Jewish/Hebrew/Yiddish words in mixed company
7. I find ways to tell new people I meet that I am Jewish

There are two pieces to this: celebrating Jewish life AND making your Judaism more visible. How can we do this? How can we amplify the public display and celebration of Judaism? How can you be more Jewish - visible? Let's brainstorm ways to do both of these things! The only rule of a brainstorm is that every idea is a good one! So let's get started!

Write their answers on a flipchart page

Facilitator: If these ideas do not come up, feel free to add them to the list

- Share you did this book group
- Post a picture of your family seder
- Go to a synagogue, a Jewish museum, or another Jewish institution and tell other people about it
- Donate to a Jewish organization that supports Jews and share publicly that you did so
- Read the Jewish press and subscribe to their newsletters/Instagram feeds—Tablet Magazine, JTA, Jewish Insider, etc.
- Listen to Jewish podcasts and rate/review/recommend them to others
- Put menorah in your window this chanukah
- Talk about antisemitism in public spaces – work, family gatherings, your child's school
- Make something Jewish - if you are a writer, write something about Judaism. If you love to cook, cook Jewish food and invite a friend to do it with you.

SAY: This is a great list to start with and I am sure if we stayed here longer we could come up with more. If you want, take a picture of this list so you have it handy. For now, I am going to ask you to each look at this list and decide on ONE item that you think you can commit to doing in the next two weeks. Once you have your thing, write it on your post it note, fold it up and come put it in this basket. While your answers will be shared, they will be shared anonymously so don't worry.

Allow time for everyone to write something and place their post it notes in the basket

Option 1: Facilitator reads the notes in the basket out loud one by one (reminding participants they should stay anonymous)

Option 2: Pass the basket around the room and ask everyone to take out one paper and read it out loud (reminding participants they should still stay anonymous)