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When Anti-Semitism Hits Home: How Hate Hurts Kids

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WHEN ANTI-SEMITISM HITS HOME: HOW HATE HURTS KIDS

By Beryl Lieff Benderly

Riding home from Hebrew school, an 11-year-old we'll call Josh proudly showed his mother a clever Hanukkah-themed drawing he had made in class. But when she pulled to a stop at a supermarket, he flipped the picture face-down on the seat. He didn't want passersby to see that they were Jewish, he explained.

Josh had not personally experienced any anti-Semitic incidents, but, as a member of a generation raised on active shooter trainings, he has no trouble imagining violence. And, like Jews of all ages, he has heard of attacks happening around him—at schools and other places in his metropolitan suburb with its sizeable Jewish population, and in other towns and cities. Beyond what's on the news, a classmate we'll call Noah had confided about anti-Semitic insults and threats from a non-Jewish student—and known bully—at their public middle school. Noah decided to avoid the worse trouble that he foresaw from reporting his experience to school authorities.

"Very scary and disturbing" incidents, both in the wider community and in schools, have shaken Jewish students, says Eliana Jofus, who, before graduating in June, was head of the Jewish Student Union at Walt Whitman High School in Montgomery County, Maryland, an area that experienced nine events at various schools in a single week in February. On a Friday night two days after her group sponsored an educational session on anti-Semitism, someone spray-painted



Photo: Ted Eytan

"Jews not welcome" on the school's main sign, Jofus said. "Thankfully, it was found and removed by Saturday morning" and "very few people saw it." Via social media, however, "everyone knew by Saturday midday, and it was very, very scary for everyone." Additional distress struck when two students traveling on a bus to a debate event bombarded Jewish members of Walt Whitman's team with "very, very threatening, awful" comments about "how they wanted, like, to kill all Jews... It was just very disgusting," Jofus said.



Photo: Courtesy of Mike Landsman

A crowd assembles in solidarity at Walt Whitman High School in Bethesda, Maryland, after the school entrance sign was defaced with anti-Semitic graffiti in December 2022.

Another high school in the same county closed its outdoor facilities after four anti-Semitic events, for “the safety of our students, staff, and community,” the school’s principal wrote in a letter to families. A total of 18 of 65 anti-Semitic incidents in the county in 2022 happened on school grounds.

In the Cherry Creek school district near Denver, Colorado, middle school students who had just viewed a video about the Holocaust marked their arms and legs with swastikas. Local resident Rikki Mor posted about the incident on Facebook. In less than 24 hours she said she received more than 60 online responses and that over one-third of them were reporting anti-Semitic incidents, she wrote to the local school superintendent in an open letter co-signed by more than 250 others. Because of “constant” harassment, Mor wrote in the letter, one mother “has told her children not to tell anyone they are Jewish.... [I]n 2023...12-, 13- and 16-year-olds are scared to say they are Jewish!”

With reported anti-Semitic incidents at the highest level the Anti-Defamation League has ever recorded—up 49% in K–12 schools in 2022, after nearly doubling in 2021—and with unreported cases perhaps rising even faster, kids across the country are clearly feeling the impact. What is it doing to them?

There appears to have been no recent research into the effects of anti-Semitic experiences on young Jewish children. But in 2015 the Institute for the Study of Global Antisemitism and Policy published a number of papers, including one titled, “I Don’t Know Why They Hate Us—I Don’t Think We Did Anything Bad to Them.”

The author, Nora Gold, formerly associate professor of social work at McMaster University in Hamilton, Ontario, followed 16 Jewish girls in Toronto from age 10 through 12, checking in each year on their feelings about themselves, their Jewishness, and their experiences with anti-Jewish incidents, both personal and in the wider community.

Extrapolating from this fragmentary information and from general knowledge about child development and trauma, does, however, provide some clues about how the current situation is affecting Jewish kids.

Depending on severity and circumstances, kids’ reactions to anti-Semitic events and reports can be “strong” and include “fear, anxiety, worry, confusion, and anger,” along with “thoughts that the world is no longer safe” and struggles “to make sense of what happened,” notes the National Child Traumatic Stress Network.

Reports on local incidents made one Toronto girl “a little afraid of people who are not Jewish.” Another recounted how a woman attacking with kicks and epithets a kippah-wearing Orthodox boy on a bus made the girl glad she doesn’t have to wear anything revealing her Jewishness. “I don’t point out that I’m a Jewish person,” she said. “If someone doesn’t ask me, I’m not going to...tell.” A 12-year-old offered a more sophisticated explanation: “[S]ometimes [anti-Semites] have their own personal problems. I don’t know what their problems would be, but...they stereotype. They think that all Jews are bad....” Overall, half the girls “rated their lives lower than they would have otherwise because of anti-Semitism,” Gold wrote.

Testing identity

As children and teens form and experiment with identities, hate speech and attacks can strongly influence that process and their concepts of how the world sees them, suggests psychologist Ryan DeLapp, director of the Racial, Ethnic, And Cultural Healing (REACH) Program at The Ross Center in New York. REACH focuses on the cultural stress impacting children and adults of color, which it defines as “uncomfortable emotional responses caused by a person, situation, or institution that expresses negative judgments or beliefs about someone, or that mistreats someone because of their identity (for example: race, ethnicity, sexuality, gender, religion, age, ability level, etc.).”

Such experiences evoke feelings of being “unwelcome, unsafe or as if you don’t belong within your surroundings...making it difficult to see a sense of love towards one’s own cultural background,” DeLapp writes. Especially relevant to young Jews these days is REACH’s concept of identity distress, which includes “struggling to have pride in your identity, experiencing self-doubt or low confidence because of your identity, or changing how you act or think of yourself because of other’s opinions about your identity.” Gold, for example, found “some evidence of internalized anti-Semitism.” “Sometimes I feel like I want to be Christian” for fear of “people killing Jews because they’re Jewish,” one Toronto girl said.

Young people’s “Jewish choices today are being shaped in the face of rising anti-Semitism,” says Samantha Vinokor-

Meinrath, senior director of Knowledge, Ideas and Learning at The Jewish Education Project in New York. Her 2022 book “#antisemitism: Coming of Age during the Resurgence of Hate” explores the attitudes of older teens and young adults. Not every “Jewish young person is a victim of anti-Semitism or even necessarily internalizes that they are being impacted by it,” she said in an interview. “But by and large...broad strokes are being made in a climate of rising anti-Semitism, of threat of physical violence, of verbal harassment, [of] steeply increased online anti-Semitism.” As a result, many young people decide not to “present Jewish,” except in “Jewish space.”

But, Vinokor-Meinrath says, others think “the exact opposite, that they want to wear a Jewish star and do so despite seeing that ‘the climate is telling me not to.’ Both of those—the choice to or the choice not to—are in response to this uptick in anti-Semitism.”



Photo: Courtesy of Zachary Singerman

Activist and blogger Zachary Singerman, whose website, genzjews.com focuses on fighting anti-Semitism and instilling a sense of Jewish pride in boys and girls his own age.

Doing something

Zack Singerman of Washington, D.C., was 13 when the murderous 2018 attack on his grandmother’s Pittsburgh synagogue, Tree of Life Congregation, riveted national attention. “I realized that I needed to do something,” he said, “I didn’t want to live in a world, and I don’t want my kids in the future to live in a world, with raging anti-Semitism and to be scared to go to shul.” He decided to bring teens together in a summit on anti-Semitism to learn “what it is, how to fight it, how to recognize it.”

When then New York Times writer Bari Weiss spoke at the Sixth & I Historic Synagogue in Washington about her 2019 book “How to Fight Anti-Semitism,” Zack attended and asked if she would also speak at his event. She agreed, and he organized some 200 local teens to attend the meeting planned for late March 2020—the very week the world closed down for COVID-19. Postponed and moved to Zoom, the summit happened online later that year, Zack recalls. He also created the website genzjews.com, which fights anti-Semitism and promotes *tikkun olam* (repairing the world). It includes 35 “Learn from Leaders” interviews with teachers, government officials, business leaders and others about “what it means to be Jewish,” plus “Hear our voices” statements by young people and other resources.



Photo: commons.wikimedia.org/office of Governor Tom Wolf

Children wearing Pittsburgh Steelers "Stronger Than Hate" sweatshirts at the November 2018 Rally for Peace and Memorial to the Victims of the Tree of Life Congregation shootings.

How individuals react to anti-Semitism differs, Vinokor-Meinrath emphasizes, with much appearing to depend on personal factors like identity, personality, support and social circumstances. Toronto study author Gold calls for much more research on larger samples of Jewish children, including those of both sexes and from different countries. "It will also be valuable," she adds, "in the future to compare the anti-Semitic experiences of Jewish children with the ways that non-Jewish children experience other forms of oppression, for example racism."

Unlike Zack, "the majority of kids and teens will go underground with their Judaism, which makes them less likely to be engaged Jews, less likely to go to places where they would meet other Jewish people," says Deborah Gilboa, a family physician who studies and writes on resilience. "That disenfranchises them. That gives them the message that it's risky to be Jewish." This matters because the more children absorb this, "the fewer Jews we will have in this country."

Social media also poses an increasing threat as children grow older. "Coming out of the COVID-19 pandemic, we've all come to recognize there is no longer a legitimate way to say there's a bifurcation between online and real life," says Vinokor-Meinrath. In former generations, a child bullied and harassed at school could go home and ignore the

hate and fear, and not have them on a cell phone "literally in your hand all day, sleeping next to you on your pillow."

But if social media can isolate, the support of the important adults in children's lives and of non-Jewish allies can help them build resilience, confidence, pride and healing, says Gilboa, herself a member of Tree of Life synagogue. The Pittsburgh community around the devastated congregation—literally, and proudly, Mister Rogers' neighborhood, home of the beloved TV show and its late namesake—along with influential others in the city, rallied around their Jewish neighbors with signs, statements, memorials, demonstrations, donations and personal connections, says Gilboa. Joanne Rogers, Fred Rogers' now-deceased widow, "who never appeared at public events after his death, came out," she recalls. The Pittsburgh Steelers altered their logo to include a Magen David and the words "Stronger than Hate."

For young people who double down on their Jewishness, the experience of anti-Semitism can strengthen their Jewish identity and commitments. But for those who take their Jewishness underground, among the emerging adults whom Vinokor-Meinrath studied, "we already see that affiliation is looking different." The long-term consequences of today's anti-Semitic trauma, both for young people and the Jewish community, are as yet far from clear. ■