

# We must work across communities to fight antisemitism and defend democracy

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By Amy Spitalnick June 19, 2024

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At a time when antisemitism is on the rise, it's no accident that fundamental democratic norms and freedoms are under threat. That's because, at its core, antisemitism targets both Jews and democracy, seeking to undermine and destroy both — ultimately jeopardizing all communities' rights and safety.

Yes, antisemitism operates like so many forms of religious, racial and ethnic prejudice: hating Jews because of who we are, what we look like, how we practice and, simply, because we're Jews. But it also uniquely functions as a conspiracy theory rooted in lies about Jewish power and influence that are used to sow distrust in our democracy by painting institutions and communities as pawns of Jewish control. In turn, as democracy deteriorates, antisemitism only continues to flourish, posing a threat that extends far beyond the Jewish community.



Amy Spitalnick, CEO of JCPA (right), Maya Wiley, president of The Leadership Conference on Civil and Human Rights (center), and Idit Klein, president of Keshet discuss Jewish safety and inclusive democracy during a session of JCPA's Jewish Communal Summit on June 17, 2024 in New York. Perry Bindelglass

Recent research from the University of Chicago, the Anti-Defamation League and others underscores the deep connection between antisemitism and broader threats to democracy and diverse communities. Belief in conspiracy theories such as the antisemitic Great Replacement are among the biggest drivers of political violence and anti-democratic extremism. Similarly, belief in conspiracy theories is among the best predictors of antisemitism. We've seen this in the recent cycle of white supremacist violence targeting the Jewish, Black, Latino, Muslim and other communities, as well as in post-Oct. 7 conspiracy theories related to Jewish or "Zionist" power and influence.

All of this tells us that the fight for democracy and the safety of all communities requires countering antisemitism because it animates and fuels broader extremism and hate. At the same time, Jewish safety is most assured in inclusive, liberal democracies where the safety and rights of all communities are protected.

Yet the conversation on antisemitism in the United States is too often myopic, lacking context on how this ancient form of hate is interconnected with other forms of bigotry and anti-democratic extremism. This has multiple consequences: It prevents some non-Jews from understanding their own self-interest in combating antisemitism. It makes it harder for some Jews to see broader democracy and civil rights work as fundamental to Jewish safety. And, ultimately, it keeps communities apart at a moment when cross-community solidarity is critical to our mutual safety and future.

Instead, antisemitism is treated in a silo – as an exclusively particularistic form of bigotry – by some, like the right-wing politicians who rail against campus antisemitism while espousing increasingly normalized and deadly "invasion" and "replacement" extremism, or labeling liberal Jews "disloyal." Others lean on conventional frameworks of race and power to give cover to overt antisemitism, such as far-left protesters demanding the exclusion of Jews who believe that Israel has a right to exist.

Over the last year, I've worked with a group of Jewish and democracy-focused foundations to better understand how we can more effectively connect the conversations on antisemitism and democracy in hopes of charting a different path forward. [We just released a report exploring our findings.](#)

Our world shifted and shattered midway through the project as we saw the deadliest day for the Jewish people since the Holocaust, and its heartbreaking ripple effects around the globe, including unprecedented waves of antisemitism.

Some voices have since argued that the aftermath of Oct. 7 is proof of failure for this framework, that the isolation and abandonment many Jewish Americans understandably feel right now means that we should put up walls and give up on building bridges between communities in pursuit of Jewish safety and a more inclusive democracy.

In reality, though, the aftermath of Oct. 7 is proof of need — that the often-siloed and narrow way we've approached the fight against antisemitism has been insufficient, and that deeper investment in a different approach — one that illustrates the interconnection of Jewish safety with the safety of other communities and the future of our liberal, inclusive democracy — is needed.

In other words, the world has changed in a way that makes this framework much more urgent, even as we simultaneously recognize that it may now be even harder to advance.

Here's the good news: The research shows that messaging connecting Jewish safety with our democracy, democratic norms and values, and the safety of others isn't just accurate — it resonates strongly with the communities who must be engaged in this fight. Research conducted in the fall of 2023, [detailed in our report](#), found that such messages tested very well across race, generation and party. As the report notes, recent follow-up research, focused on 18- to 34-year-olds, found that the most resonant messaging highlighted antisemitism's threats to our democracy and freedom and how antisemitic hate spreads to target other groups.

This tells us that there is a clear path forward: one that recognizes the deep interconnection of Jewish safety with the safety of others and brings together communities under threat in pursuit of an inclusive democracy in which all Americans' rights and freedoms are protected.

Still, the field of leaders and organizations directly engaged in this framework is emergent, uneven and significantly under-resourced, too often drowned out by louder voices and zero-sum narratives. My report recommends prioritizing resources and work to expand public affairs, communications and training capacity (including expanding and diversifying the bench of messengers); improve advocacy and bridge-building; and support the philanthropic community to better engage with this framework.

We're beginning to do just that at the Jewish Council for Public Affairs, where I recently started as CEO and where, just last month, [we launched new Action Networks](#) focused on mobilizing the Jewish community and our partners to protect democracy and counter hate and empowering allies across communities to understand the deep connection between Jewish safety and their own future.

Ultimately, success is going to take all of us: funders, practitioners, clergy and stakeholders. We need to tell the story of the inextricable link between Jewish safety and the health of American democracy, and come together across lines of difference to advance the policies

and solutions necessary to protect *all* of our safety and rights. The future of our community and our country depends on it.

*Amy Spitalnick is the CEO of the Jewish Council for Public Affairs.*

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