Lee Edwards December 19th, 2025

Violence and silence: What can organisations do to tackle antisemitism?

LSE's Professor Lee Edwards reflects on media reactions to recent terrorist attacks on Jewish communities, and on what her research shows about how places of work could help to better tackle antisemitism.

The horrific attacks on Jewish communities at Bondi Beach this week and at Heaton Park synagogue in October this year have prompted extensive discussions in the media about how to tackle antisemitism, while protecting free speech. The debate has quickly become focused on how slogans used in protests should be policed, the extent to which they constitute hate speech, and the degree to which they may prompt physical and sometimes fatal violence against Jewish communities.

One lesson history has taught us is that words matter, and so the discussion – which is complex and contested – is vitally important. But context is also crucial, and focusing on the protests runs the risk of reifying links between the Israel-Gaza war, protests against the war, and antisemitism, and overlooking other possible explanations for antisemitic violence. Antisemitic attacks have increased since the attack on October 7 2023, but have been on an upward trajectory for a decade, so the war does not fully explain this violence. After all, as activist groups have shown over many years, it is possible to oppose the war and the occupation, and not engage in antisemitism.

Complexity of antisemitism

What else can explain antisemitic behaviour and violence, in a way that might help us to address it? The question is not straightforward, not least because antisemitism itself is complex. Two major forms are social antisemitism – or discrimination against individuals because of their Jewish identity – and political antisemitism, which centres on conspiracy theories that attribute various forms of power to Jews as a group (e.g. control of global finance, governments, or media). A third

type, antizionist antisemitism, connects Jewish identity with the state of Israel, regards Israel as an illegitimate state, and sees all Jews as complicit in its actions. Like all racisms, these forms of antisemitism often operate implicitly, as well as explicitly, grounded in assumptions, preconceptions, symbols and stereotypes. They all have the potential to spill over into physical violence.

The UK government has been vocal about its strategies to address antisemitism, including training in the NHS, more stringent policing of protests, and more consistent community protection. However, it is not only the responsibility of government to generate change. All organisations have a vital role to play. Organisations frequently replicate social inequalities, and have a corresponding responsibility to support marginalised groups in their struggles for equality and justice.

Organisational responses

What might change, then, in our places of work, to address antisemitism? I conducted a study with Jewish PR professionals in the UK, one year after the October 7 Hamas attack and the beginning of the Israel-Gaza war, to understand how the context had affected their experience at work. All of them had experienced antisemitism in their professional and private lives before, but felt that the current war had raised the danger of it to another level. Organisational responses to discrimination often take the form of programmes such as DEI initiatives, helplines for employees, or public statements of support. However, the experiences of participants in this study suggested that, at least in the current context, organisational norms were to not discuss antisemitism, or express overt support for Jewish communities.

One common example related to public support for Jewish communities. The Hamas attack may be defined as a type of public tragedy, 'disruptive, catastrophic events that cause physical or psychological trauma for individuals, communities, organizations, and social support networks' (see Hayes et al, 2017, p. 255). Public tragedies can prompt organisational responses in support of victims, particularly if there is a connection to the event (e.g. an office in the location of a disaster, or employees affected by the tragedy). However, participants recounted that public advocacy by their organisations in support of Jewish communities, whether in response to the attack or in relation to the more general increase in antisemitism, was largely absent. This silence was paralleled by an apparent lack of concern among non-Jewish colleagues, who rarely mentioned the attack, expressed sympathy about it, or asked how they were coping with the aftermath, including the very strong public opinion and protests against Israel's actions in Gaza that they had to navigate.

The impact of silence

Organisational silences generated multiple uncertainties for the participants. They were not sure what colleagues might assume about their attitude to the war, or about the responses they might

get if they did try to raise the topic or explain the complexities of the context. The feeling of being invisible made their sense of belonging in their organisations more fragile, and they were often concerned about the reactions people might have if they revealed they were Jewish. For some, it made them aware of what it was to be a 'good' Jew – conditional on opposition to the war, the occupation and Israeli prime minister Benjamin Netanyahu. For everyone, the general lack of knowledge of the long history and complicated realities of the Middle East, of how Jewish history, religion and culture are connected to Israel, and of the specific nature of antisemitism as a form of racism, acted as a major barrier to conversations.

In turn, the silences that participants encountered silenced them, too, insofar as they were very reluctant to discuss their experiences, or the current war, with colleagues. In part, this was because they were worried about what the reaction might be, and in part because it felt both impossible and exhausting to try to explain the complexity of the context, even though it was vital to understanding the situation.

Silence is not antisemitism. But in organisations, silence can suggest generalised norms about what may and may not be said, issues that should and should not generate concern. In the participants' experiences, this normative pressure was compounded by the fact that antisemitism had never been included in any organisational training on diversity, equity and inclusion (DEI/EDI). The latter had two effects: it perpetuated a lack of understanding about Jewish identities and the specificities of antisemitism; and it meant that antisemitism itself did not have the formal legitimacy that DEI/EDI inclusion grants, making it more difficult to raise as a problem when it was experienced.

As one participant pointed out, we spend an awful lot of time at work, and what happens there has a significant impact on our lives. Therefore, silences within our workplaces matter a great deal. For example, where silence about the Hamas attack and the Israel-Gaza war is a norm, often justified by a desire to 'tread carefully' or avoid offence to different groups, organisations may inadvertently perpetuate antisemitic assumptions (such as that all Jews must be loyal to Israel and therefore support the war), precisely because they miss opportunities to have productive – if potentially challenging – conversations, that can help bridge gaps and misunderstandings.

Conversations about race and racism are always difficult, and antisemitism is no exception. But in his recent Robert Fine Memorial Lecture, Dave Rich, Director of Policy at the Community Security Trust, argued that change has to start with individual conversations. For organisations, facilitating these conversations through careful investment in steps towards change, including consultation with everyone involved, is crucial. In doing nothing, they ignore the responsibility they carry as important social actors with the capacity to drive social change. Such altruism is often claimed when it serves their own interests – now is the time to act on it.

This post gives the views of the author and not the position of the Media@LSE blog, nor of the London School of Economics and Political Science.

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