

ERASIVE ANTI-SEMITISM

What is Erasive Anti-Semitism?

Erasive anti-Semitism is a form of anti-Semitism which negates the right of Jews individually or collectively to define their own identity, experience, and vulnerabilities.¹ There are two different strains of erasure: erasure of Jewish identity and erasure of Jews as victims of prejudice.²

Type 1: Erasure of Jewish Identity

Erasing Jewish identity denies the Jewish community the right to self-define and to represent their own narrative. It essentially denies Jews the right to define themselves first and foremost as Jews, a distinct people with a distinct history. Instead, according to the Reut Group, it imposes external definitions on Jews, such as characterizing Jews ethnically as white Europeans or as one-dimensionally “privileged” – literally erasing Jewish identity and replacing it with something else.³ Jews have faced persecution and have been “othered” by the dominant society for 3,000 years because of their ethnicity. To impose factually and historically inaccurate narratives upon them is not only insensitive, but also denies the uniqueness and vulnerability of the Jewish community. Erasive anti-Semitism also minimizes the uniquely Jewish contributions that Jewish people collectively and individually have made to society. Erasure of Jewish identity also includes treating Jews as being solely a religious group as opposed to

also a racial, or ethnic group that shares a national origin.

Relatedly, Ben Freeman explains that the erasure of Jewish identity frequently “erases our indigeneity - the fact that [the Jews] are indigenous to the Land of Israel in the Levant.⁴ This occurs when Jews are told that they do not originate from the Land of Israel and when Jews face outside pressure to denounce or disassociate from an integral component of their Jewish identity, Zionism.⁵ LDB President Alyza D. Lewin has stated that “the pressure imposed on Jews today to shed their support for the Jewish homeland is a contemporary form of the historic demand that Jews discard their sense of Jewish peoplehood and yearning to return to Zion - essential elements of the Jews' religious and ethnic identity.”⁶ By demanding that Jews erase an integral component of their ethnic, religious, cultural, and historical identity, anti-Semites deny and distort historical facts and perpetuate persecution.

Type 2: Erasure of Jews as Victims of Prejudice

Jews have faced persecution for thousands of years across the globe. Nonetheless, some attempt to erase Jews as victims of prejudice, stripping them of their minority status and denying past and current persecution. Popular erasure of Jewish suffering includes Holocaust denial or labeling light-skinned Jews as white

and therefore unable to be victims of legitimate forms of prejudice. Overall, they aim to diminish and erase anti-Semitism from the history books and warp contemporary society's view of Jews. They often blame Jews for current discriminatory social power structures or frame Jews as being powerful and privileged oppressors who account for all of society's injustice, cloaking classic anti-Semitic conspiracy theories and stereotypes in language that purports to fight discrimination and bigotry but actually perpetuates it.

Examples of erasure abound, despite the historical record being stained with Jewish blood. For example, in the fight against Zionism, some argue that Jews have no historic connection to the Land of Israel.⁷ This charge not only ignores well-documented history but also ignores every ancient persecution Jews faced while in the Land of Israel. A series of major deportations of Israel's Jews between 722 BCE and 1st century CE led to the modern-day Jewish diaspora, flinging Jews across the globe – physically disconnecting most of them from their spiritual homeland and people.⁸ Other calamities include the loss of Jewish sovereignty to foreign nations and the destruction of the First and Second Temple in Jerusalem.⁹ While these tragedies are ancient, their impact is not. These events altered and shaped Judaic practice and led to a segregated worldwide diaspora – one that would be subjected to religious persecution,

political disenfranchisement, and even genocide.

Jews continued to be victimized into the medieval ages, facing massacres, forced conversion, and economic deprivation. Chimerical myths about Jews spread among the general population. Jews were charged with the ritual blood libel (killing Christian children for their blood) and host desecration, as well as well-poisonings.¹⁰ Anti-Semitism was also institutionalized, with Jews being forced to wear identifying badges, barred from certain occupations, and restricted to living in segregated areas.¹¹ Jewish ghettos were established, citizenship was denied, and anti-Semitic conspiracy theories about Jewish wealth and power were published for public consumption.¹² This marginalization and persecution birthed the anti-Semitism of the modern era, with the same myths and stereotypes being perpetuated; today the Jewish state is accused of killing children for their blood, and incredibly despite their significant death toll and incredible contributions to the vaccines, Jews are also blamed for the Covid-19 pandemic.¹³

During the 2023 Israel-Hamas War, where Palestinian terrorist organization Hamas invaded Israel and committed mass rape, murder, and kidnapping of Israeli civilians, both Israeli and diaspora Jews suffered from threats of violence. While over 1,200 Jewish civilians were massacred in the deadliest day for Jews since the Holocaust, hostility towards

Jews rose.¹⁴ Despite evidence of the atrocities – including beheadings and families burned alive with their hands tied behind their backs – being made public on social media and gaining international attention, many disputed the veracity of verified photographic evidence.¹⁵ Online, some engaged in conspiracy theories about the attacks being an inside job or coordinated by the Israeli government.¹⁶ Anti-Israel rallies supporting violence against Jews popped up across the world. Protesters supported Hamas, whose charter calls for the annihilation of all Jews.

One of the most common forms of Jewish victim-erasure is Holocaust denial. According to the International Holocaust Remembrance Alliance (IHRA) working definition of Holocaust denial and distortion, Holocaust denial is “discourse and propaganda that deny the historical reality and the extent of the extermination of the Jews by the Nazis and their accomplices during World War II, known as the Holocaust or the Shoah.”¹⁷ Holocaust deniers frequently blame Jews for exaggerating or creating the Holocaust for financial or political gain, playing into the same conspiracy theories that were pervasive centuries prior.¹⁸ Holocaust deniers also claim that Jews created or exaggerated the Holocaust in order to gain statehood and that the State of Israel only exists because of fraudulent sympathy garnered from political leaders in the West.¹⁹ Holocaust denial, however, is not based in any way on a legitimate factual dispute. Instead, it is an

attempt at pure erasive anti-Semitism, utilized by the alt-right in America and Europe and also by the Arab world. The Holocaust is a fact, and a modern historical occurrence, such that there are witnesses, video recordings, photographs, and millions of pages of documentation. To truly believe that this is all “made up” is not only to deny Jewish trauma and exonerate those who murdered Jewish people in cold blood, but to also believe, or want to believe that Jews somehow control the world, including various governments, and the media.

Despite all of these examples, many still claim that anti-Semitism is a thing of the past and attempt to erase the shared lived experience of Jews in contemporary society. According to Freeman, these anti-Semites will argue that “Jew-hate is not a contemporary problem. Jews are often a white-privileged group who are not deserving of allyship.” They erase Jewish victimhood by redefining anti-Semitism to minimize its impact, rejecting its contemporary systemic or institutional nature. In their view, anti-Semitism cannot be systemic or institutionalized because Jews are powerful and “white.”²⁰ According to the Reut Group, “[b]y virtue of Jews being perceived as white people of European descent, Jews are conceptually categorized as white privileged, equating advantages that Jews have gained when ‘accepted’ as white, with natural membership and lived experience.”²¹ This ignores the vast history of anti-Semitic discrimination Jews have faced from ancient

days. Categorization as “white” also neglects to account for the experience of Middle Eastern and North African (MENA) Jews, especially the 850,000 expelled from Arab lands in the last century. In the millennium prior, these MENA Jews were subject to social, financial, and political discrimination and treated as second-class citizens.²² Ignoring MENA Jews’ history of discrimination and ultimate expulsion ignores centuries of prejudice. Categorizing Jews as white oppressors is counterfactual and serves to delegitimize their suffering.

Erasive anti-Semitism is also an example of how anti-Semites use the method of ‘othering’ to perpetuate their hate by erasing whatever aspects of Jewish identity that do not fit their narrative. And as Brandeis Center President and Chair Kenneth L. Marcus has said, “Jews tend to assume the appearance of whatever group the observer most dislikes: white (even ‘hyper-white,’ as some have put it) to the progressive anti-racists but non-white to the Aryan supremacists.”²³ Anyone from any background can utilize erasure for their agenda. Using Holocaust denial as an example: in living memory, an entire one-third of all world Jewry was murderously annihilated explicitly because of their race, and yet now, when anti-racism is finally in vogue, Jews are told that their struggles should not be part of that discussion, because they are not actually a race. This same idea plays out frequently on the international level as well. As James Wald has noted, “In the past Jews were rendered

alien to the West by being orientalized. Today, Jews are rendered alien to the Middle East by being redefined as European.”²⁴

Examples of Erasive Anti-Semitism

On college campuses, erasive anti-Semitism impacts Jewish students in an alarming and visceral way. Jewish students are forced to shed certain aspects of their Jewish identity, such as Zionism, on campus or else risk social and/or academic repercussions.²⁵

Additionally, when an anti-Semitic incident occurs on campus, Jewish students are told that they cannot be victims of discrimination because they are “white” and therefore have power and privilege. Anti-Semitism on college campuses has only increased, with 32% of Jewish students claiming to have had personal experience of anti-Semitism on campus.²⁶ Jewish students report verbal attacks such as “the ‘Jewish lobby’ has too much power in the United States” and “Zionism is a form of white supremacy.”²⁷

Former Brandeis Center Senior Counsel Arthur Traldi stated that “at a time of rising levels of anti-Semitism on campus, Jewish students are told their identities and targeting don’t count or aren’t important enough to be included in what is ironically called inclusion programming.”²⁸ For example, the Brandeis Center filed a complaint against Stanford University in 2021 after its Counseling & Psychological Services (CAPS) division created and fostered a hostile and unwelcoming environment for Jews in its Diversity, Equity

and Inclusion (DEI) program.²⁹ Stanford's DEI program advanced anti-Semitic tropes concerning Jewish power, conspiracy and control, while endorsing the narrative that Jews support white supremacy and contribute to systemic racism. The program refused to address incidents of anti-Semitism, including swastika-clad vandalism, and excluded anti-Semitism from the program's agenda.³⁰ Meanwhile, Jewish students who challenge the program's failure to address anti-Semitic acts were silenced.³¹

In the workplace, Jewish employees are frequently subject to erasive anti-Semitism by their employers, coworkers, and DEI officials. In many cases, corporate DEI programs engage in promoting Jewish stereotypes (about Jewish power, Jewish money, etc.), incorrectly categorize Jews as "white" oppressors, and fail to include education about anti-Semitism in their educational resources and programming. By being taught that Jews are white oppressors, employees are led to believe that their Jewish coworkers are privileged and free from discrimination. The opposite is true.

In fact, 52% of Jewish American adults report having faced anti-Semitism in their professional careers.³² 22% of Jewish American workers report avoiding expressing their views on Israel around their colleagues and 10% avoid wearing or displaying anything that would identify them as Jewish.³³ Commissioner on the U.S. Equal Employment

Opportunity Commission (EEOC) Andrea Lucas has said, "Antisemitism, like other types of discrimination, can have a devastating impact on individual employees and the workplace as a whole."³⁴ By denying that Jews are victims of prejudice and discrimination, employers engage in (and even promote) erasive anti-Semitism.

In legal settings, erasive anti-Semitism is particularly insidious because it denies Jewish students and employees their civil rights protections. By claiming that Jews are not a people with a distinctive shared Jewish history, heritage, ancestry, and ethnicity, those who engage in erasive anti-Semitism deny the applicability of anti-discrimination laws to Jews. Claiming that Jews are defined only by religion suggests that anti-discrimination laws, including Title VI of the Civil Rights Act of 1964 which prohibits discrimination based on national, racial, ancestral, or ethnic origin, do not apply to Jews. Nothing could be further from the truth.

Erasive anti-Semitism also impacts hate crime data and reporting. In 2022, the FBI released its 2021 hate crimes data, and despite the alarming amount of anti-Semitism, it turns out that the report dramatically underreported the actual number of anti-Semitic hate crimes due to faulty data collection.³⁵ Anti-Semitic hate crimes had actually increased.³⁶ A very famous example of how hesitant people are to call anti-Semitism by its name played out after the Colleyville synagogue hostage-taking

incident, when a rabbi and three worshipers were held at gunpoint for nearly 12 hours inside their synagogue on a Shabbat morning, while the would-be terrorist, relying on tropes about Jewish power and control, tried to get the bewildered Jewish community to free a federal prisoner, the local FBI office initially claimed that the attack had “nothing to do with the Jewish community.”³⁷ And in university legally mandated hate crime reporting at the university level, anti-Semitic hate crimes have consistently been underreported.³⁸ In all of these cases, the Jewish community’s suffering is downplayed or ignored.

The goal of calling out erasive anti-Semitism is not to have others view Jews as victims. Rather, it demands that Jews' unique history, heritage, and contributions to society be respected and that the Jews' right to define and take pride in their identity and Jewish resilience be preserved.

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About the Brandeis Center

The Louis D. Brandeis Center for Human Rights Under Law is an independent, unaffiliated, nonprofit corporation established to advance the civil and human rights of the Jewish people and promote justice for all. LDB engages in research, education, and legal advocacy to combat the resurgence of anti-Semitism on college and university campuses, in the workplace, and elsewhere. It empowers students by training them to understand their legal rights and educates administrators and employers on best practices to combat racism and anti-Semitism. It is not affiliated with the Massachusetts University, the Kentucky law school, or any of the other institutions that share the name and honor the memory of the late U.S. Supreme Court justice.

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