

## **Am I Responsible Within My Own Community?**

Understanding one's ability and inherent responsibility to make changes within their community to eradicate antisemitism.

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Throughout history, people practicing Judaism have been the target of antisemitic jokes, discrimination, and even violent acts. Such violence can range from the drawing of a swastika on a synagogue to the horrendous acts in Colleyville, Texas. However, they all have one thing in common: they are fueled by the antisemitic tropes of the past including, but certainly not limited to, blood libel, demonization, beastilization, and accusations of ritual slaughter. Nonetheless, Jews across the globe have risen to the challenge of defending Judaism. One such response was the greater involvement of young people within the Jewish community. Many teenagers have become involved in philanthropic organizations in their respective communities. However, this leaves many asking the question, "What are the responsibilities of Jewish-teenage philanthropists and philanthropists in general?" We have come to the belief that in order to understand our broader responsibility as philanthropists we must also understand our duty to specific facets of Judaism. This includes both our history and the modernity of Judaism which is often intertwined with antisemitic beliefs originating thousands of years ago; the ever changing responses to Israel advocacy and how social media has morphed Israel advocacy. Overall, we must also examine how education can influence religious understanding and how we must strive to educate others so that future generations need not struggle with the same issues. As Jewish teen philanthropists, we are fortunate to have the necessary tools and resources to inform large audiences about issues that Jews have faced and continue to face regarding antisemitism and misinformation targeting Israel and other educational factors. However, we cannot help but consider how unfortunate it is that such a responsibility has fallen in our laps and is yet to be addressed by the generations before us.

The history of antisemitism spans thousands of years. Perhaps most prominently, Jews were blamed for the death of Jesus and throughout history, this resentment grew. There were accusations of Jews sacrificing Christian babies in a process called a "blood libel". One origin of modern antisemitism happened when European Christians were not allowed to have banking and money lending occupations. These occupations were also considered unclean. Eventually, Jews became very good at their positions and the jobs became highly profitable and led to many people becoming jealous of them. As a reaction to this, conspiracies such as The Protocols of the Elders of Zion were made in the early 20th century claiming that there was a Jewish conspiracy that controlled the world. In WW2, Adolf Hitler used this suspicion and hatred of Jews to blame the loss of WW1 on them and rise to power. After the terrible effects of WW2 had on the Jewish people and minorities alike, the Swastika became the new symbol of antisemitism.. In modern times, the symbol has been used in antisemitic propaganda and graffiti. Other forms of modern antisemitism include the hostage situation that took place on January 15th, 2022 in Colleyville, Texas. Malik Faisal Akram decided to take a synagogue hostage because he believed centuries-old

antisemitic tropes and conspiracies that Jews controlled the world to free a convicted terrorist in a nearby prison. Other examples include antisemitic flyers claiming "Every single aspect of the COVID agenda is Jewish" and Vladimir Putin claims the government of Ukraine is run by neo-Nazis, even though the country's president is Jewish. A large instance of antisemitism that we have witnessed is regarding the IsraelPalestine conflict. In the spring of 2021, another act in the decades-long conflict caused a new wave of social media activism about the issue. Instantly, infographics trying to summarize a decades-long conflict were posted, celebrities, and people alike chose sides of an issue they knew very little about. One of the effects of this was blaming all Jews for the past actions of Israel and more specifically, Zionists. People believed all Jews across the world immediately supported Israel and hated Palestinians. This led to a new wave of antisemitism where people used this opportunity to spread misinformation and verbally and physically assault Jews based on their religion.

To gain a better understanding of antisemitism, we interviewed Rabbi Davidson, the Senior Rabbi of Temple Emanu-El in New York City who had recently spoke to the Women's Auxiliary about Deborah Lipstadt's recent book *Antisemitism: Here and Now*. When asked how he used his status and position as a rabbi to combat antisemitism, he responded by saying that "When I see a political figure echoing antisemitic tropes, ... an entertainment figure display ignorance about the Holocaust, or when the community is trying to figure out how to respond to antisemitism when it comes from different sectors, then I absolutely feel it is my responsibility to speak out and either to respond to the things that I'm seeing or to help unpack some of the complicated aspects of it all". When asked how should one deal with or respond to misinformation and stereotypes that are antisemitic he responded by saying "I think you have to call it out because if you allow those stereotypes to perpetuate themselves or if you allow the misinformation to become publicly accepted as correct then you put the Jewish community in even greater danger." Antisemitism is a very difficult thing to respond to but Rabbi Davidson calls for an educational approach to dealing with it because more often than not antisemitism comes from misinformation and stereotypes rather than an outright hatred for Jews. An educational approach is important because instead of just calling it out, you are providing a small fix in the larger issue of antisemitism. Even though antisemitism is a huge global issue spanning thousands of years, philanthropy can still be used to help combat it in meaningful ways. One of the final questions we asked Rabbi Davidson was if there were any ways he knew in which philanthropy could be used to combat antisemitism. He responded by stating "all educational experiences require funding. To bring Deborah Lipstadt to your community so she can teach about the variety and shapes of antisemitism requires money. If you want to put together an Interfaith dialogue group where you have Jews, Christians and Muslims talking together, those sorts of programs require underwriting"..

As the Israeli-Palestinian conflict continues to impact our lives as Jews and especially Jewish philanthropists, it is vital to reexamine what the future of Israel advocacy is and how it is continually influenced by both social media and the rise of misinformation caused by such platforms. To do this, we believe that it is vital to speak with prominent members of our individual communities in order to gain a broader perspective on our responsibility as Jews. Andrea Cohen, a leader within the Jewish Community Foundation of

Greater Phoenix defines advocacy as the ability and notion of speaking up for various individuals and communities as well as, “asking for what you believe in your heart to be of value and important.” With this definition, she goes on to say that Israel advocacy is a particularly tricky topic because of the moral standard to which Israel is held. People across the globe have voiced their opinion that the decisions of Israel reflect the direct beliefs of Jews and vice versa. This has called into question the belief systems of Jews who are Zionists and those who are not. However, as Jews, we have the ability to criticize the Israeli government while also supporting Israel's right to be a nation. This also transfers to the idea that criticism does not undermine the existence of a “Jewish state.” Israel advocacy has also become a hot-button issue on social media as facts and opinions on Israel have become intertwined. Cohen believes that social media has changed the face of advocacy because it has created platforms for all people to speak and voice their opinions. Before the advent of such programs, Cohen remarked that it was, “Hard to find a platform.” Now, platforms have been created for anyone and everyone who wishes to utilize one. While social media is a fantastic resource for those spreading vital information and facts, it has also increased the circulation of misinformation. This makes battling misinformation that much harder. In order to deal with misinformation, Cohen believes that the best tool is education.

Educating oneself allows an individual to call into question the reliability of a source and pursue evidence that will support a claim. Through education, we have the power to dismantle opinions which are entirely inaccurate. This has also become the message that many leaders around the globe wish to spread to young philanthropists and Jews everywhere. Education is a powerful tool. The responsibility of a philanthropist is to know what is going on and get news from trustworthy sources. Moreover, when battling misinformation, it is vital to understand that one cannot respond to everything as an individual; a community of informed individuals is much more likely to make an impact. Therefore, advocacy for Israel must be sophisticated and backed by professionals who can inform both the Jewish and non-Jewish populace. It must also be coordinated with individuals who are truly equipped with tools to respond to misinformation. As we navigate the future of Israel advocacy and our responsibility to Israel as Jews, it is vital to step forward with knowledge to battle misinformation in-person and online. This translates to how we respond to decisions in and around Israel by our communities and nations.

The greater Jewish community must consider what part they can play in reducing the pervasive stereotypes and harmful accusations that antisemites feed to the world, especially with the presence of social media and media as a whole in society today. The extreme lack of education and information surrounding the Jewish community is what leads to the continuation of antisemitism, which in turn leads to the continuation of other forms of hate, like xenophobia, homophobia, and racism. The one thing we can count on to prevent this hate from waging on any longer is philanthropy. Specifically, equipping our youth with a wide range of accessible philanthropic funding and resources. Which, in turn, will give them the support that is necessary to debunk misinformation and educate their communities about issues that Jews face. By taking a look at the American education system, it is clear to see that this is a feasible place to start. A study conducted by London's Center for Holocaust Education revealed that most teachers do not even know where or when the Holocaust began. Philanthropy will provide many teachers with proper resources

to teach about the Holocaust accurately and without bias, which in turn can reshape the minds of students who do contribute to misinformation. But, these efforts must be led by students themselves and reflect the changes they want to see in the education they receive. This encompasses the work that we have done as youth philanthropists in Arizona, New York, and Michigan. While we are very physically distanced, we have experienced much of the same learning regarding efforts in our communities. Our programs have placed an emphasis on deepening the connection our local Jewish communities have to our regions. As Jews, it is our responsibility to support initiatives that are attempting to do this.

To get a better understanding of how Jewish education can support a future where antisemitism is mitigated, I spoke to Rachel Matz, an educator at Bloomfield Hills High School in Bloomfield Hills, Michigan about the importance of motivating students to make changes in their community in relation to antisemitism and forms of hate. When asked about her experience with philanthropy and how it influences her experience as a Jew, she remarked, “giving back to my community or the Jewish people in general is a responsibility and honor that I do not take lightly,” she added, “in my family and with those close to us, I have always understood that if you are able to give money, you give money, and if you are able to give time, you give time. I hope to be able to do both throughout my life to live up to the examples set by my family.” As a Jewish educator herself, Matz has experience with teaching the next generation about the problems that many Jews face. When asked about her responsibility to debunk misinformation in her daily life she mentioned she feels an obligation to correct misinformation when she sees it and share truths or different perspectives on Judaism. Philanthropy offers a lens to help Matz’s hopes become a reality. Our responsibility as Jews to debunk misinformation surrounding our religion will only be possible with the help of philanthropic organizations that are backed by teen leaders. Moving forward, it is imperative that we work within our communities to get everyone on board to ensure that education surrounding Judaism is as unbiased and accurate as possible.

The responsibility of Jewish people and especially philanthropists spans many topics and ideas. From combating antisemitism, understanding Israel advocacy and the many levels which contribute to Zionism, to the broader education of nations on Judaism as well as the education of fellow Jews on meaningful topics. Of course, each of us cannot accomplish all of these things, but having a supportive community around you makes philanthropy that much easier. As Rabbi Lord Jonathan Sacks once wrote, “Never compromise your ideals. Never give in to defeat or despair. Never stop journeying merely because the way is long and hard. It always is.”

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This article was written by youth ambassadors of the [2021-2022 Honeycomb youth ambassador council](#).