



DEFENDERS OF THE FAITH

Amid a rising spate of anti-Semitic incidents, three Jewish leaders speak out

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Participants:



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Anti-Defamation League



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think of Boca Raton and Palm Beach County as welcoming places for Jewish people. In fact, 40 percent of Boca's population is Jewish. Yet we are not immune to a troubling trend: In its newly released 2022 audit, the Anti-Defamation League (ADL) tracked more than 269 incidents of anti-Semitism in Florida last year alone, and a 42-percent increase in anti-Semitic incidents across the state—this following a 50-percent increase in incidents from 2020 to 2021.

This past January at FAU, men set up a table with anti-Semitic propaganda at an event to promote student clubs. The same month, Boca Raton homeowners found plastic bags filled with anti-Semitic messages on their front lawns. Also in January, a swastika was projected onto a building in downtown West Palm Beach.

In February, the Palm Beach Sheriff's Office reported a swastika spray-painted on the side of a building in Century Village in West Boca. These are just the incidents we know about.

To explore this rise in anti-Jewish activity, we convened three of the region's experts to discuss its provenance, the reality for local Jews on the ground and online, and possible solutions. Sarah Emmons is the Florida regional director for the Anti-Defamation League. Laurence Milstein is the director of the American Jewish Committee's Palm Beach Region. And Efreim Goldberg is the senior rabbi for Boca Raton Synagogue, the largest Orthodox synagogue in the Southeast United States, with a congregation of more than 800 families.

Why have we seen so much hatred against the Jewish community spring up, even in such a tolerant city and county, in recent years?

Emmons: One of the main causes of this proliferation of hate is we've seen a rise in extremist groups and extremist individuals who are asso-

ciated with national organizations that are particularly prevalent here in Florida and have really increased their activity. The ADL tracked a 71-percent increase in extremist-related activity from 2020 to 2021. And we're certainly seeing that play out—people traveling from not only across the state but also from other states to do hateful things here.

But it's not only extremist groups. It's also individuals who have become normalized to anti-Semitic beliefs, and have felt empowered to act on those anti-Semitic beliefs here in our Boca Raton and Palm Beach community.

Milstein: I don't think we can point to one specific moment where we can say we transitioned into more anti-Semitism, but over at least the last decade, there have been several trends that have contributed to it. One is, as we get further removed from the Holocaust, there's less shame associated with being able to publicly espouse anti-Semitic views. The other thing we know is that anti-Semitism tends to rise when there's economic distress. We're just coming out of a pandemic

that created a tremendous amount of economic distress, and we're still dealing with that today. Another factor is we're living in an era where there's a tremendous amount of mistrust of government institutions. That leads to conspiracy theories that abound about government and what's happening in society. And at its core, anti-Semitism is another conspiracy theory. It

gets traction when we're living in this era of distrust.

The fourth trend is social media. The increasing prevalence of social media, with the ability to now take hate and anti-Semitism in a matter of seconds, and send it at lightning speed around the world to millions of observers, accentuates the problem we're dealing with.

Goldberg: I would add a historical context. We shouldn't react to this proliferation and this rise as if we've lived with safety and security throughout our history, and all of a sudden out of nowhere, there's this hate that's swelling. The truth is, we're reverting back to a reality we faced for 2,000 years and beyond, that we had a 75-year reprieve from. Anti-Semitism is the world's oldest hatred. Since there have been a Jewish people, there have been those who hate and have tried to eliminate the Jewish people. And that shouldn't make us slow down or reluctant to tackle it and to confront it and to eliminate it, but it should sober us to the reality that we're returning to what always was, not facing something new.

Where does Florida stand against other states in terms of reported anti-Semitism?

Emmons: The ADL publishes, and has since 1979, our annual audit of anti-Semitic incidents, which is not so much a thermometer—an exact measurement of anti-Semitic incidents—but more a barometer: What are the trends we're seeing, and how many incidents are we able to capture? Our 2022 audit of anti-Semitic incidents again shows a rise, not only nationally but also in the state of Florida, of anti-Semitic incidents, which is unfortunate but expected, based on what we saw in 2021.

Nationally, we're seeing a 36-percent increase in anti-Semitic incidents. Here in Florida, that statistic is a 42-percent jump. In Florida, since 2020, we've seen a doubling of anti-Semitism incidents.

In comparison to other states, this is not a space where Florida wants to be ranking high in the statistics. ... We come in fourth, behind New York, New Jersey and California in terms of the total number of anti-Semitic incidents.

What kind of a role should the governor have in responding to numbers like these? What role should the president have?

Milstein: I think all public figures have a role, when anti-Semitism arises, to condemn it unequivocally. And that's one of the key elements in combating it. Public officials, especially, should be on record condemning anti-Semitism and quite frankly any form of hatred or racism that is happening under their watch.

I'd like to give a little context to the ADL report. We've now released, for the past four years, the State of Anti-Semitism in America report... It's actually two parallel surveys. One of them is a survey of the American Jewish community, to get their pulse on how they're experiencing an-



Rabbi Efreim Goldberg



Laurence Milstein



Sarah Emmons

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ti-Semitism. One of the key findings was that 41 percent of American Jews said that they feel less secure in America today than they did one year ago. And that statistic is up 10 percent from when we asked the same question in 2021.

Another statistic from the same study: Four out of 10 American Jews said they've changed their behavior in the past year out of fear of anti-Semitism, and when we break it down, that meant they took off a star of David that they would wear, they took off a skullcap they would wear in public, or they didn't go to a particular event or venue because they felt it was a target.

The Jewish community is really feeling this. ... That's why it's so important that public officials, at a minimum, need to speak up against it. We need to keep it on the fringes of society as best we can.

Goldberg: I wonder about the data, which is important and instructive but also probably correlates to where Jews live, meaning the four states you mentioned are the four most highly populated Jewish states. In terms of the public officials ... When I hear people, in almost

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an extreme way, saying, 'we're going back to Germany in 1938,' I say there's one fundamental difference. Certainly we're seeing trends, and they're deeply troublesome. But in Germany in 1938, the government itself was enacting policies that were anti-Semitic.

Here, to the best of my knowledge, on our state level and federally, with President Biden appointing a special commission, we're seeing leaders, politicians, public figures who are expressing an intolerance for anti-Semitism. If that were to change, if we see them hesitate, if we see them waver and equivocate, that would be an enormous warning sign to us, based on our history. But as long as we see that elected officials and public persons and other religions are standing with us and for us, it's not a reason to relax our confron-

tation with anti-Semitism, but I do think it is reassuring. And those who are equivocating more, or hosting the wrong people in their domain, should be called out and should be pressured to make their position clear. The intolerance for anti-Semitism should be the same intolerance for homophobia and racism and bigotry and discrimination.

... I'm upset at the notion that people are changing their behavior. [It] is the exact opposite of what we need to be doing. I'm not saying we engage in risky behavior and put ourselves in front of those who might harm us, but I think now is the time that calls for greater practice, greater passion and greater Jewish pride. The way we are going to send it to the fringes and make this an outlier behavior is not to recoil and to hide and to sit in shame.

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I think we're failing to leverage this rise in anti-Semitism the way we could. If there are young Jews who were not in touch with their Judaism, who now feel targeted as Jews, let's invite them to explore what Judaism means. Why don't we embrace that?

In 2000 years we're the strongest we've ever been, with a State of Israel with an incredible military and a wonderful U.S.-Israel relationship. We have public officials and politicians who are outspoken behind us. We can't revert back to that reaction, for 2,000 years, of hiding in the corner. I think we have to be more assertive.

ADL Florida has a space on its website called the Changing Face of Anti-Semitism. What do you mean by that?

Emmons: We're just starting to see anti-Semitism escalate and pop up in places we haven't prior. This is a centuries-old issue, but it's manifesting in new ways in our modern society. Social media has become a space where people are able to perpetuate anti-Semitic ideas, gather and have

conversations with other anti-Semitic individuals, and that space—that intersection of ideas on the internet—often leads to people coming together for demonstrations, for flyering, for laser projections like we saw here in Palm Beach County.

We at ADL are also looking into the role of online gaming. We know from a recent study at ADL that for adults, over 80 percent of them have experienced harassment online when playing games like Minecraft—identity-based harassment. More than 60 percent of people under 18 who are playing games have experienced this type of harassment. Here in Florida, we recently got an incident reported to us by a parent who said that her student was playing Minecraft, and someone wrote to him, 'I know that you're Jewish, and I know where you live.' ... We need our gaming companies and social media platforms to first have policies against hate speech on their platforms, and second to actually enforce those policies.

Goldberg: Meyers Leonard, who played for the Miami Heat, was a big gamer. He used an anti-Semitic expression that he later said he didn't

know what it meant, and that he learned it in that space, where it's apparently normalized to use language and be violent. I was introduced to him by someone we had in common. He's a case study in what can go right with this, because he took responsibility right away, apologized, spent a couple years educating himself, and it's an amazing story of redemption. ... It's an example where, we collectively could have called him an anti-Semite. And then he might have become a spokesperson for that. Instead, we developed a relationship with him, and now he's at the forefront of speaking out against anti-Semitism. We won a friend, and we won an advocate.

What are the subtle forms of anti-Semitism, where it might not be a swastika plastered somewhere, but it could be more insidious than that?

Goldberg: Micro-aggressions, you could call them. ... So whether it's a professor in a classroom who is not respecting religious freedom of when [a student] can take a test, or where

it's a reference to Jews and money. And in interpersonal daily life, someone who looks askance at a Jew, or is not as courteous to a Jew because they're visibly dressed Jewishly. ... I was walking with my family in Saint Augustine last winter, and a woman stopped and looked at one of my daughters, and said, 'you're an ugly Jew.' She didn't raise a swastika or physically attack us. I got a sermon out of it, but it was jarring. That's one of those smaller examples.

Emmons: We're seeing that more and more—people making statements toward Jews, either out-right because they have some sort of hatred, or because they don't know better. Maybe they've heard somewhere that Jews are powerful or greedy or run the banks or run Hollywood; these are beliefs people have, and they play out. We're seeing it more and more in schools; kids are starting to say things to one another because they have beliefs about the Jewish community. And that is anti-Semitism. There really is an education piece, to help people learn more about the community—not just the Holocaust but the richness of the Jewish community, so people are not anti-Semitic in their words.

We recently put out a study around anti-Semitic attitudes, which have seen a tremendous jump over the past few years. We found that 20 percent of adults surveyed held six or more anti-Semitic beliefs—things like, Jews have too much power in the U.S. today, or Jews are more loyal to Israel than to America, or Jews are dishonest. That's a massive jump. That number in 2019 was 11 percent. And those ideas play out in interactions.

What about usage of a term like 'globalist'? Is that a dog whistle?

Milstein: Absolutely. It depends on context. It seems like a very innocuous word for someone who perceives the political or economic world

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through an international lens. But when it's used in certain contexts, and applied just to Jews, it raises the specter of another anti-Semitic trope, which is that Jews don't have allegiance to their home country; they have this allegiance to this international world order financial system that they're hoping to benefit from and influence. That's one of the words in our Translate Hate guidebook that can be a dog whistle.

Another one is George Soros, whose name is thrown around. He's a Hungarian Holocaust survivor who happens to be very progressive, with liberal views, but his name is often used as a symbol of Jewish power, control or influence. When it's used in that context, it's a dog whistle.

Goldberg: It's ironic. Some use him in that context, and too many Jews think he's a self-hating Jew. He gets beaten up on both sides.

Milstein: That's anti-Semitism. We always get it from both sides. We get it from the left, the right—we're communists, we're capitalists ...

Following up on the rabbi's Meyers Leonard story, is education the solution, or are most extremist ideas essentially incurable?

Milstein: It's case-specific. There are many examples of it being used as a learning opportunity. We know for sure that education can make a difference. One fact from our study is that only 53 percent of the general population knew that 6 million Jews were killed in the Holocaust. But we also found, from the same study, that the more knowl-

edge that people have of Holocaust education, the more they appreciate the dangers of anti-Semitism.

Emmons: I'm not a psychologist, but when I think about why people are anti-Semitic, I think a lot of it has to do with fear, and a lot of it has to do with loneliness. Especially during COVID, we saw a lot of people gravitate toward extremist or conspiratorial thinking. But giving people an opportunity to feel more comfortable in themselves, to learn about anti-Semitism, about the Jewish community, I think those can be really instructive moments. We believe in counsel culture versus cancel culture.

Goldberg: We're living in the age of sound bites and outrage. So if we're not careful what we label anti-Semitism ... if everything's anti-Semitism, nothing's anti-Semitism. If nothing's anti-Semitism, we're in big trouble. Sometimes, someone is an unrepentant, unabashed anti-Semite. The likelihood you're going to turn them around is very small. Nobody's turning [Louis] Farrakhan around on his views about Jews. Then you have Meyers Leonard, who's a good guy, and he just didn't know.

There was a story about a white supremacist who grew up in that world, who was invited to a Shabbat meal in someone's home, and who ended up turning around and leaving a world of extremism and supremacy. You add humanity to it, and you give people a personal experience.

We need to have a scalpel, not a machete, and be really nuanced in our attitude and approach to these issues. If we call for canceling, and label everything anti-Semitism, we'll end up hurting ourselves. **b**