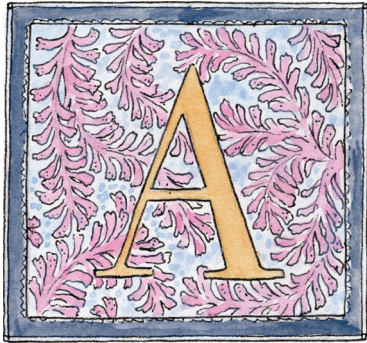


DARA HORN

How to Teach the Jewish Story

The opposite of hate isn't love, it's curiosity



AFTER MY BOOK about contemporary antisemitism, *People Love Dead Jews*, came out in 2021, I realized I had made a stupid mistake. When you write a nonfiction book about a problem, people expect you to solve the problem by the end of the book. It was my first nonfiction book after publishing five novels, and I soon had readers of every background asking me, “So what’s your solution to this problem?” —to which my rather tasteless reply was, “Do you want me to give you the final solution to the Jewish question? Because I’m really not prepared for that.”

But now, after four years of readers sharing their personal horror stories regarding antisemitism, and two years of a war that has also been waged against Diaspora Jews, I am prepared. I even have a plan.

It may sound glib to say it’s possible to defeat a centuries-old hatred, but fatalism about such supposed impossibilities is not something

Martin Luther King Jr. or Theodor Herzl would have accepted. In any case, my suggestion is far more modest. My goal isn't to defeat American antisemitism. It's to turn the tide on the ignorance that makes well-meaning people susceptible to it. My experiences speaking to non-Jewish audiences across the country for the past four years have shown me that there is far, far more ignorance than malice—and that presents an opportunity.



My hypothesis is that teaching the broader American public about the basic content of living Jewish civilization—and how dominant societies have reacted to that civilization—will provide our fellow Americans with the simple knowledge required to recognize and reject the consistent pattern of antisemitism's foundational lie.

The lie, simply stated, is that Jews are destroying whatever their societies value most. The goal, short of ending antisemitism but worthy and ambitious enough, is to make it *normal* and *expected* for educated people of all backgrounds to know the most basic facts about Jewish civilization, in the same way that we today expect educated people to know the basic facts about the Holocaust. This should matter to all because those basic facts function as an acid test for living in a pluralistic society.

This modest goal of mine emerged from two unpleasant projects I was roped into after *People Love Dead Jews*. One was Harvard's ill-fated Antisemitism Advisory Group set up under the university's now-former president, Claudine Gay, who did not take much of our advice. I learned something important from this: If one hopes to address antisemitism through education, college is far too late. The other project was a long investigative piece about American Holocaust education that *The Atlantic* commissioned me to write, titled "Is Holocaust Education Making

Antisemitism Worse?” (Spoiler: Yes.) This article made many people hate me—or, as some say in publishing, “started a conversation.” But I also heard from many more Holocaust educators eager to learn how they might do better.

In my public talks for non-Jewish audiences, I’d also noticed that many people were intensely curious about Jewish life, but like the fourth son in the Haggadah, they didn’t know how to ask. Educators sometimes speak of the “null curriculum”—what’s *not* taught in schools, like sex education a few generations ago. The null curriculum is also part of the curriculum, because it signals to students that if they want to know anything about it, they’ll need to seek information outside formal educational channels.

In my reporting on Holocaust education, I’d noticed that the only thing most American students learned about Jews, if they learned anything at all, was that we were people who died in Europe between 1933 and 1945. (One docent at a Holocaust museum told me that students often ask him, “Are there still Jews alive today?”) When social media bots then inform these students that Jews are European colonizers who have no business in the Middle East, why wouldn’t they believe it, when it doesn’t contradict anything they know? By relegating Jewish civilization to the null curriculum, we have outsourced it to TikTok, a platform not known for its interest in civilizing anything. If the goal of Holocaust education is to protect our society from antisemitism, wouldn’t it make more sense to teach the public about living Jews instead of dead ones?

After writing and speaking publicly about this idea, I began to meet people from various organizations who were doing the hard work of introducing a non-Jewish public to the positive story of Jewish life. They were presenting this material in public and private K–12 schools, in museums, in interfaith settings, and online. Some were educating non-Jews about Jewish traditions, holidays, and beliefs. Others were provid-

ing accurate and accessible information about Israel. Still others focused on American Jews, teaching how American Jews cured polio or fought for the civil rights of black Americans. Many of these initiatives deeply impressed me. But something about them also left me uneasy. These efforts were based on the premise that the opposite of hatred is love or empathy, so the goal was to make people love Jews, or at least relate to them. In their gallant effort to avoid focusing on antisemitism, these approaches often unwittingly accepted antisemitism's deepest assumption, which was that Jews need to convince others of their worthiness.

This unspoken assumption appeared in almost every detail. In school materials about other minorities, for instance, I'd never once seen anything highlighting a given minority's work on behalf of other groups—but material on American Jews often emphasized their role as “allies.” The emphasis on Jewish individuals' contributions also felt weirdly defensive; curing polio is a rather high bar for gaining public respect. The idea of Jews as a “religion” (even though the many millions of secular Jews are no less Jewish than religious ones) reflected an insistence that Jews were *just like everyone else*, behaving themselves by staying in their assigned identity lane. And why should the details of the Israeli–Palestinian conflict be any more relevant to American students than the details of how Turkey (a NATO ally to whom the United States has formal military obligations) has occupied northern Cyprus and fought the Kurds?

The answer, of course, is that the default and completely unacknowledged assumption in most non-Jewish societies is that Jews are evil unless proven otherwise. It's an assumption that too many Jews themselves have apparently internalized.

I had often championed the idea of focusing on living Jews and the positive aspects of Jewish life. But the more I thought about this divide between the “positive” approach (teaching people about Jewish life) and the “negative” approach (teaching people about anti-

semitism), the more I understood how artificial this divide really is. Was it “positive” to avoid focusing on the oppression of Jews or “noncontroversial” to avoid teaching about Zionism and Jewish independence by instead teaching about ... Hanukkah? What on earth did people think Hanukkah was about? Did it make sense to teach people that Jews were *just like everyone else*, when Jews have spent 3,000 years not being like everyone else? More important, *why* had Jews spent 3,000 years not being like everyone else, instead of vanishing into dominant empires like almost every other ancient group has done? For most of Jewish history, Jews had the ability to opt out of persecution by assimilating into dominant societies, and many did. (The Holocaust was atypical in this regard.) But Jews today are the descendants of those who didn't. Why didn't they? What made people commit to that high-cost, countercultural choice?



As I weighed these questions after October 7, I came to understand that these supposedly distinct topics — Jewish life and culture (including Israel and Zionism) on the one hand, and the Holocaust and historical and contemporary antisemitism on the other — have never been separate stories. They are one story, which happens to be one of the greatest stories on earth. It is the story of Jewish nonconformity, a story that lies at the very foundation of freedom, and it is the only reason why anything about this 0.2 percent sliver of the world's population should matter to a non-Jewish public at all.

This is the story of a tiny group of people whose groundbreaking ideas shaped world history. The first of those ideas was monotheism, which is actually a political idea. In the ancient world, societies had many gods, and one of the gods was often the dictator. When the Jews said they do not bow to other gods — stated most explic-

itly to the Babylonian King Nebuchadnezzar in Daniel 3:18, “Be it known to you, O king, that we will not serve your god or worship the statue of gold that you have set up”—the point is that they do not bow to tyrants. Jewish civilization is an anti-tyrannical movement, a nonconformist movement, an anti-hierarchical movement, based on a story of liberation that taught the world that change is possible. It is a movement built on laws, debate, and civil discourse that taught the world that freedom requires responsibility.

These foundations of Jewish civilization are inseparable from the history of antisemitism for well over 2,000 years. The assumption that Jews are evil unless and until proven otherwise endures for the same reason that Jewish civilization itself does: its nonconformity. When you have an anti-tyrannical movement, it pisses off tyrants. When you have a nonconformist movement, it pisses off dominant cultures that need everyone to conform. When you have a movement based on the necessity of civil discourse, it pisses off people who cannot tolerate debate or dissent.

The story of antisemitism has been remarkably consistent for thousands of years, and entirely inseparable from Jewish civilization, because it all traces back to the Jewish people’s radical proposition that people don’t need to conform or agree, that people don’t need to bow to tyrants. People who refuse to conform are a profound challenge to the authority of a dominant culture. An *entire people* refusing to conform is an almost intolerable challenge, tantamount to a threat. Antisemitism isn’t just a social prejudice or a conspiracy theory. It is a lie that people use to gain or maintain power. The Big Lie of antisemitism is that Jews are destroying what you value most, even while that changes over the course of history. This lie is what turns antisemitism into a righteous—or at least self-righteous—cause.

This lie is directly related to the threat that the Jewish people have always posed to the idea of conformity and blind submission. It is a lie

told by people who need to dominate, whether those people are middle schoolers, social influencers, or full-blown tyrants. It is a lie that benefits people who need to crush dissent. And the reason that it's so hard to defuse the Big Lie is that we are still living inside it and are supposed to pretend we aren't.

We're supposed to teach nice lessons about powerless dead European Jews from nearly a century ago while pretending that the richest people from the world's most tyrannical regimes aren't currently spending billions of dollars on spreading the Big Lie, or that the financial structure of the internet isn't premised on the inherently majority-favoring concept that popularity is the arbiter of truth. The massive institutional investment in the Big Lie is the reason why Jews today are concentrated in only two countries on earth. It's the reason Israeli Jews are tortured and starved in dungeons for years while so much of the world cheers on their kidnappers and murderers. It's the reason anyone who posts anything Jewish online can realistically expect to be inundated with abuse. It's the reason American Jewish children think it's normal to be subjected to daily marginalization in an age of supposed de-marginalizing. It's the reason why so many of those talented educators telling the positive story of Jewish life, unlike those teaching about dead, powerless European Jews from the 1940s, find themselves begging for crumbs from schools, asking whether schools could please, please, graciously provide them with a 40-minute period, or maybe a "heritage month" assembly, or even just a bulletin board display. In many American schools, it's not unusual for teachers to spend three weeks on ancient Egypt, two weeks on ancient Mesopotamia, and four weeks on the puberty of Anne Frank. Yet somehow these schools barely manage to find any time at all, out of 13 academic years, to spend on the civilization that is the source of the cultures of most people on the planet, the civilization that inspired America's Founders, the civilization that

showed the world that freedom and civil discourse are possible — the civilization that is still proving it now.



Our responsibility, not only as Jews but as members of the liberal West descended from Jewish civilization, is to make people curious about that dramatic story to which we owe our world. Jews are among the first groups in history to stand up to tyranny, and to this day they continue to do so. No one can defuse the lie of antisemitism without understanding that story, because it explains how people who want to dominate need that lie as a tool to stop curiosity and crush dissent.

I founded the Tell Institute to tell that one story. I named it for the idea of an archaeological tell, a hill made of the layers of the past, and also for storytelling, telling it like it is, telling a friend, and the “tell” that reveals a lie.

Our crack team of talented and experienced educators (including full-time classroom teachers, district supervisors, and curriculum writers) has created a short set of accessible lesson plans and teacher trainings, which we have adapted for different courses and grade levels in middle and high schools, and also for Jewish community settings like b’nai mitzvah cohorts. These lesson plans are a crash course in the groundbreaking ideas of Jewish civilization that continue to shape Jewish communities as well as the broader world. Integrated within this introduction are the dynamics of the Big Lie of antisemitism, which we explore in a set of case studies from before and after the Holocaust that demonstrate the consistent pattern of the lie. These case studies unfold on four continents, the first from 40 C.E. and the last from 2001. The goal is to enable pattern recognition. Because the lie in every time period is activated by new media (scrolls, books, printing presses, telegraphs, radio, film, TV, internet), we’ve also had to introduce media-literacy elements that

students apparently lack, such as the ability to recognize the illusory truth effect (in which repetition makes a falsehood seem true), the way new media environments invert the relationship between credibility and exposure, and the fact that popularity is not a measure of truth.

Far from an information dump, these materials are interactive and iterative, modeling millennia-old Jewish learning practices to ignite curiosity. For instance, one “bell-ringer” (short opening activity) in our second lesson presents students with a hypothetical: “You live in a small, independent community that values its traditions. A powerful new ruler takes over your region. Today, a proclamation is issued: ‘From this day forward, all citizens must abandon their old customs and obey the ruler’s laws without question. Independent meetings and local decision-making are banned. Anyone who speaks against the new system will be punished.’”

Students are then asked to choose among four responses: Do they agree with this new rule, since anyone powerful enough to conquer them must be doing something right? Do they disagree but comply to avoid conflict? Do they resist, but only quietly? Or do they openly oppose it? (Historically, different groups of Jews have reacted in *all* of these ways.) The purpose of the exercise is to introduce curiosity about what it might take to preserve a counterculture under vast and often violent pressure from dominant societies. I initially thought that students might deem this activity patronizing. Wouldn’t every self-respecting teenage rebel sign up for the open-opposition choice? I was surprised when, in our first pilot classrooms, the teachers reported that everyone chose compliance—and that this opened a discussion about social pressure and dissent. I guess these kids needed more Jewish civilization than even we realized.

We are early in this process, but I have already been astonished by how little it takes to open people’s minds. In one training for public school educators, I began my presentation with the most basic foun-

dations of Jewish civilization: monotheism, the liberation narrative, laws that don't come from individual rulers, civil discourse, and also an ethos of non-expansion—Jews never had or desired an empire, never sought to rule over others, and while some Jews did proselytize in the ancient period, there was and is no mission to convert anyone. The teachers and principals in this school were overwhelmingly not Jewish. Few knew anything about Judaism or Jewish life. After the first 20 minutes, I paused for questions, and a young woman in the back of the room raised her hand. “So what you're saying,” she said hesitantly, “is that there's this tiny group of people that just wants to be left alone, and no one is leaving them alone?” Bingo—and it took only 20 minutes.

In the few responses we have from students thus far, we've also seen how it's possible to activate curiosity about both the “positive” and “negative” aspects of this story. One student of Brazilian heritage mentioned that learning the basics of Jewish civilization felt very relatable to him—it gave him a mirror to “the presumptions and dumb questions people ask me about Brazil.” It turns out that people really don't know how much they don't know about many things—and it's not nearly as hard as it seems to start learning. Another student was intrigued by the Big Lie: “What really stood out to me was how simple yet effective lies and propaganda can be. This made me realize that most people will blindly accept false information, especially if this aligns with what they already believe in.” At the end of one teacher workshop, an African-American woman from a federally funded Title I public school approached me with tears in her eyes, talking about what it meant to her to learn for the first time about this enduring counterculture that set an acid test for a pluralistic society. In her words: “I want to take this story back to my black and brown students. They need this story.”

All of us do. The opposite of hatred isn't love or empathy. It's curiosity. And the purpose of education is to activate curiosity, to make

people encounter the unfamiliar not with fear, but with eagerness to learn more. Fortunately, Jewish civilization has provided us with several thousand years of best practices in sparking that curiosity in the next generation. It's time to open the conversation for those who don't know how to ask. *

DARA HORN is the author of seven books, including *People Love Dead Jews*, and the founder and president of The Tell Institute.