

Judaism 101 For Community Activists

Syllabus

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PURPOSE

- The purpose of this class is to introduce basic concepts of Judaism to leftist Gentiles, in order to hopefully dispel common antisemitic canards that are frequently found in leftist activism, and help students create a social justice framework that recognizes Jewish people as a group affected by systemic oppression

LOGISTICS

- Class will run for 7 weeks starting March 16.
- Class will be every Saturday from 7 to 9pm
- There is a suggested donation of \$18-36 for the class, to offset the time and emotional labor spent on the material. People who cannot pay are under no obligation to do so. People who can pay more are encouraged to do so
- In addition to class, students will also attend at least one Friday night Kabbalat Shabbat service at the Reform synagogue and one Shabbat Morning service at the Conservative synagogue.

TOPICS

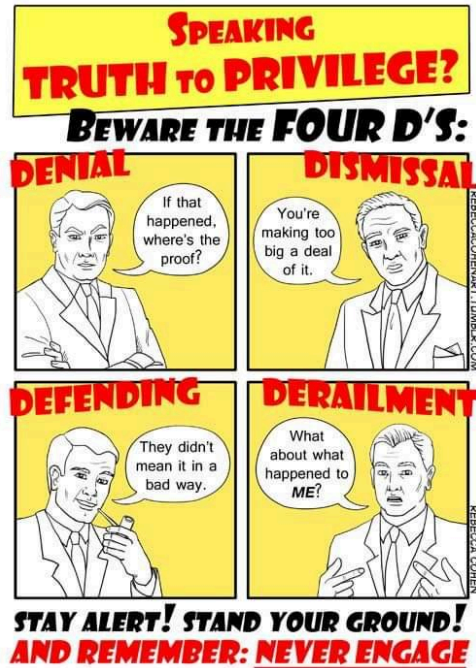
- 1. Week 1: Introductions, Expectations, and Vocabulary.**
 - a. Students will learn class expectations, the IHRA definition of antisemitism, and basic vocabulary that will be used throughout the course
- 2. Week 2: A Crash Course On Holidays and Halacha**
 - a. Students will be introduced to the basic tenets of Jewish law, the Jewish calendar, and the cycle of Jewish holidays
 - b. Students will be able to identify pitfalls in organizing when it comes to recognizing (or failing to recognize) Jewish observance
- 3. Week 3: Privilege and Power: How Our Modern Social Justice Framework Fails to Recognize Antisemitism As A System of Oppression**
 - a. Students will be introduced to the concept of antisemitism as a racist conspiracy theory and Eric K Ward's work connecting antisemitism as the basis of white supremacy and white nationalism
 - b. Students will brainstorm ways of creating a new social justice framework that doesn't minimize antisemitism
- 4. Week 4: When You're Not Just Jewish: Anti-Semitism and the Intersections of Other Marginalized Groups**

- a. Students will learn about how racism, misogyny, homophobia, transphobia, ableism, and class warfare affect Jewish communities
 - b. Students will also learn major successes and failures of social justice groups in dealing with antisemitism alongside other systems of oppression
- 5. Week 5: How Not To Talk About The Shoah**
- a. Students will learn about the Shoah, and the US and UK's complicity in the deaths of Jews during the Shoah
 - b. Students will learn about how Holocaust denial and Holocaust inversion manifest themselves in leftist spaces
- 6. Week 6: Addressing The Blue and White Elephant In the Room: What We Talk About When We Talk About Israel**
- a. Students will learn about the religious and cultural connections to Eretz Yisrael in the Diaspora, the history of the modern Zionist movement, the founding of the modern State of Israel, and current political and military conflicts
 - b. Students will learn how to effectively advocate for Palestinians living under occupation without being antisemitic
- 7. Week 7: The Past, Present, and Future of Jewish Activism, And Where We Go From Here**
- a. Students will learn about the history of Jewish people in activism and movement building, and how movements effectively pushed out Jews
 - b. Students will learn about efforts to revive Jewish leftism, and their challenges
 - c. Students will create action plans to commit to fighting antisemitism in groups they are affiliated with.

GUIDELINES

1. On Fragility

- a. People from a dominant group can sometimes express defensiveness, anger and hostility when asked to correct their behavior. If I tell you that a comment is antisemitic, I'm not personally attacking you or your character. Here's a handy graphic on what to avoid:



2. On Lashon Hara

- a. Lashon hara is Hebrew for “evil speech” (literally “evil tongue”), and gossip and cruel speech against others is prohibited in Judaism.
 - i. Class is a safe space for people to ask questions and unlearn antisemitism. Please refrain from gossiping about what goes on in class to friends, family, and peers.
 - ii. When discussing antisemitism you may have witnessed previously, please do not use people's names.
 - iii. Please do not post screenshots of discussions from the class Facebook group on your social media. If there are issues with inappropriate comments, please tag me.

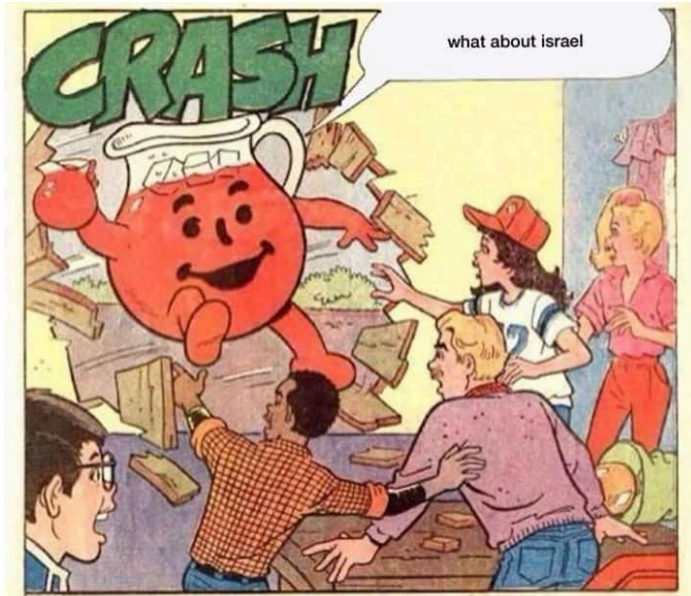
3. On “But My Jewish Friend Says...”

- a. There is an old Yiddish saying: “Two Jews, three opinions”. Jews are not a monolith and disagreement is a major aspect of Jewish culture
- b. That being said, it's very common for Gentiles to find Token Jewish Friends™ to defend themselves against accusations of Anti-Semitism
- c. Jewish people who defend antisemites frequently do so in the hopes that by proving that they're one of the “good ones”, that will be protected from antisemitic violence
 - i. Historically this belief has had tragic consequences for Jews

- d. In the same way that it would be inappropriate to point to Kellyanne Conway to defend Donald Trump from accusations of misogyny, it is inappropriate to tokenize Jewish people to refute accusations of antisemitism

4. On But What About Israel

- a. More often than not, when a Jewish person discusses anything about Judaism or antisemitism, this happens:



Please do not derail class discussions with comments about Israel. If you have specific questions about a current event, such as Israeli elections, let me know and I can make space in discussion time to discuss the current event. The Week 5 lesson will start earlier specifically to accommodate student questions

STUDY MATERIALS

1. Weekly Readings

- a. I will assign reading materials (all online articles) for each class. Some classes may have more readings than others. *Please have readings completed before class*
 - i. I will also start weekly discussion threads on the FB group for folks to discuss the readings
- b. I also have some Suggested Readings (see Appendix) of books and news media to supplement assigned readings

HOUSEKEEPING

- 1. Class starts before the end of Shabbos, and class will break for Havdalah (the ceremony that marks the end of Shabbos).

- a. Please keep in mind that I do not use my phone from 18 minutes prior to sunset on Friday night, through Havdalah Saturday evening. If you have questions about class *****please contact me before 3pm Friday afternoon if you need a prompt response*****
2. Sharing food is a long-standing Jewish tradition and I encourage people to bring snacks to share. Please limit snacks to things that are vegan and certified kosher. I recommend using the Chicago Rabbinical Council's website's guide on hechshers.

ON CONTENT WARNINGS

This class comes with a general content warning for antisemitism and discussion of genocide. If for whatever reason, you need to step out of class, do not hesitate to do so.

There are certain points where I may ask people to interact with content that could be triggering. In those cases I will provide appropriate warnings, and state that choosing to engage with triggering images is strictly voluntary.

APPENDIX 1: SUGGESTED READINGS

These are sources that will help enrich and supplement class. They are not required, and most can be found at the library or online.

BOOKS:

A Book of Life: Embracing Judaism As A Spiritual Practice by Michael Strassfeld

The Jewish Holidays by Michael Strassfeld

God In Search of Man by Abraham Joshua Heschel

The Prophets by Abraham Joshua Heschel

The Sabbath by Abraham Joshua Heschel

Like Dreamers by Yossi Klein Halevi

Letters to My Palestinian Neighbor by Yossi Klein Halevi

The Women's Torah Commentary edited by Rabbi Elyse Goldstein

How Jews Became White Folks and What That Says About Race in America by Karen Brodtkin

Standing Again At Sinai: Judaism From A Feminist Perspective by Judith Plaksow

The First, Second and Third Jewish Catalogs edited by Michael Strassfeld. (Note: libraries typically don't carry these, but used copies can easily be found online)

JEWISH MEDIA:

The following sites run the gamut from conservative to leftist and are worth browsing.

Commentary

The Jerusalem Post

The Times of Israel

Ha'aretz

The Forward

Tablet Magazine

Lillith

JTA

Alma

Jewish Currents

+972

APPENDIX 2: GOING TO SERVICES

As part of this class, I would like you to attend at least one Friday night service at the Reform Synagogue and one Saturday morning service at the Conservative synagogue

The Reform service includes lots of music, and is 50/50 Hebrew and English. The prayer book includes full transliteration of the Hebrew. Service is a little over an hour and there is an Oneg Shabbat after services with food.

The Conservative service is 80 percent Hebrew and 20 percent English, and while the prayer book has a full English translation, only some parts are transliterated. However, congregants are pretty helpful to newcomers and the synagogue does have pamphlets that explain the service.

Most prayers are chanted and a portion of the Torah is read along with a portion from one of the Prophets, called the Haftarah.

Men are expected to cover their heads and there are kippot available to wear.

After the service there is a Kiddush meal and social hour.

Please Note: Both congregations have members who run the gamut of the entire political spectrum from anarcho-communist to hardcore Trump supporters. Most members are liberal and/or centrist. Most members at both congregations are Zionists. Attending services is an opportunity to learn about the structure of Jewish prayer services and meet members of the Jewish community. ***If you pick arguments about US or Israeli politics with congregants I will ask you to leave and permanently remove you from class.***

APPENDIX 3: THE IHRA DEFINITION OF ANTISEMITISM

Class will use the International Holocaust Remembrance Alliance definition of antisemitism. This is the definition used by the US State Department and most European governing bodies.

The IHRA Working Definition of Antisemitism:

“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.”

To guide IHRA in its work, the following examples may serve as illustrations:

Manifestations might include the targeting of the state of Israel, conceived as a Jewish collectivity. However, criticism of Israel similar to that leveled against any other country cannot be regarded as antisemitic. Antisemitism frequently charges Jews with conspiring to harm humanity, and it is often used to blame Jews for “why things go wrong.” It is expressed in speech, writing, visual forms and action, and employs sinister stereotypes and negative character traits.

Contemporary examples of antisemitism in public life, the media, schools, the workplace, and in the religious sphere could, taking into account the overall context, include, but are not limited to:

- Calling for, aiding, or justifying the killing or harming of Jews in the name of a radical ideology or an extremist view of religion.
- Making mendacious, dehumanizing, demonizing, or stereotypical allegations about Jews as such or the power of Jews as collective — such as, especially but not exclusively, the myth about a world Jewish conspiracy or of Jews controlling the media, economy, government or other societal institutions.
- Accusing Jews as a people of being responsible for real or imagined wrongdoing committed by a single Jewish person or group, or even for acts committed by non-Jews.
- Denying the fact, scope, mechanisms (e.g. gas chambers) or intentionality of the genocide of the Jewish people at the hands of National Socialist Germany and its supporters and accomplices during World War II (the Holocaust)
- Accusing the Jews as a people, or Israel as a state, of inventing or exaggerating the Holocaust.

- Accusing Jewish citizens of being more loyal to Israel, or to the alleged priorities of Jews worldwide, than to the interests of their own nations.
- 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.
- Applying double standards by requiring of it a behavior not expected or demanded of any other democratic nation.
- Using the symbols and images associated with classic antisemitism (e.g., claims of Jews killing Jesus or blood libel) to characterize Israel or Israelis.
- Drawing comparisons of contemporary Israeli policy to that of the Nazis.
- Holding Jews collectively responsible for actions of the state of Israel.

Antisemitic acts are criminal when they are so defined by law (for example, denial of the Holocaust or distribution of antisemitic materials in some countries).

Criminal acts are antisemitic when the targets of attacks, whether they are people or property – such as buildings, schools, places of worship and cemeteries – are selected because they are, or are perceived to be, Jewish or linked to Jews.

Antisemitic discrimination is the denial to Jews of opportunities or services available to others and is illegal in many countries.

*****PLEASE NOTE*****

There are discussions in left-leaning Jewish spaces about whether the IHRA definition stifles legitimate criticism of Israel. However, in my experience, there is plenty of room in this definition to criticize Israel. If you are finding that it is difficult to criticize Israel and not violate the IHRA definition, that is probably a sign that you have to unpack some antisemitic beliefs and I will be glad to provide additional resources to assist in doing that work.

