

This week,

If you missed it, I covered the IHRA definition of antisemitism earlier this month on this podcast, doing a sweep of its origin to its largest controversy. Now, let's take a look at two new antisemitism definitions. Why do they exist? What problems are they trying to fix? And how do they fix them?

I'm Lev Gringauz, and welcome to The Jews Are Tired, your podcast about Jewish news.

So to quickly refresh the "why" of this whole subject: Part of the effort to fight antisemitism has now become about implementing a definition of antisemitism across different countries and institutions. The idea is that with a definition, administrators and legal experts and whoever else will have more clarity and guidance about when a particular act or speech is antisemitic. By identifying it, that's already the first step to figuring out how to address it.

The most prominent antisemitism definition is something called the IHRA definition, named after the International Holocaust Remembrance Alliance, an organization made up of representatives from 34 countries (most of which are in Europe) that serves as a think tank on Holocaust education and genocide remembrance.

IHRA adopted the definition in 2016, and since then many countries, sports leagues, universities, and other institutions and organizations have adopted it. And the definition has a particular focus on explaining when anti-Zionist, or anti-Israel, action and speech is antisemitic.

But with its spread in recent years has come criticism. Earlier this month I covered the biggest critique, that the IHRA definition can, in some ways, threaten the free speech and activity of anti-Zionists and pro-Palestinian advocates. If you haven't yet, go back and listen to that episode for the full context, because there's a lot of it. But the short of it is, at minimum, critics say even a non-binding, non-legal IHRA definition of antisemitism adopted by, say, a university, can make people afraid to be labeled antisemites, and thus lead them to do less free expression.

There's another issue that critics say the IHRA definition has: It's pretty vague.

For example, here's the main antisemitism definition:

QUOTE

“Antisemitism is a certain perception of Jews, which may be expressed as hatred toward Jews. Rhetorical and physical manifestations of antisemitism are directed toward Jewish or non-Jewish individuals and/or their property, toward Jewish community institutions and religious facilities.”

ENDQUOTE

What exactly is a certain perception of Jews? What does that mean? And more importantly, how does that help a random university administrator figure out what is or isn't antisemitic?

Well, the IHRA definition tries to answer that question by having 11 examples of contemporary antisemitism. Seven of those have to do with Israel.

Many of the examples are, arguably, pretty straightforward. Denying the reality or the scope of the Holocaust — antisemitic. Saying there's a global Jewish conspiracy to control the media, politics, and the world — antisemitic.

Also, holding all Jews responsible for Israel's actions — antisemitic. Saying Israel invented or exaggerated the Holocaust — antisemitic. Accusing Jews of being more loyal to Israel than the country in which they reside — antisemitic.

But then you have examples that are straightforward, but still leave a lot of questions.

Like this one:

QUOTE

- Denying the Jewish people their right to self-determination, e.g., by claiming that the existence of a State of Israel is a racist endeavor.

ENDQUOTE

What qualifies under claiming that Israel's existence is a racist endeavor? This isn't a theoretical question, by the way. A lot of Jews, and in fact, many Israelis, are critical of Israel's government and society for racism against Ethiopian Jews, African refugees,

and Arab Israelis. Israel does also have a distinct history, dating to before its founding, of institutional racism against Jews from Arab countries.

So, does bringing those issues up qualify as calling Israel racist? Does that then mean people are being antisemitic for bringing that up? And is there a distinct difference between calling, and claiming, Israel is racist? The degree of the racism, how much of that amounts to Israel's existence or endeavor? Is this all just semantics?

In that hyper-political conversation, where every slip of the tongue and easy oversimplification is both human nature and a potential scandal, it can be hard to make sense of some of the IHRA definition examples. And if Jews can't always figure it out, how is a random administrator of some random institution supposed to navigate this?

None of this is made easier by the IHRA antisemitism examples being listed with the caveat that they QUOTE "could, taking into the overall context, include, but are not limited to" ENDQUOTE these examples. So these things could also not be antisemitic. That's helpful.

So all of this brings us to two new antisemitism definitions that were released in early 2021: The Nexus Document, and the Jerusalem Declaration on Antisemitism. Both aim to clarify the definition and examples that should be used as a guide, and to do so in a way that redraws the line on anti-Israel and pro-Palestinian discourse to protect full political expression, action, and speech. Links to both are in the podcast notes, as I won't be covering them totally here, just some of the relevant bits and context.

Let's start with the Nexus document, or definition. This was created by a group of prominent Jewish scholars and communal professionals associated with the Knight Program in Media and Religion at the University of Southern California. According to some of the drafters of the Nexus definition, like UC Berkley law professor David Schraub, Nexus isn't trying to replace IHRA, but serve as a kind of commentary on IHRA that helps to clarify some of the issues of vagueness. A link to one of Schraub's blog posts, where he goes into greater detail about this, is in the podcast notes.

Here's the Nexus definition of antisemitism:

QUOTE

"Antisemitism consists of anti-Jewish beliefs, attitudes, actions or systemic conditions. It includes negative beliefs and feelings about Jews, hostile behavior directed against Jews (because they are Jews), and conditions that discriminate against Jews and

significantly impede their ability to participate as equals in political, religious, cultural, economic, or social life.”

ENDQUOTE

Which is already much more specific than the IHRA definition’s ‘certain perception of Jews.’ But truthfully, most of the Nexus definition’s examples of antisemitism are not functionally different from what the IHRA definition offers.

Saying Jews or Israel are part of a global conspiracy of power and money and the media — yea, that’s antisemitic. Assuming Jews are all totally loyal to Israel — antisemitic. Holding Jews collectively guilty for the actions of Israel — antisemitic.

All of that is in the IHRA definition, there are just more words to explain them in the Nexus definition. Remember that example from the IHRA definition, of it being antisemitic to deny the Jewish people their right to self-determination?

Well, here are the two Nexus definition examples that break that down:

QUOTE

It is antisemitic to treat Israel in a negative manner based of a claim that Jews alone should be denied the right to define themselves as a people and to exercise any form of self-determination.

It is antisemitic to advocate a political solution that denies Jews the right to define themselves as a people, thereby denying them — because they are Jews — the right to self-determination.

ENDQUOTE

Now, legitimately, some of the wording in there, I would argue, doesn’t necessarily make this concept easier to understand at face value for, again, some random administrator of some random institution. It’s harder to make an instant decision with more information to sort through. But there is definitely more context to what it means to deny Jewish self-determination, and starting with that larger context can help educate said random administrator a little more than the IHRA definition’s brief examples. So it definitely feels like a little bit of a tradeoff in the effort to be more specific than the IHRA definition.

What's really unique about the Nexus definition, though, is that it has a section to talk about what, generally, isn't antisemitic. That's something the Jerusalem Definition also has, and the IHRA definition doesn't.

Now, really, go read through the Nexus document to check that section out for yourself, because I'm just going to summarize it here. But you can tell how the drafters are trying to defend what they see as legitimate pro-Palestinian and anti-Israel activists from being wholly accused of antisemitism. So under the Nexus definition:

Generally speaking, criticism of Zionism and Israel is not antisemitic. Harsh criticism is not antisemitic. Being anti-Zionist or anti-Israel is not necessarily antisemitic, because someone could be against all forms of nationalism, not just Jewish nationalism, or a person may come from a Palestinian family that fled from Israel in 1948 and was unable to return to their home so they have a very specific reason for being anti-Israel.

And, interestingly enough, QUOTE "paying disproportionate attention to Israel" ENDQUOTE is not necessarily antisemitic, because some people do just care about Israel more, and Israel does have a, for example, somewhat unique relationship politically and regarding military aid with the United States.

So that's a pretty big exception and clarification for anti-Zionist, anti-Israel, or pro-Palestinian activism. And that exception is also really controversial to some Jews. I mean, for many Jews, it doesn't make a difference whether you're against Jewish nationalism only, or all nationalism everywhere, because either way you're calling a Jewish state for Jews illegitimate.

And yet, if Jews aren't being specifically targeted for being Jews in that situation, is that really antisemitism? Obviously this could be an endless and potentially interesting conversation. But you can kind of see, in real time, how a document like the Nexus definition is trying to navigate what feels antisemitic regarding Israel, versus what is antisemitic. And every Jew has a different answer to what that looks like, of course. In this respect, the IHRA definition feels much more black and white.

So let's get to the Jerusalem Declaration on Antisemitism, which is in a similar vein to the Nexus definition, minus some key differences. The JDA was put together by a group of scholars through the Van Leer Jerusalem Institute, which is functionally a Zionism and Jewish think tank in, you guessed it, Jerusalem.

Here's the JDA definition:

QUOTE

“Antisemitism is discrimination, prejudice, hostility or violence against Jews as Jews (or Jewish institutions as Jewish).”

ENDQUOTE

Clear and short. But the intention and layout is a bit different. The JDA is meant to replace the IHRA definition, not add onto it like Nexus. The JDA also comes with a whole preamble explaining why and how it is a response to the IHRA definition, which centers on the IHRA definition’s lack of clarity.

The antisemitism examples are now split into three sections for the JDA: General antisemitism, antisemitism to do with Israel, and stuff that isn’t antisemitic when it comes to Israel.

And like the Nexus definition before it, the JDA includes many examples that are functionally the same as what is in the IHRA definition — just with more words to explain.

Associating all Jews with power and money — antisemitic. Minimizing the Holocaust — antisemitic. Overstating Israel’s influence on the world and connection to power — antisemitic. Holding all Jews responsible for Israel — antisemitic.

On a quick tangent, for all the stuff that we’re arguing about with Israel, I feel like all of this just shows that there’s a lot that Jews actually do agree is antisemitic. Make of that what you will.

But where the JDA really stands out is by being further to the political left of the Nexus definition by carving out an even bigger explicit exception for anti-Zionist, anti-Israel, and pro-Palestinian activists so that they’re not labeled as antisemites.

The JDA states that the Boycott, Divestment, and Sanctions, or BDS, movement against Israel — seen by many Jews to be an antisemitic movement — is not antisemitic. Comparing Israel to settler-colonialism or apartheid is also generally not antisemitic. Criticizing or opposing Zionism isn’t generally antisemitic for the JDA.

So JDA really goes in hard in a way that the Nexus definition doesn’t, and in a way that many Jews are not so likely to agree with.

So let's zoom out from all of this. I think there are a couple of key takeaways from all of this messing around with definitions. First of all, when you read all three definitions, they agree more often than they disagree. Even on Israel. Second of all, the Nexus and JDA definitions are a great way to see how liberal and progressive Jews are struggling to navigate the line between 'anti-Israel speech I disagree with and am uncomfortable about' and 'anti-Israel speech that is actually antisemitic.'

As well as tackling some other issues, like Nexus including as an example of antisemitism denying someone's Jewish identity because they don't have the right position on Israel. That is such internal baseball, and yet it points to a significant conversation in the Jewish community about how we're all supposed to get along but, to super generalize, half of us think the other half of us is antisemitic in some way and doesn't represent Judaism. And sometimes that happens while having nothing to do with Israel.

The third big takeaway, tying all of that together, is that I think it may be too late for the JDA and the Nexus definition to be more than a conversation starter. The IHRA definition is everywhere in the Jewish community, and it really is a global phenomena. And despite being kinda vague, it is shorter than both the Nexus and the JDA definitions, and, again, does not differ all that substantially from the newer definitions, even with a lot of the Israel stuff.

Looking at college campuses in the U.S., where a lot of the fight is now for adopting a definition of antisemitism, Jewish campus organizations and students are focused on the IHRA definition. I can't help but feel like JDA and Nexus are academic experiments by comparison. I mean, the organized campus Jewish community in most places tends to think BDS is antisemitic, so why would they support the JDA definition. If Nexus is basically an add-on for the IHRA definition, then why not keep things simple and just pass the IHRA definition.

And it's worth mentioning that, for all the debate about the IHRA definition, maybe it's more flexible than some critics give it credit for, particularly when you cut out all the political posturing. In the podcast notes is really interesting JTA story about how, earlier this semester, the University of Iowa went through a campus debate about antisemitism, Zionism, and whether or not the Jewish community deserved its own student senator.

What's notable is that national Jewish and Israel organizations basically stayed away from the University of Iowa as this debate was playing out. There was no huge national scandal, no articles in Tablet Magazine about Jews being attacked in Iowa and how Jewish parents shouldn't send their kids to higher education anymore. The Jewish

students quietly talked it out on campus in the student government. They dealt with it themselves. By the end, they did get a student senator representing the Jewish community as part of a bill passed in 45 minutes of discussion. And as part of that, the student government debated adopting the IHRA definition of antisemitism.

Facing concerns about free speech on campus, the students decided to adopt the IHRA definition, just without the example of antisemitism about calling Israel a racist endeavor. Now, is that a perfect thing in the eyes of many Jews? No. But Jewish students compromised and got the rest of the definition through. It worked for them.

That kind of compromise isn't possible in every community. But I do think this story gives us the most important lesson when it comes to this stuff: We've got three definitions of antisemitism now. We can fight over them all day long. But ultimately, the effort to fight antisemitism is something based in local communities, where Jews living in a place know best how to address antisemitism in that place. A definition is a start, which is great, but it's also just a start.

No one will every agree fully about any of the definitions, or any of the potential ways to implement them. Which is hilarious because they all say, mostly, the same stuff. But if you think three different people with the IHRA definition will respond exactly the same to every incident of antisemitism, you are wrong. If you think Facebook, or the U.S. State Department, by adopting any definition of antisemitism, will stick to it perfectly forever, you're wrong. Facebook, as part of their hate speech policy, banned Holocaust denial a few months ago. Guess what, there's still Holocaust denial all over Facebook platforms.

But the real question is, how do we move on actually addressing antisemitism. If getting a move on in a certain community means adopting part of a definition, because that's how far compromise gets you, fine. Let's get to the next step then, and keep going. If getting a move on means the ability to adopt an entire definition, great. There's still more work to do, though.

None of this is a perfect process. And maybe we the Jews need to cool off the debates on definitions, slow down this proxy war over Israel, and focus more on the bigger plan to address antisemitism in our communities. Because — and if you're sick of me saying this, I'm sick of saying it too — even on Israel, all three of these definitions say functionally the same thing about what is antisemitic. Maybe bridging that commonality, though imperfect, is a better place to start with addressing antisemitism as a cohesive community than doing more internal baseball.

End:

This has been this week's The Jews Are Tired podcast, I'm Lev Gringauz, don't forget to subscribe and share, and hopefully next week, the Jews will get some rest.

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