



ILLINOIS HOLOCAUST MUSEUM
& EDUCATION CENTER

COMPLEX ANSWERS TO DIFFICULT QUESTIONS:

Processing Current Events Through the Lens of History

These are challenging times – across the world and here in the United States.

We are at a moment where antisemitism, acts of hate and violence, assault on democratic norms, war and humanitarian disasters seem to be spreading; and it can be difficult to grapple and process the enormity of all that is happening.

We may fear tackling the difficult questions that surround these complex challenges. However, it is precisely these challenging inquiries that offer us the greatest opportunities for growth, understanding, and progress. Connecting and working to seek answers to complex questions, can serve as a powerful defense against ignorance, indifference, and division.

We need only look to the example of our Museum founders, our cherished Survivors who through sharing their stories of survival, are often asked to answer difficult questions on current events and the world today. They understand that by using the lens of history they can address audience misconceptions, break down barriers, and challenge biases. They are able to remind us not to lose sight of our shared humanity. To understand the imperative to be inclusive rather than exclusive, to accept rather than reject.

Many of you have asked us how the Museum addresses some of these difficult questions. This document, while not exhaustive, focuses on the most commonly asked questions on the following topics: antisemitism and rising hate; war in Israel and Gaza; Holocaust denial and disinformation; and genocide. We expect to be updating this document as new questions emerge.

Our aim is to foster dialogue that respects and honors diverse perspectives, encouraging individuals of all political and social perspectives to engage with history to better understand today's realities. Empathy, respect, and collective humanity are essential as we navigate these turbulent waters.

It is our hope that these guidelines will serve as a resource for thoughtful reflection and constructive conversation, empowering each of us to contribute to a more inclusive and compassionate society.

Let us honor the memory of those who suffered by committing ourselves to a future where the mistakes of the past are not repeated. Together, we can build a world where understanding and cooperation triumph over division and conflict.



“My purpose today is to plead with you not to repeat the mistakes of the past. If you see or hear of injustice of any kind, be it racial, ethnic, or religious, do not be quiet. Speak up; don’t stand aside and say, ‘it does not concern me.’”

Walter Thalheimer

Holocaust Survivor

Our Mission

Illinois Holocaust Museum and Education Center is dedicated to preserving the legacy of the Holocaust by honoring the memories of those who were lost and by teaching universal lessons that combat hatred, prejudice and indifference. The Museum fulfills its mission through the exhibition, preservation and interpretation of its collections and through education programs and initiatives that foster the promotion of human rights and the elimination of genocide.

Our Voice in Action

As an institution of both memory and action we are committed to taking steps to advance our institutional mission dedicated to our founding principle – *Remember the Past, Transform the Future*. The history of the Holocaust teaches what happens when hatred, bigotry, and antisemitism are left unchallenged, laying a foundation for persecution, exclusion, and inequity.

We are proud to be a part of a diverse learning community, and we are committed to ensuring that our Museum is a safe place to come together to learn every day. We all come to the Museum on different paths, from many diverse backgrounds, with many different beliefs. That is part of what makes us such a rich community. Each visitor should feel the Museum is a place where they do not have to be afraid to have honest discussions about difficult subjects. Furthermore neither should they ever feel uncomfortable or pushed to feel ashamed about how they feel or think about a particular topic.

The Museum has positioned itself on numerous key mission-based issues in order to contribute to public reflection, discussion, and decision-making. To view the Museum’s public statements, visit: ilholocaustmuseum.org/learn/voice. To view press coverage including interviews with Museum staff, visit: ilholocaustmuseum.org/about/in-the-news.

RESPONDING TO DIFFICULT QUESTIONS

Most questions about current events are not directly connected to Holocaust memory or history. You can choose whether or not to engage in discussion or answer difficult questions posed on topics around politics, social issues, and broader global challenges. This toolkit was created to give you guidelines on how to address some potentially difficult questions you may encounter.

This toolkit is not exhaustive. We have focused on most commonly asked questions on following topics: **antisemitism; war in Israel and Gaza; Holocaust denial and disinformation; and genocide**. And for each question, we provide only a sampling of possible responses.

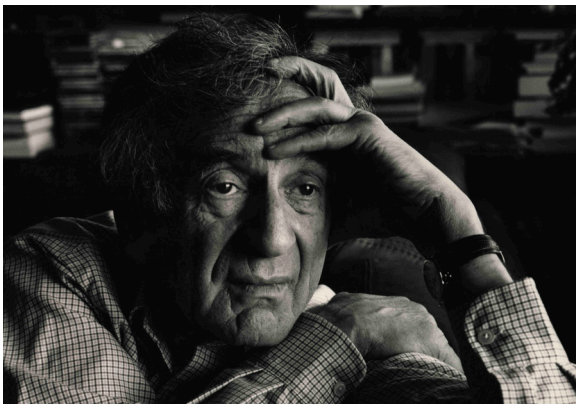
While you can answer such questions in whole or in part, depending on the context, *you are never obligated to answer any questions you are uncomfortable addressing*. Whether you choose to engage or not, remember the following: **active listening, empathy, and transparency** are keys to responding to tough questions and conversations.

Acknowledgement

Whether you want to address a difficult question or not, always start by acknowledging the question using a phrase such as “That’s a critical (or difficult) question, thank you for asking,” and then use empathetic language, such as “I can see (or hear) you feel strongly about this topic.”

Note: acknowledging a question does not mean that you need to agree with the question; but ‘acknowledgement’ is one of the most important steps in communication – letting someone know you are listening, and they are seen and heard.

Do not degrade an individual for asking a difficult question or not asking it in a delicate manner.



“What the world seems to forget is that a person who hates a Jew also hates other minorities, other religions, other ethnic groups, and ends up hating all humanity. It is a cancer whose cells devour others — unless action is taken to stop them.”

Elie Wiesel

Holocaust Survivor

Antisemitism

What is antisemitism?

- At its core, antisemitism is hatred or disdain for Jews.
- Multiple sources define antisemitism, they include:
 - International Holocaust Remembrance Alliance: “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.”¹
 - TheNexusProject: “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.”²
 - United States Holocaust Memorial Museum: “Antisemitism is prejudice against or hatred of Jews.”³

Has antisemitism changed?⁴

- Antisemitism doesn't completely change over time, but rather new layers are added to it.
- Antisemitism didn't start – and didn't end – with the Nazis. It dates back to ancient times (with written evidence from ancient Egyptian, Greek, and Roman periods) when Jewish people were persecuted as a minority group for being different – primarily for their religious differences (such as being monotheistic and not acknowledging the divinity of various rulers/individuals or gods of other religions; having different dietary laws and customs; etc.).
- With the rise of Christianity, anti-Jewish hate also spread, fueled by lies about Jewish people being responsible for the crucifixion of Jesus.
- In the Middle Ages, Jewish people were forced to live in separate areas, wear certain articles of clothing, and were barred from most professions. This led to further stereotypes and prejudices from the majority population.
- By the 1800s, “racial science” became popularized and Jewish people were then categorized as a race. It's at this point that antisemitism was grounded in the concept of race rather than religion, as it had primarily been before. This meant that Jewish people were viewed as being born with “Jewish blood.”
- Another form of antisemitism that targets the Jewish state emerged with the re-establishment of the State of Israel in 1948.
 - The belief that the Jewish people do not have a right to self-determination — or that they have no religious and historical connection to Israel.
 - Holding Jews collectively responsible for actions of the state of Israel.



“There is no denying what has happened. And we should learn from history and not repeat history. And because of that, if we learn from our history, we should make progress — maybe more slowly than is what would be desired, but we should make progress forwards, not to go backwards again.”

Ernie Heimann

Holocaust Survivor

Holocaust Denial and Distortion

What is Holocaust denial and distortion?⁵

- Holocaust denial is discourse and propaganda that deny the historical reality and the extent of the genocide of Jews by the Nazis and their accomplices.
- Holocaust denial and distortion refers specifically to any attempt to claim that the Holocaust did not take place or minimize what happened in the Holocaust.
 - Holocaust denial may include publicly denying or calling into doubt the use of principal mechanisms of destruction (such as gas chambers, mass shooting, starvation and torture) or the intentionality of the genocide of the Jewish people.
 - Forms of Holocaust denial also include blaming Jews for either exaggerating or creating the Holocaust for political or financial gain as if the Holocaust itself was the result of a conspiracy plotted by Jews. In this, the goal is to make Jews culpable and antisemitism once again legitimate.
 - Intentional efforts to excuse or minimize the impact of the Holocaust or its principal elements, including the actions of collaborators and allies of Nazi Germany.
 - Gross minimization of the number of the victims of the Holocaust in contradiction to reliable sources.
 - Attempts to blame Jews for causing their own genocide.
 - Drawing false equivalences, such as calling other humanitarian or societal crises a new Holocaust.

Israeli–Palestinian Conflict

What is the Israeli-Palestinian conflict about?⁶

- This is a complex conflict and can be hard to reduce to simplistic terms. It includes many different angles, such as ethnic, religious, territorial, political, and ideological ones, and all are interconnected. It is a conflict between two peoples with legitimate rights and claims to various areas within Israel proper, the West Bank, and Gaza strip.

- Within each group (Palestinians and Israelis), there are moderates and radicals. As we know, violence breeds violence, and we can feel helpless while witnessing an escalation in confrontations.
- Sadly, war rarely produces winners, but always victims.

Does the Museum support the current Israel-Gaza war?⁷

- The Museum does not support any war.
- War breeds its share of physical and psychological death and injury, with devastating personal, professional, familial, and societal consequences.
- That said, war is sometimes unavoidable. Governments cannot be denied the right of self-defense.
- The current Israel-Gaza war started on October 7th when Hamas committed a terrorist attack on Israel.
- We reaffirm that there must be respect for international humanitarian law by all parties.

Does the Museum support a two-state solution, a one-state solution, a ceasefire, etc.?

- The Museum does not take positions on political issues. The parties themselves are best positioned to determine what future to build for themselves and the coming generations.

Is Israel committing genocide against the Palestinians?

- The Museum does not make declarations on which conflicts meet the criteria for the legal definition of genocide. We look to general consensus of mainstream legal and historical scholars.
- Currently, the events in Israel and Gaza are still extremely fluid and changing daily. This does not discount the gravity of the humanitarian crisis or the need to help people in Israel and Gaza. The crime of genocide as defined by international law has very specific criteria, and can only be decided by an international court of law.
- How is genocide defined?
 - Article II of the Convention on the Prevention and Punishment of the Crime of Genocides defines genocide as the “intent to destroy, in whole or in part, a national, ethnic, racial, or religious group,” and commission of one of the following five acts:
 - murder of members of the group
 - serious physical or mental harm to members of the group
 - intentionally subjecting the group to conditions of life calculated to bring about its physical destruction in whole or in part
 - measures to prevent births within the group
 - the forced transfer of children from the group to another group

These points are not meant to minimize the scale of human suffering and humanitarian disaster caused by the current conflict.

Is Hamas committing genocide against Israel/Jewish people?

- The Museum does not make declarations on which conflicts meet the criteria for the legal definition of genocide. We look to general consensus of mainstream legal and historical scholars.
- Currently, the events in Israel and Gaza are still extremely fluid and changing daily. This does not discount the gravity of the humanitarian crisis or the need to help people in Israel and Gaza. The crime of genocide as defined by international law has very specific criteria, and can only be decided by an international court of law.

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Are pro-Palestinian protests antisemitic?⁹

- There is nothing antisemitic about supporting the Palestinians' right to a state or demonstrating for their rights. That said, supporting a movement like Hamas or Hezbollah (considered terrorist organizations by the US and other countries), whose aim is to destroy Israel, is antisemitic.
 - Participating in a demonstration organized by Hamas or Hezbollah sympathizers is antisemitic.
 - Presenting the Hamas attack as a form of legitimate resistance is antisemitic.
 - Chanting 'Palestine will be free from the river to the sea,' a coded call for the removal of Jews in Israel and the destruction of Israel is antisemitic.
 - Protesting Israel by targeting Jewish institutions, events, neighborhoods, Jewish students, or Jewish people in any capacity because they are Jewish, is antisemitic.
 - Blaming Jewish people for actions taken by the Israeli government, or demanding a Jewish person have a position on the current conflict, is antisemitic.
- Let us be clear, holding Muslim individuals responsible for the actions of Hamas, Hezbollah, or of foreign governments they are not party to is Islamophobic. We condemn any acts of Islamophobia that have been present in Chicago, the U.S., and around the world. We have seen the devastating effects of hate speech and all of us need to speak up when confronted by hate, racism, and discrimination.

What are some common phrases, slogans, and chants that are antisemitic and why?

- "From the river to the sea, Palestine will be free."
 - This rallying cry has long been used by supporters of terrorist movements such as Hamas, which seek Israel's destruction through violent means. It is fundamentally a call for a Palestinian state extending from the Jordan River to the Mediterranean Sea, territory that includes the State of Israel, which would mean the destructions of the Jewish state. It is a rejection of the Jewish people's right to self-determination in their ancestral homeland.
 - Use of this phrase, therefore, has the effect of making members of the Jewish community feel unsafe and targeted. Demanding justice for Palestinians, or calling for a Palestinian state, should not mean a rejection of the Jewish people's connection to the land of Israel.¹⁰
- "Khaybar, Khaybar, oh Jews, the army of Mohammed will return."
 - Khaybar is a historic Arabian oasis north of Medina in present-day Saudi Arabia that is religiously significant in Islamic history. This slogan recalls a series of seventh-century battles between Mohammed and local Jews during the first few years of Islam's establishment. As retold in the Quran

and other textual sources, Mohammed's forces took action against Khaybar in response to purported acts of Jewish treachery. Ultimately, these battles resulted in the subjugation, mass expulsion, or slaughter of the area's tribal Jewish communities.

- Invoking this slogan problematically shifts the complex Israeli-Palestinian conflict into a religious battle between Islam and Judaism. Moreover, in celebrating a past armed attack on Jews, this chant can be perceived as a threat of armed violence or forcible expulsion against Jews today.¹¹
- "Globalize the Intifada."
 - The chant is a reference to two periods of Palestinian violence against Israel – in the late 1980s and from 2000-2005 – which saw Palestinian terrorists commit indiscriminate acts of violence against Israelis, including suicide bombings, shootings and stabbings, targeting people on city buses, restaurants or at nightclubs – resulting in over 1,000 people killed. This slogan is generally understood as a call for indiscriminate violence against Israel, and potentially against Jews and Jewish institutions worldwide.¹²
- "Resistance by any means necessary."
 - Justifying Hamas' actions as the right to resist by any means necessary is effectively a justification of the barbaric actions of Oct. 7, including the murder and kidnapping of babies, the elderly, men, women, and children – as well as other forms of terrorism used against Israelis – including suicide bombings, shootings, stabbings, and rocket fire directed at civilian population centers. Whatever one's view of Israeli policies and the Palestinian condition, support for terrorism, especially the type of attacks we witnessed on Oct. 7 can never be justified.¹³

Does Israel exist because of the Holocaust?

- No. Israel does not exist because of the Holocaust. Jewish people have inhabited this land for thousands of years. It was at one time comprised of two states: Israel and Judah. Since the destruction of the Temple in Jerusalem and subsequent exile by the Babylonians around 586 BCE, and then again in 70CE by the Roman, many Jewish people have yearned to reestablish their state – the ancestral homeland.
- Zionism is an idea of Jewish self-determination in their historic homeland and is an important part of Judaism for many Jews around the world.
 - **Religious Zionism** is an integral part of the Jewish religion. The First Jewish-Roman War, which led to the destruction of the Second Temple, caused the dispersion of the Jewish people, referred to as the diaspora. This exile from the land of Israel became a recurring theme in rabbinic literature.
 - **Political Zionism** was born at the end of the 19th century, well before the Holocaust. Zionism is an ideology, as well as a cultural and political movement whose aim is to create a sovereign state for the Jewish people.
- There is very little connection between the Holocaust and the re-establishment of the State of Israel. This idea must be denounced because it delegitimizes the Jewish people's right to self-determination.
- Israel is not a consolation prize offered to the Jews in the aftermath of the Holocaust to allow Europe to assuage its guilt. On the contrary, the destruction of European Jewry almost put the creation of the State of Israel into question. During the Holocaust, immigration was severely restricted for Jews trying to flee persecution. The most obvious link between Israel and the Holocaust is demographic, due to the massive influx of Holocaust survivors in the new state: 350,000 in 1949, or a third of its population. These survivors rebuilt their lives in Israel.



**ILLINOIS HOLOCAUST MUSEUM
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Take history to heart. Take a stand for humanity.

"I would like to say to people not to take for granted – not freedom, not justice. You have to stand up for it. You have to defend this. To be your brother's keeper. Not to be passive when things are going on around you. Not to be indifferent. To be a participant in life, and to defend the rights of humanity."

Vladka Meed

Holocaust Survivor

¹ International Holocaust Remembrance Alliance. "Working Definition of Antisemitism." <https://holocaustremembrance.com/resources/working-definition-antisemitism>

² The Nexus Project. "Understanding Antisemitism at its Nexus with Israel and Zionism." <https://nexusproject.us/the-nexus-document/>

³ United States Holocaust Memorial Museum. "What is Antisemitism." Holocaust Encyclopedia. <https://encyclopedia.ushmm.org/content/en/article/antisemitism>

⁴ ADL, "Antisemitism in Global History," <https://antisemitism.adl.org/antisemitism-in-global-history/>

⁵ U.S. State Department. "Defining Holocaust Distortion and Denial." <https://www.state.gov/defining-holocaust-distortion-and-denial/>

^{6, 7, 9} Montreal Holocaust Museum. "Communication to Volunteer Guides." November 17, 2023. English Version

⁸ United Nations. "Convention on the Prevention and Punishment of the Crime of Genocide." <https://www.un.org/en/genocide-prevention/1948-convention>

¹⁰ ADL, "Slogan: From the River to the Sea Palestine Will be Free," <https://www.adl.org/resources/backgrounder/slogan-river-sea-Palestine-will-be-free>.

¹¹ ADL, "Chant: Khaybar, Khaybar, oh Jews, the Army of Mohammed will Return," <https://www.adl.org/resources/backgrounder/chant-khaybar-khaybar-oh-jews-army-mohammed-will-return>.

¹² ADL, "Slogan: Globalize the Intifada," <https://www.adl.org/resources/backgrounder/slogan-globalize-intifada>

¹³ ADL, "Slogan: Resistance by any means necessary," <https://www.adl.org/resources/backgrounder/slogan-resistance-any-means-necessary>