

IKAR Lunch and Learn with Jonathan Jacoby and Rabbi Sharon Brous

February 21, 2026 - Complete Transcript

Introduction

Rabbi Sharon Brous:

Welcome everybody. First lesson: start in a lower key next time. So one thing all the Jews can unite around. Welcome everybody. I am so grateful for the opportunity to share the voice and the perspective and the wisdom of my friend Jonathan Jacoby with our shared community this afternoon. Thank you for taking the time to come in. I love that there's a full room for this conversation. This is exactly what I was hoping.

I'm going to give you a little bit of background to Jonathan and then we are just going to jump right into this conversation. Jonathan is the president of the Nexus Project. He was the founding executive director of the New Israel Fund and the founding president of the Israel Policy Forum. He also held leadership positions at the Jewish Federation of Greater Los Angeles and Americans for Peace Now.

Jonathan has spent the last many decades pioneering new models for public-private partnership in the field of rare disease research as a co-founder of Support of Accelerated Research, which has built a pipeline of potential therapeutics for a rare neurodegenerative disease. He and his wife Hope live here in Los Angeles. They have three sons. They are also members of IKAR and deeply beloved.

And Jonathan is one of the few people who when life gets really perplexing and confusing I pick up the phone to call for wisdom and for guidance. And I am so profoundly grateful to you for not only the

years of friendship but also the clarity of thinking that you are bringing to this most perplexing of issues. So, I first just want to start by thanking you so much, Jonathan. Thank you for being here.

Opening: Defining Antisemitism

Rabbi Sharon Brous:

I want to say that we all know that these are incredibly difficult and also confusing times. And it seems to me that we're suffering from both a kind of moral confusion in our time and also just from a general confusion because the world is shifting so quickly before our eyes that we don't even necessarily understand the way that certain words that have been part of our lexicon maybe for generations now have completely different meanings than they had before. Certain people use words in one context that mean exactly the opposite in another context. And because of the algorithm, we're all living essentially in different ecosystems.

And so I think there's a lot of confusion and lack of clarity around how we even use words, let alone what those words and concepts and ideas really mean. So, I want to get right into it with you by talking about what is antisemitism and why this project matters so much that you've decided to dedicate yourself to it so fully in this time.

Jonathan Jacoby:

So first I want to say thank you to you not just for this opportunity but for many years, maybe decades of friendship, guidance, leadership, wisdom and for sharing with the kahal your own struggle and evolution and agony and also leadership about this issue which can't be easy. So thank you.

So I brought some reading material. This is a paper that was written about six years ago by a group of mostly scholars, some practitioners who were engaged in work around antisemitism and/or Israel. And what happened was that I at the time was working for New Israel Fund the second time around. And we noticed that in progressive circles, people didn't want to talk about Israel. They were afraid

they're going to be accused of being antisemitic if they criticize Israel. And it sort of became the third rail of American progressive politics.

And so we gathered a group of people together. And if you look at the title of this paper which they wrote: "Understanding Antisemitism at its Nexus with Israel and Zionism"—there goes the name.

Rabbi Sharon Brous:

For people who didn't get a copy of it and also for folks who are with us online, we'll post this, we'll share with everybody afterwards.

Jonathan Jacoby:

Yeah. So if you'll just refer to it on the top page, the most important paragraph is the first paragraph. What is antisemitism? It is anti-Jewish attitudes, actions, and systemic conditions. It's not just how people act. It's systematic. It includes negative beliefs. It includes tropes. I won't go into all the details, but you know.

Now, the second paragraph is really important: uniting all of antisemitism's strands is a persistent demonization that casts Jews not only as others—meaning intrinsically different—but also as irredeemably threatening and dangerously powerful.

So that's the core of antisemitism: that people think of us as first of all others. We're not just not the same but we're others and we're down here and we're also dangerous. We might get into some of the examples of that later.

Now turn to the second page which I hope is on the back of the first page. And you can just read the third paragraph of that page: "As the embodiment or realization of collective Jewish organization and action, Israel is a magnet for and a target of antisemitic behavior."

So all the antisemitism that existed basically until the 20th century had nothing to do with Israel. And in a certain way, antisemitism is really easy to understand until Israel gets into the picture.

When Israel Enters the Picture

Jonathan Jacoby:

So a few words about what happens when Israel gets into the picture. First of all, it takes over. Natan Sharansky, who was a great refusenik and Zionist leader, came up with his definition of antisemitism and his definition of antisemitism was: it's antisemitic if it demonizes Israel, delegitimizes Israel, or has a double standard about Israel. So what's interesting about that is that it's all about Israel. The entire definition of antisemitism was about Israel.

Or some of you have heard of the International Holocaust Remembrance Association, affectionately known as IHRA, definition of antisemitism. And out of the 11 examples of what could be antisemitic, seven of them are about Israel.

Why is that? So I mean we'll talk about it a little bit more but I think what's important to understand and that's what we tried to do initially is we need to understand when does bringing Israel into the picture make something antisemitic.

I won't go into details maybe a little later on but I will say this: I think it's pretty easy—takes some work and thinking but it's pretty easy to understand when something is and when something isn't. But I brought a show and tell, thanks to Nomi Stolzenberg for this idea: this is a COVID test. I'm negative, don't worry.

A COVID test is a wonderful thing because it can tell you whether you do or don't have COVID. But there are also false negatives and there are also false positives, and there are more false negatives and positives now than there were when we wrote this paper. And so what we need to do with those is try to avoid jumping to a conclusion that it's a negative or a positive and really think and study and learn in order to understand.

Screening Questions for Identifying Antisemitism

Rabbi Sharon Brous:

Okay. So we're going to really get into the hard stuff here and talk about it. But I'm reminded as you're speaking of something that Dan

—our mutual friend Daniel Sokatch—often says when he's asked, "Is anti-Zionism antisemitism?" And he says, "No, except when it is," or "Yes, except when it's not."

And I think part of what's so problematic about the discourse right now is that there are people who see any symbol of solidarity with Palestinians in their struggle for freedom and dignity as antisemitic. And equally, there are people who look at the movement for Palestinian freedom and dignity and cannot see antisemitism there even when there's antisemitism clearly from my perspective at the very surface of what's happening.

And so I think part of what's going on is that we don't have the tools to untangle, as you say, what is actually antisemitic and what is not. So now help us figure out how you and this group of scholars approached this so that you could do this untangling or disentangling.

Jonathan Jacoby:

Yeah. So for the first couple of years of Nexus, that's all we did—trying to figure that out. So there are some very easy things. There are sort of screening questions. We put together a guide for identifying antisemitism on campuses and it has screening questions.

I think we could update that but let me just say what some of the screening questions are. If it is against Zionism or opposes the Jewish state or any of those things and employs an antisemitic trope—easily, the Zionist world conspiracy to kill Palestinian babies. That's antisemitic. It's not a political statement. It's antisemitic.

If you deny Jews the same rights that you are affording other people in that land, let's say you believe that the Palestinians should have a state and you say Jews shouldn't have a state—if you deny the right to self-determination that other people have in that land, that's antisemitic. You may not mean for it to be antisemitic, but it's antisemitic. It's a denial of rights.

If you put Jews in danger through your actions, that's antisemitic. Again, you may not want—there's the horrible shooting at the Capitol Jewish Museum where he said he was a pro-Palestinian activist, but

he shot Jews. He knew where he was going. That's an act of antisemitism. And people tried to hide behind that.

And then the last example. So there's three: the three I mentioned is putting Jews in harm's way, denying equal rights to Jews, and using antisemitic tropes. And the fourth is assigning collective responsibility to Jews for the actions of the state of Israel. In other words, blaming Jews for what Israel does. An area where there's some gray.

Case Study: Restaurant Protests

Rabbi Sharon Brous:

Now, yes, let's talk about that area. Because this is really I think a great source of confusion for people. You and I were talking recently. I don't know how many people saw but in New York City there's a restaurant called Tsion that was run by an Ethiopian Israeli immigrant to the US and that served Ethiopian and Israeli food and it had to shut down. Now they're only catering private events because there were so many protests outside of her restaurant. And so let's use that as an example. Is that antisemitic or is that legitimate criticism of the state of Israel?

Jonathan Jacoby:

So first of all I want to say that there are things that are antisemitic that are still legal and there are things that are legal that are not antisemitic. And so I'm assuming that what they did was legal, that it was a legal demonstration. I don't know. I didn't read about it, but let's assume that it was a legal demonstration.

I would just ask these questions: Were they protesting against this place because of its association with the state of Israel? Then it's an anti-Israel protest. Now sometimes—I don't know, a couple years ago people were protesting at Canter's Delicatessen against the policies of the state of Israel. That's antisemitism. That's a Jewish delicatessen. It's not Israelis.

But there's a lot of gray here and I want to just go into one way in which it's gray which we talked about. So you know there was recently a poll of young Jews in America. I think it was for the

Forward and JTA covered it where I think only one-third of young Jews identified as Zionists. So that's one data point.

The head of the Anti-Defamation League—I mean I see there, even I get confused—the head of the Anti-Defamation League, a Jewish organization, says that Zionism is an integral part of Jewish identity.

So if you're saying that and somebody's coming to your Jewish place to protest against Israel, I'm not saying it's right. I'm not even saying it's not antisemitic, but I am saying the confusion leads people to do that. The confusion on some level that we create or that our community creates. So in that situation, I don't know. I would think that it was a protest against Israel in front of an Israeli restaurant.

I know your next question. Should I let you ask it or should I?

Rabbi Sharon Brous:

Yeah, let me ask it. If people went to the restaurant of a Chinese American, an immigrant to this country, and protested and vandalized and made the lives of the Chinese American owners of that restaurant a living hell, would that be racist? Because they have a legitimate issue with human rights violations of the Chinese government. But is any Chinese American therefore seen as a representative of the government of the country of China?

Jonathan Jacoby:

Right. So first of all, if there's vandalism, then it's in another category. It's wrong. Period.

Now, I will come back and ask you this question. If there was a South African who owned a restaurant where they served South African food when we were growing up and there was a protest against apartheid in front of that South African restaurant, I don't know that we would have objected to it. I don't know that we would have.

I don't like—and I think we need to understand why we get singled out more than Chinese. I think we really need to look at that. But I don't want to jump to the conclusion that it's because of antisemitism.

Rabbi Sharon Brous:

I don't know if you would call it antisemitism or something else, but it does seem to be the case that every Israeli and to some extent every Jew is held responsible for the policies and decisions of the government of the state of Israel as though each one of us is on the war cabinet. And I don't necessarily see that same level of scrutiny and shared responsibility applying to any other people.

And so I can't answer necessarily to the question about how I would have reacted in the 1980s if a South African immigrant to the United States was held responsible. But I can tell you that if I saw people protesting outside of a restaurant of Russians who live in LA, I would think that's wrong.

But I think there's a reason why we don't really see people protesting outside of those restaurants. And so I want to be clear and I also want to be honest about something which is: it seems to me that there is a different standard that is held.

I say this as a person who by the way just held services. I mean this is a rental property and I did not decorate the walls in our rental property but we have both an Israeli and American flag on the wall of the school that we pray in. And so I understand the complexity because many Jewish people in the diaspora feel deeply wedded to the Jewish people who live in the state of Israel.

But I think that the connection between the Jewish people and the sense of Jewish peoplehood, because we're a very small family ultimately of only 15 million people, ends up putting us in a position where we are actually held responsible for the very worst forces in Israel's government, whether we are the loudest protesters against it or not, in a way that we would never hold every American responsible for the actions of our president.

Jonathan Jacoby:

Yeah, I agree.

Rabbi Sharon Brous:

Despite the fact that we pay taxes, presumably we all pay taxes, meaning we contribute to the strengthening of this administration even as we reject everything that they stand for—and many Israelis

do and many diaspora Israelis do and many Jews do. And yet I think there's a grace afforded to others that often is not afforded to our people.

The Question of Double Standards

Jonathan Jacoby:

That's my sense of it. I think so I'm going to take the restaurant and put it aside because I don't know all the details. And I want to go to this question of double standard.

Sharansky had three D's. One was demonization. We've already covered that. No question. Antisemitic period. One of them was delegitimization. We can talk about that maybe. One of them is double standard.

So why are Jews treated differently than other people? We are. Now let's start with the easy things. We treat ourselves differently. I'm not sure if she's here, but I said—I don't know if you remember, in the aliyah I said God chose us with the other nations. Most of the liturgy says God chose us from out of all the nations. We are the chosen people. We draw attention to ourselves because we say we're the chosen people. Because we have Hebrew National commercials—we answer to a higher standard.

The second is that there is no place in the world that is as important to as many people as Jerusalem. Far and away there's no other place in the world that has as many—not adherents but lovers—as Zion. And so people pay more attention to that.

People pay more attention because Israel is—I'm not sure where it is now, but certainly is one of the highest recipients of aid from the United States. People pay more attention to that.

So there are lots of sort of understandable reasons. I don't think it's fair that they pay more attention to us, but it's not fair. I'm not going to make a big deal out of it because it's a sort of understandable reason, a reasonable reason if there could be.

But then there are other reasons. So the one that I want to go to is one that you brought up and I've actually been thinking a lot about since

our conversation which has to do with the way in which—it's not about Israel—about how Zionism has become the worst ideology in the world. Why is that?

So some of it is because of plain and simple antisemitism. Some of it is because it's the Jewish state and it's antisemitic, pure and simple because people don't like there to be Jews to have a state. Whatever it is, some of it is because when Israel projects strength and power, that's Zionist power. When we sing Hatikvah or rally around, it's a Jewish dance to rally around an Israeli flag. That feels like it becomes Jewish power.

Now, I think it's still antisemitic. I think it's still antisemitic, but it goes to the question of what kinds of antisemitism, what sources of antisemitism there are, and therefore what the strategy for fighting it is.

And I'll just say one more thing about that. At some point whether it's antisemitism that arises out of the Israel-Palestine conflict or it's antisemitism that arises out of people like Charlie Kirk—we'll come back to him. Did everyone see the cover of the Jewish Journal? It says it's a tribute to the late conservative activist Charlie Kirk: "pens a love letter to the Jewish Sabbath and invites the world to reclaim its humanity." This is called whitewashing. We'll come back to it.

But at a certain point, it doesn't matter how it starts. It becomes antisemitic when it gets into the ether. It becomes antisemitic and it becomes really dangerous. And the reason we need to know where it starts is because we can't fight up there. The only thing you can do is protect yourself up there, like we do here. You can't actually unravel it up there. It's in the ether. But you need to know from where it is emanating so that we actually can prevent it from getting to that point.

It happens a little bit on the right. The place where it needs to happen more is on the left because of the issues that you're bringing up, because of what people are doing that I would say even unwittingly ends up being antisemitic.

Antisemitism on the Left and Right

Rabbi Sharon Brous:

Part of what makes it so confusing is that the leading voices, the most powerful voices in Netanyahu's governing coalition are Jewish supremacists and they are proud to be Jewish supremacists. They call themselves that. And so that adds an element of confusion here. I mean they're giving plenty of fodder to people who want to say that the problem is not the policies of the government of the state of Israel but the problem is Jewish power. They call their party Jewish Power. I mean this is part of what I think makes it so hard to understand.

At the same time I will say on the other side, some of what I have been wrestling with over the course of the last couple of years is seeing among people with whom I share many values and a deep sense of anguish about human suffering, a kind of retreat into what I can only think of as a kind of seductive or transgressive sensibility around Israel and around world events such that when Renee Nicole Good was murdered by ICE agents, immediately I saw online people from the left—people whom I used to count as friends—say "this is the face of Zionism on American soil."

And so what I think is happening there is they are attaching human pain and human suffering to the Jewish overlords that are responsible for all pain. This is the most classic anti-semitic conspiracy theory. And there's something incredibly sexy about it, because you feel like you're saying the thing that you're not supposed to say out loud. You could even lose your job for saying it. Your university could lose its funding for saying it. It's super transgressive, which makes it exciting in a way that saying Trump is responsible for sending masked armed agents into the streets who are killing US citizens is not sexy. It's just obvious.

And so I think there's a kind of hot take that's operating here that is leading people into a realm that's far beyond saying out loud that the Israeli war cabinet has exceeded what could be classified as just war and moved into something far more sinister. It's far more than saying Israel has—and many Israelis have for decades—accepted and normalized a completely abnormal reality which is occupation.

It's not saying that. It's identifying that there's something about the Jews that—if we're smart enough about it—we can attach to all of our pain and suffering: the governments, the banks. We see this in the Epstein files, the way that it's called "the Jewish billionaire class." There's this—it feels like very old antisemitic conspiracy theory to me. And I think that's part of what makes it so difficult.

And then at the same time, as I said, some of the most powerful members of the Knesset are actually feeding into those very tropes with their words and with their actions.

Jonathan Jacoby:

Right. Yeah. I mean, you've just described a manifestation of antisemitism in the progressive movement. You're clear. I agree with every word you said. The question is what do we do with that? That's a reality and it's a really dangerous reality. It's dangerous for two reasons, probably more than two reasons.

One is it puts us at risk. So whether it's the risk of exclusion, which is the easiest risk, or the risk of losing our friends—that's really hard—but it's also risk of bodily harm.

There was a Friendsgiving event that was put up by a left-wing organization in front of Union Station in Washington DC. Friendsgiving. And they had—it was you know guerrilla theater. They had masked BB wearing a mask and Rubio and Trump and all that stuff. And the menu and the fake food: they served the limbs of Palestinian children. They had bloody mouths. That's how bad it can get.

And it's not just the way that looks, but it's that stuff gets normalized and at that point it's a real problem. That's why we need strategies and that's why we need clear guidelines.

The Instrumentalization of Antisemitism

Rabbi Sharon Brous:

I'm going to get to the strategies in a second, but I think this is part of—this is exactly why I wanted to have this conversation. Because at the same time that this is happening—"this is the face of Zionism on

American soil" and what really is an actual blood libel that Jews are eating non-Jewish babies and drinking their blood—on one hand, at the same time we see in much of our Jewish institutional space a kind of confusion around what is antisemitic and what is legitimate criticism of Israel, such that so many things are labeled as antisemitic that I think the risk—the additional risk—is that we can't actually address real antisemitism in the movement. Because if everything is antisemitic then nothing is, and we're essentially powerless to respond to real danger and threat to our community.

And I think this is part of why the Nexus project matters so much in this moment. And I know that you have written several open letters to the head of the ADL and have very strong feelings about how Jewish philanthropic dollars are often now being used to in some ways support the confusion and in a way that actually endangers our community. So can you talk a little bit about that?

Jonathan Jacoby:

Yeah. So first of all I always want to start with what's understandable. It's sort of understandable that people experience anti-Zionism, anti-Israel as antisemitic. It's understandable. It can—it's a problem when that principle gets instrumentalized.

So when antisemitism becomes an instrument then it does a number of things. One is it's a mobilizing tool. So I'm going to go back to Charlie Kirk or JD Vance who is one of his biggest fans. So I don't know—do you know who the Groypers are? The Groypers is like an informal group of mostly white, mostly Catholic, mostly young, all men. There's tens of thousands of them, maybe millions. And they're the base of JD Vance in particular. They're the people who—well there were some bad rabbis also and they had—so they can—antisemitism, what we were talking about, is the sexiness of antisemitism. It's a mobilizing tool.

Oh my god, we can be anti-semites together. It's great. You know, I don't know if you saw the video of—I forgot who it was—three anti-semites, I forgot which ones, on their way to a club in Miami and they were singing "Heil Hitler." They were having fun. I mean, but I got to tell you something: that is part of how it started. It gets normalized. It

becomes fun. Kids—our kids wanted to go to Zionist youth groups. They wanted to go to Hitler Youth. It becomes a thing.

So that's an instrumentalization of antisemitism as a mobilizing tool. And add to that the opportunity to scapegoat Jews. Not only do we get to scapegoat them, we get to blame them. So research for my loved one—research at American universities was cut because of Jews. Because Jews aren't safe. That was the reason that was given for all these cuts. And what does it do? Why are the anti-semites rejoicing? Because it puts us in the middle. It scapegoats us.

The third thing that it does—this is what you were saying—it distracts from people who actually are trying to kill us. People who are real bonafide, where there's no nuance, there's no gray area. It's almost all that we're the other, you know, or we're the ones who brought in the immigrants or whatever it is. It distracts from that. It gives them a free pass. So you can have people like Pete Hegseth with, you know, an antisemitic tattoo on his chest be the Defense Secretary because he's fighting antisemitism.

And then the last thing that it does is it's a weapon that exploits Jewish fear in service of undermining not just academic freedom but democratic institutions.

Democracy and Jewish Safety

Jonathan Jacoby:

And here I was thinking about this a lot today. As I was thinking about tonight, I said, "What am I the most afraid of?" My mother was saying last night that she doesn't trust her caregivers because they won't help her if there's danger. She's probably right. Not because they're anti-semites, but because they probably want to take care of their own people. But her paranoia is coming back. My mother's paranoia is coming back. That trauma is reasserting itself.

Rabbi Sharon Brous:

As a survivor.

Jonathan Jacoby:

As a survivor. Yes. Sorry. I as a child of a survivor have some of that. But what terrifies me—I mean, literally terrifies me—is the way you started your sermon last week: it's the erasure of truth, the erasure of democracy, the erasure of rights, all of those things. That's the most—nothing has brought safety to Jews in our history at least since the end of the Second Temple—historians here can tell me even from before—nothing has brought safety to Jews more and still brings safety to Jews more than our democracy.

So that's why clarity becomes so important. And so when Jewish—so there's antisemitism, there's the trivialization of antisemitism, you know, or the minimization—saying like it doesn't really—that's not really antisemitism. I mean I've heard this so many times from Jews who say when I try to tell somebody that what they just said was antisemitic they tell me it's not. But that's against the rules of an anti-racist society. The impacted population should be honored when they share that the thing that you just said is hurtful to us.

So there's minimizing it or trivializing it or disputing it. And then there's the weaponization of antisemitism in the dismantling of our democracy.

Project Esther and the Shofar Report

Rabbi Sharon Brous:

And some of the work that you've done, the really extraordinary work that you've done, has been a response to Project Esther, which—I mean where we saw I think most blatantly the plan to use and exploit Jewish pain in order to advance anti-democratic measures.

And so we're at a place now where my oldest daughter—who was on one of the university campuses as many of you know that was really at the epicenter of a lot of the protests and I would say a not insignificant amount of antisemitism manifesting in those anti-Israel protests—when they were one of the first universities targeted, the Trump administration said that they were going to pull \$400 million from the academy, from the campus.

And my daughter said it's as if they ran a focus group and said, "How can we get everyone to hate the Jews?" Because we're trying—we're

ostensibly responding to antisemitism by doing something that's going to make more people angry about antisemitism: cutting funding for critical medical research and other things. And that's infuriating.

And the universities and the academic environments are only one piece of the dismantling of democracy. But this is part of the reason why I think that your response is so essential in this moment. So will you address Project Esther and the way that you and the group have been responding to it?

Jonathan Jacoby:

Well, Project Esther is a strategy, quote-unquote, created by the Heritage Foundation for, quote-unquote, fighting antisemitism. It really is a way of implementing the Heritage Foundation's Project 2025, which is a strategy for dismantling democracy.

So Project Esther, which was put together—I think there was one Jew, no Jewish organizations, a lot of Christian organizations—and it basically came up with this very clever thing. It called it "pro-Hamas." So anything that was critical of Israel—across the board, whether it was something that just made you uncomfortable, whether you were demonstrating, whether you had a Palestinian flag, whether you were protesting with a bunch of other Jews at Kabbalat Shabbat at Brown University—these were all "pro-Hamas." Pro-Hamas is much stronger than antisemitism because then it taps into all kinds of other stuff.

And Project Esther became—I mean nobody opposed it. Nobody opposed it and nobody really understood it. So what we did is—there are many people, I want to say a number of organizations responded to it, some really good resources on it. Our resource was called the Shofar Report. You can find it on our website. The Shofar Report—because we published it around the yamim noraim, the High Holidays—was a strategy for protecting democracy as a way of fighting antisemitism.

So many of our friends and many scholars wrote: "Here's how you"—Hannah Rosenthal, who used to be the US special envoy to fight antisemitism, wrote an article about why combating xenophobia is a way of fighting antisemitism. Eric Ward wrote an article about why

trying to preserve diversity, equity, and inclusion is a strategy for fighting anti-semitism. Because Jews need democracy. It's a simple equation.

The Question of Nuance

Rabbi Sharon Brous:

Okay. I am aware of the hour. We have about 10 minutes left and there's so much more that we need to talk about here. And I'm sure that there are lots of questions. So hold on a moment. I'm not ready to turn it over yet. And I hope we're going to have time for a couple of very quick questions, but if we don't, I'm going to trust that people will go to the website, get this information, and they can bombard you with questions next Shabbat, which is a joy.

Jonathan Jacoby:

I'm going to be at the J Street conference.

Rabbi Sharon Brous:

Oh, okay. So they can't. Okay. So I want to talk to you about nuance versus—about complexity versus simplicity for a moment because one of the things that I have heard again and again over the last couple of years is that nuance is a code for white supremacy, that when you say something is complicated, what you're actually doing is justifying oppression.

And I hear that. And some things are not complicated. I mean there is a right and wrong. I want to—I still believe that there is a right and wrong. And also the Israeli-Palestinian conflict, Israel-Palestine, is extremely complicated. I mean even I say this just coming back from a conference as I mentioned earlier today with Israeli Jews, Palestinian citizens of Israel, Palestinian citizens of the West Bank, and world Jewry, all of whom are in various ways stakeholders in this project, some of whom hold very complex identities.

And we heard from Dr. Yasmin Abu-Fraa, who's a Palestinian Bedouin doctor at Soroka Hospital who was a first responder helping Nova survivors who were attacked by Hamas on October 7th. It is extremely complicated.

So I wonder if you can talk for a moment about why nuance is essential in this space even when it's uncomfortable and how we in our own Shabbat dinner tables and at work and in these various environments where people have been sort of thrust into really binary thinking and are afraid to break the binary in any way can introduce nuance without being white supremacist. How about that?

Jonathan Jacoby:

All right. So first of all, I mean, nuance is really important, but nuance is getting a little bit of a bad rap because it sort of seems as if like you're avoiding reality. You're avoiding the truth when you're saying there's nuance. There's nuance to everything, but you can't always pay attention to it.

So I would say the first thing is start with what's not nuanced. There is really—I mean I think we did a pretty good job. I think you can—I mean we say here it's a living document, this will change, it will evolve—but there are some really easy things to say. If somebody—that Friendsgiving, that was antisemitic period. That guy who was spewing antisemitism—I hate that he was assassinated but you just have to look at his stuff. It's not—I'm not interpreting anything. Okay, those are really clear things.

Somebody says Jews don't have the right to their own state but Palestinians do—that crosses a line. I don't care what the reasons are. So start with what you know. Start with what you know and then have a sense of curiosity about the things that we're not sure of.

And that I mean that's what this place is for, to really look and listen and try to understand and be willing to have your mind changed, to let yourself be corrected by people who disagree with you but who you know care about you and you care about them and you're willing to say, "I was wrong about that" or "I didn't see it that way. Thank you for helping me to understand."

So I think that's how we do it. I'm going to also say that I think what's necessary—and this is a very, very hard thing that I'm going to say—I think it's really necessary right now for our Jewish institutions, for people in this room to ask our partners on college campuses, to ask

our partners in the fight against antisemitism, to ask really tough questions.

And let me give you an example. So there is a conference—I think it's happening in about a month—that is co-sponsored by a couple of Jewish organizations, and it's about combating antisemitism on campus. And they have invited Campus Conservatives, which is a pro-Trump organization, to be part of that conversation. And I think we need to say: "Wait a minute. Before we do that, we need to understand what their agenda is and whether their agenda is consistent with protecting Jewish students or whether their agenda is about using Jewish students to advance an anti-democratic agenda."

And I think those questions are really, really important. And I think that's part of what we mean by nuance. It's not avoiding the hard conversations. It's actually leaning into them but doing so with clarity about what we're trying to accomplish.

Universities and Free Speech

Rabbi Sharon Brous:

I want to ask you about universities specifically because I think there's been so much confusion about what the role of a university is, what academic freedom means, what it means to protect Jewish students while also protecting the right to protest, the right to dissent. Can you talk a little bit about that?

Jonathan Jacoby:

Yeah. So I think universities have a really important role to play, and I think they have not played it well. I think universities need to be places where difficult conversations can happen, where people can be exposed to ideas that they disagree with, where they can learn to argue and debate and engage with people who see the world differently than they do.

And I think what has happened on many campuses is that universities have either over-policed student speech or they have under-policed actual threats to student safety. And those are two different things. So when students are protesting, when students are

saying things that make other students uncomfortable, that is part of what a university education is supposed to be about. That's actually valuable.

When students are being targeted, when students are being threatened, when students are being prevented from going to class or accessing parts of campus, that's a different thing. That's a safety issue. And universities need to be clear about the distinction between those two things.

And I think what's happened is that there's been a lot of conflation of legitimate protest—which can be uncomfortable, which can involve criticism of Israel that some people think is unfair or wrong—with actual threats to Jewish students' safety. And those are not the same thing.

And I think we need to be really clear about that because if we're not clear about that, then we end up in a situation where we're asking universities to shut down legitimate speech because it makes us uncomfortable. And that's not what universities are for. Universities are supposed to be places where we're uncomfortable, where we're challenged, where we have to defend our ideas.

But at the same time, universities have an obligation to keep students safe. And when there are actual threats, when there is targeting of students, when there is harassment, universities need to act. And I think they have not always acted in those situations.

"From the River to the Sea"

Rabbi Sharon Brous:

I want to ask you about a specific phrase that has become really contentious, which is "From the river to the sea, Palestine will be free." Can you talk about whether that phrase is inherently antisemitic or whether it depends on context and who's saying it and what they mean by it?

Jonathan Jacoby:

Yeah. So this is a great example of where we need to have curiosity and not jump to conclusions. So "From the river to the sea" means

different things to different people. For some people, it means the elimination of the state of Israel and the elimination of Jews from that land. And if that's what it means, then it's antisemitic. It's a call for ethnic cleansing or genocide.

For other people, it means a vision of equality and justice for all people between the river and the sea, including Jews and Palestinians. And if that's what it means, then it's not antisemitic. It might be naive. It might be unrealistic. You might disagree with it politically. But it's not antisemitic.

The problem is that we don't always know what people mean when they say it. And so I think the responsible thing to do is to ask: "What do you mean by that? When you say 'From the river to the sea,' what are you envisioning? Are you envisioning a place where Jews can live safely? Are you envisioning the elimination of the state of Israel? Are you envisioning a one-state solution, a two-state solution? What does that mean to you?"

And I think if we ask those questions, we're going to get a variety of answers. And some of those answers are going to be antisemitic, and some of them are not going to be antisemitic. And we need to be able to distinguish between them.

But what I've seen happen is that people hear that phrase and they immediately assume the worst interpretation. And I understand why, because for many Jews, that phrase is associated with groups like Hamas that do call for the elimination of Israel and the elimination of Jews. But I also know that there are young people, there are progressives, there are Palestinians who use that phrase and they don't mean that at all.

And so I think we need to have enough curiosity to ask what people mean rather than assuming the worst.

Audience Questions

Rabbi Sharon Brous:

Okay. We have a few minutes for questions. I'm going to take maybe two or three quick questions. Yes, go ahead.

Audience Member 1:

Thank you so much for this conversation. I have a question about the word "genocide." My daughter is hearing that word used constantly on her campus to describe what's happening in Gaza. And I'm curious how you think about that term and whether the use of that term to describe what Israel is doing in Gaza is antisemitic or whether it's a legitimate use of that term.

Jonathan Jacoby:

So I don't think—I don't know. I don't know. I don't think that my mother once said to me—I was working in Israel with Jews and Arabs, this is in 1979 or something, 1980. And one of the Palestinians I was working with called what Israel did—they're Nazis or something like that. And I asked my mother, so I don't understand. She's a survivor. She said, "When people are in pain, they don't think in relative terms."

So I'm not going to snap my finger and say I know the answer to that question. I think—I do think that there are legitimate debates about whether what's happening in Gaza meets the technical definition of genocide under international law. I think those are complicated legal and factual questions.

I also think that when people use the word "genocide," they're often expressing their horror at the level of civilian death and destruction. And I think that's a legitimate thing to express horror about. I think the numbers of civilians who have been killed in Gaza are horrifying. And I think it's legitimate to say that.

Now, does that mean that it's genocide in the technical sense? I don't know. I'm not a lawyer. I'm not an expert on international law. But I do think that we need to be able to hear people's pain and horror without immediately saying, "That's antisemitic."

At the same time, I think there are people who use the word "genocide" in a way that is intended to demonize Israel and to draw a parallel between Israel and Nazi Germany. And when people do that, I think that crosses a line into antisemitism. Because the Holocaust

was a unique event in human history, and drawing that comparison is not only historically inaccurate, but it's also deeply hurtful to Jews.

So I think it depends on context. I think it depends on what people mean. And I think we need to have enough curiosity to understand what people are trying to express.

Audience Member 2:

Thank you. I want to ask about something that happened in one of my daughter's classes. She's in college. She was in a salsa and reggae class, not particularly Jewish content-rich, unless it was reggae about King Solomon and all that. And the professor stopped in the middle of the lecture and said, "You know, they're now saying that Christopher Columbus was a Jew, which kind of changes the whole narrative."

And so she delicately raised her hand and said, "Excuse me, what narrative does that change?" And he said, "Well, he kind of invented genocide, so..."

Jonathan Jacoby:

Yeah, I don't think that's hard. I don't think that one's hard. I get a prize for saying that. That's—the bell goes off. Yeah.

Rabbi Sharon Brous:

Okay. I—what I'm going to do because it is 2:00, and Jonathan, I thank you so much for your time today. And I suspect because very few people have walked out yet that we might have some interest in a second session with you. And so we'll continue that conversation.

But I'm going to ask you one last thing, which is you are dedicating everything you've got right now to this work. And presumably that means that you do have some hope that we—with the right kind of guidance—can shift the course that we're on currently. So am I correct in assuming that you believe that we—each of us as we become more educated, as we learn how to have more honest conversations with each other—that we can actually change the predicament that we find ourselves in right now?

Closing: Hope and the Path Forward

Jonathan Jacoby:

Yes. You know, we focus mostly on Congress and we see a movement in Congress where, you know, almost every Democrat in Congress right now uses our material in one way or another. So yes, the answer is yes.

And look, we're at this point—we are at a crossroads as a people. And what I feel about that is we as a people are governed—our leaders are trying to lead with trauma. They want us to be afraid because fear for them is a tool for unity. Maybe for fundraising. Maybe for fundraising. It works. I think when we sensationalize these issues, we hurt ourselves. We don't make good decisions.

And I think we are at a point in Jewish history—and I say this to you as sort of the next generation after me in some ways, and to, well, not this room so much, but—you know what I hope that we pass on to our next generation is some wisdom about how to deal with this moment, which is a really, really important moment in our history.

It's not about a definition. It's not about a guideline. It's about really understanding what will move us to greater flourishing and safety and fulfillment for our children and our children's children, our country, and the world.

Rabbi Sharon Brous:

I really appreciate you closing us with this because I want to—and I want to end with a blessing for you and for your mother. Because I think your mother is for me a teacher and a reminder that a human being can experience the worst possible trauma and choose to look at the world with love and with hope and to birth into the world endless possibility.

And so I'm thinking of her and holding great love for her and also blessing you with continued strength and moral clarity as you help all of us find our strength and our moral clarity in these very difficult times.

By show of hands, how many people would like, if I can convince Jonathan Jacoby to do about an hour in this room at some point in the future where you can just ask all of your questions and he'll engage? Fantastic. We're going to try to do that.

Thank you all so much and wishing you a sweet and restful Shabbat. And thank you to Jonathan Jacoby. It's called Nexus and it's a phenomenal website with incredible resources. Thank you all.

End of Transcript

For more information, visit the Nexus Project website