**Tuesday, June 11, 2024 / Was that antisemitic?**

**[HALF SECOND OF SILENCE]**

**[BILLBOARD]**

NOEL KING (host, *Today, Explained*): Was that antisemitic?

NOEL: This weekend, when a little group of protesters at the White House chanted

*<CLIP> DC Protest, 8 June, “Hezbollah. Hezbollah. Kill another zionist now.”*

NOEL: “Kill another zionist now,” was that antisemitic?

NOEL: Or the *spreadsheet* that circulated in May:

*<*[*CLIP*](https://www.instagram.com/elyssafriedland/reel/C6zl3mBrVeC/)*> Elyssa Friedland: “I’m one of 24 authors on a public spreadsheet called ‘is your favorite author a Zionist?’”*

*NOEL:* Was that antisemitic?

NOEL: The events on college campuses

*<*[*CLIP*](https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=-S5velqIjJ8)*> Eyal Yakoby, UPenn senior speaking before Congress: “While students walked to class, they were met with masked individuals screaming at them, quote, ‘Go die. You are Hitler’s children and Nazis.”*

NOEL: that led to Congressional hearings on antisemitism. Was it really antisemitism?

SCORING IN <live at the paymore - BMC>

NOEL: The FBI says antisemitism has “risen to a whole other level” since October 7th, and some of you are thinking yes, you’ve seen it! While some of you will say the opposite, you may even believe antisemitism is being weaponized. Coming up on *Today, Explained*: some smart people on HOW to SEE antisemitism.

**[THEME]**

*<BUMPER> 4 Note Theme\_\_Vibe-n-Flutter*

RABBI JILL JACOBS (CEO of T’ruah: The Rabbinic Call for Human Rights): I'm Rabbi Jill Jacobs. I'm the CEO of T’ruah: The Rabbinic Call for Human Rights.

NOEL: What is T’ruah?

JILL: T’ruah’s an organization of rabbis and cantors who work for human rights both in the United States and Canada and also in Israel and the occupied Palestinian territories. We have close to 2400 rabbis and cantors. Our rabbis come from every denomination and also every type of rabbinate. So not only synagogues, but also schools and camps and hospital chaplains and institutions and every other place that rabbis work.

NOEL: And what has your work looked like since October 7th?

JILL: So a lot of our work has focused on both supporting the rabbis and cantors who are supporting their own communities and helping them to be able to speak to their communities, to hold them pastorally, and also bringing a moral voice that says that it's not only possible, but actually necessary to speak to the humanity of both Israelis and Palestinians. Unfortunately, in this time, in this country, there's a really polarized sense that you have to either be pro-Israel or pro-Palestine, and we're bringing a moral voice that can call for both an end to the war and a return of the hostages. And actually, those are the same things, not different things.

NOEL: Have you encountered antisemitic language or violence yourself since October 7th in a way that makes you think ‘this would not have happened before the war. This really is different.’?

JILL: So I personally, thank God, have not been a victim of antisemitic violence in person, I've seen a lot of horrific antisemitic language online, sometimes directed at me, sometimes directed at other people that, yes, very often does come from people who are effectively saying that, Jews deserve to be killed, should go back to Europe –

*<*[*CLIP*](https://x.com/l3v1at4an/status/1799808258934468769/video/1)*> Protest chant: …leave Palestine alone, then go back to Europe…*

JILL: most Jews in Israel did not come from Europe – or pushing forward antisemitic stereotypes. So I've seen that a lot. And I've also seen that among the rabbis, the 2,400 rabbis who are members of T’ruah, we hear pretty much every week a story about a synagogue being violently attacked…

*<*[*CLIP*](https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=BxWPt8PxRDo)*> NBC News: The shots were fired outside Temple Israel in Albany where two dozen preschoolers inside were immediately placed on lockdown. Police tonight are quoting the shooter as having said "Free Palestine."*

JILL: …about bomb threats, about firebombing, vandalism, a protest that shows up on Shabbat morning during services or right when people are coming out of services.

*<*[*CLIP*](https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=O9GEAwYaY1Y)*> CBC News: Police say some form of accelerant was used to start the fire here at a time when congregants were exiting the synagogue. Someone driving by alerted them that there was a fire that has left them shaken.*

JILL: So we hear about that on a really regular basis, which was not true before October 7th. Now antisemitism has been rising. We saw a rise in antisemitism also during the Trump administration.

*<*[*CLIP*](https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=n01xz4VqnqU)*> ABC News:*

*Chanting: “Blood and soil!”*

*Torches in hand, chants echoing across the historic campus.*

*Chanting: “You will not replace us!”*

JILL: There it was more coming from the white Christian nationalist community. And that also has not gone away. We saw, of course, the horrific shootings and murders in Pittsburgh, in Poway. And then we also have seen antisemitic violence that doesn't necessarily fit into a strict left-right paradigm, like, for example, the shootings in Jersey City, at a kosher supermarket, or the hostage taking situation in Texas, where you have people who are walking around with a lot of antisemitic stereotypes that unfortunately propel them to carry out an antisemitic, violent incident.

NOEL: How do you define antisemitism? Do you have, like, a couple sentences that you keep at top of mind?

JILL: Well, the short definition is that antisemitism is hatred or prejudice against Jews as Jews. And it started more than 2000 years ago, really with the advent of Christianity, and especially with the Roman Empire converting to Christianity and Christianity having power behind it.

SCORING IN <Canopy Dusk - BMC>

JILL: The question that Christians had to answer is, if Christianity has superseded Judaism, then why are Jews still around? And through the centuries, a lot of stereotypes, prejudices, myths about Jews, were created, many out of that religious context. There were in many cases restrictions on Jewish political, social, economic rights, like whether Jews could own land, whether they could freely practice religion in public, in private, whether they could be part of certain professions, whether they could vote, etc. And of course, in the worst cases, there were expulsions, forced conversions and of course, murders – not only in the Holocaust, but of course, that is the genocide in our historical memory – also during the Crusades, mass murders of Jews, and at other times during history.

SCORING BUMP

JILL: The word antisemitism, though, came out of the mid-19th century in Germany, when Western Europe was starting to emancipate their Jews. So Jews were starting to get more social and political rights, including in the new German constitution.

*<*[*CLIP*](https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=8KP7aCKPQRY)*> Prof. Shulamit Volkov, Professor Emerita of History at Tel Aviv University: This meant that the Jews were becoming more and more part of their environment and, having had a population of capable, active, dynamic people, you see the entry into society in a very quick manner.*

JILL: So the term antisemitism came out of that period. It was popularized by Wilhelm Marr, who was a popular pamphleteer in Germany. It was an attempt to create a scientific reason for hating Jews. So the people who created it thought they were being extremely scientific and modern, and they said, well, look, Hebrew is a Semitic language. The Jews are Semites. They're not from here. They're from the Middle East. And so they're a foreign race that's among us. And actually, now it's even scarier because we can't always tell who they are now that they're integrated more and allowed into places they didn't used to be allowed into. So now they are a terrifying, nefarious presence among us. Even more terrifying now that we don't know who's Jewish.

SCORING OUT

JILL: And so the word antisemitism came out of that context, but has become the popular word to describe hatred of Jews. I also want to say that one of the tropes that we hear a lot is, well, Arabic is also a Semitic language. And so therefore antisemitism is hatred of Arabs. And then people go on from there. And the word antisemitism only means hatred of Jews. That's what it's meant historically. That's what it continues to mean. It doesn't mean that there's not Islamophobia. Of course there is. Or anti-Arab prejudice. Anti-Palestinian prejudice. Those all exist. They have separate words. But antisemitism always means the hatred of Jews.

NOEL: Do you have a way for yourself of deciding what speech, what actions, what's being said online and in real life is antisemitism, and what is legitimate criticism of what Israel is doing in Gaza? I think this is where people of good faith really want an answer, and maybe where people acting in bad faith are kind of more easily called out if we figure out a way to, like, answer this question. But I don't know that anybody can, other than for themselves.

JILL: The kind of cheat sheet version that I would offer is, if you're about to say something about Israel, that you're not sure if it crosses a line, substitute the name of whatever other country you're most angry about in this moment, and see if it's a sentence that would actually make sense. Some of the specifics. So criticizing Israel based on its human rights record, its policies, whether it's adhering or failing to adhere to international law, is absolutely not antisemitism. Boycotting Israel or its territories. It's a basic First Amendment right that one can boycott a business or a country or a state. That is not automatically antisemitism. Choosing to engage in activism only in Israel/Palestine. There's lots of reasons that many people are very upset about what's happening in Gaza right now. It's not necessarily antisemitism to only do activism about Israel/Palestine and not about, say, China or Russia or other countries that are violating human rights in horrific ways. So when criticism of Israel does cross the line from criticizing a country. So, again, Israel is a country, into antisemitism is when you see people using anti-Jewish tropes to describe Israel or Israelis. When you see, let's say, caricatures of Israeli leaders with, like, big noses or other kind of stereotypical Jewish features, when you see the conspiracies that suggests that Israel has outsized power. That dates back to The Protocols of the Elders of Zion, which was an early 20th century antisemitic forgery that purported to be a record of a meeting of Jewish elders conspiring to control the world. Using the word Zionist as code for Jew, for Israelis, or Zionist entity rather than Israel.

*<*[*CLIP*](https://x.com/uprising_1/status/1799488605934493846/video/1)*> Protest chant: “We don’t want no Zionists here!”*

JILL: You know, we hear chants, for example, saying, we don't want Zionists here. Now, Zionist is a very complicated word that means a lot of things to a lot of people. But the vast majority of Jews in this country have at least some emotional connection to the state of Israel, want the State of Israel to continue to be a Jewish state, a place of refuge. And that has the impact of saying, essentially, that the vast majority of Jews aren't welcome in certain spaces.

*<*[*CLIP*](https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=CoYBZ2IFazw)*> Charlie Sachs, University of Minnesota student: Seeing “Death to Zionism” as I'm walking to class feels as though the protesters on my campus want my Judaism to cease to exist. They want me to cease to exist.*

JILL: So when somebody says Zionist, I want to know what they mean. Do they mean a Jew? Do they mean an Israeli? Do they mean somebody who holds a particular political position? In which case, which one? And maybe we should not use that word and just say what it is that you actually mean. Denying Jewish history. So pretending that Jews never had a connection to the land of Israel, suggesting that today's Jews are fake Jews. That the temple never existed in, in Jerusalem, that there never was any Jewish history there. Denying the humanity of Israelis. So any justification for murdering Israelis, suggestions that all 7 million Israeli Jews should leave and go somewhere else, wherever that somewhere else might be? If somebody spray paints Free Palestine on a random sidewalk, that's not antisemitism. If they go and spray that on a synagogue, on a Holocaust museum, on some other Jewish institution, that's antisemitism, because you're saying, basically, you, as a Jewish institution, we’re assuming that you speak for the state of Israel. We see this a lot online. Somebody will post, “here is a challah that I just baked for Shabbat. Here's me lighting Hanukkah candles,” and people will post Free Palestine. Well, what does that have to do with somebody celebrating Shabbat or Hanukkah? Nothing.

NOEL: There's another claim I'd like to get your thoughts about, and it's this: antisemitism is a problem. It is real. It's happening. But the humanitarian crisis in Gaza is far more urgent. It's far more dire. It's far more deserving of our attention. Now you're a rabbi, and you're the head of a human rights organization that is against what is happening in Gaza. How do you balance these two things?

JILL: This is a binary that just shouldn't exist. It's actually not hard to criticize Israel, to protest the war, and not be antisemitic.

SCORING IN <New Tension 08 - Infinite Whack-A-Mole>

JILL: In Israel, there's protests every single day against the war and specifically calling on the government to take a hostage deal that will end the war.

*<*[*CLIP*](https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=Rk05pxq7Pkw)*> Zach, protester: They need to stop the war, release all hostages, bring them back home, stop the killing, stop the retaliation on the Palestinian people and start negotiating, talking for, you know, start talking really with the people around us.*

JILL: And Israelis are really clear about that. And they're not antisemitic. They're criticizing their government. These are not opposed to each other. We don't have to choose.

SCORING BUMP

NOEL: That’s Rabbi Jill Jacobs. She’s the CEO of T’ruah: The Rabbinic Call for Human Rights.

After the break… can we legislate antisemitism away? We’re trying.

**[BREAK]**

**[BUMPER]**

*<BUMPER> Bumper Neutral 3*

NOAH FELDMAN (law professor and the director of the Center for Jewish and Israeli Law at Harvard Law School): I'm Noah Feldman, and I am a law professor and the director of the Center for Jewish and Israeli Law at Harvard Law School. I'm also the author, most recently, of “To Be a Jew Today: A New Guide to God, Israel, and the Jewish People.”

NOEL: How has the debate over antisemitism unfolded where you are at Harvard?

NOAH: It has been an exceptionally intense year for Jewish and Israel-related matters at Harvard going back to October 7th.

SCORING IN <Wormhole Chamber - BMC>

*<*[*CLIP*](https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=d0vUsSWbQAQ)*> Crowd chanting: Intifada revolution! Intifada revolution! Intifada revolution!*

NOAH: A crucial question on our campus, as on many campuses around the country, has been: when does criticism of Israel, legitimate in itself, cross over into antisemitism that violates university rules, and that also violates rules of basic decency?

*<*[*CLIP*](https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=KvoTIeB8L3w)*> MSNBC: The Ivy League university faced national backlash after the Harvard Undergraduate Palestine Solidarity Committee published a statement on Saturday blaming Israel for the deadly Hamas attack that targeted civilians. The letter was co-signed by 33 other student organizations.*

NOAH: And this has been relevant to conversations, in particular, about a student encampment led by students, who weren't only focusing on Israel's role in Gaza, but also more broadly on Israel's very existence. And so that issue has been front and center on my campus for most of the last academic year.

SCORING OUT

NOEL: Do you believe you've seen antisemitism on Harvard's campus since October 7th?

NOAH: You know, early in the academic year when the criticism was very focused on Gaza. I myself did not feel in an active and personal way real antisemitism on the campus. In the spring, there were moments where there's no question in my mind that the criticism of Israel, which began as perfectly legitimate, crossed into antisemitism. There was a sign being held up by some students in the encampment in Harvard Yard that was a picture of the president of Harvard, Alan Garber, who happens to be Jewish, as the devil with a devil's tail and, you know, devil's horns. And there's a longstanding trope of depicting Jews in this way. And to me, that was clearly antisemitic.

NOEL: Since last year, the House has held hearings on antisemitism on campus. They brought in college presidents to testify. We did an episode about the hearing that led to Harvard's former president losing her job. Since those hearings, Congress has passed resolutions condemning antisemitism. Many political leaders have condemned antisemitism. The House even passed a bill called the Antisemitism Awareness Act. If the Antisemitism Awareness Act passes in the Senate, and if it's signed into law, what would it do?

NOAH: It's pretty subtle. Under title six, which is part of the civil rights laws, universities cannot discriminate themselves on the basis of race or national origin or sex. But it also says that the university has an obligation to create conditions on campus where no one is blocked from full participation in the life of the university by virtue of those protected categories. So I know that's a bit of a mouthful, but that's what title six does. Now, what this law purports to do is it says when the Department of Education goes to look at whether a university has successfully created an environment where students are not interfered with in their studies on the basis of race or national origin. It says that when you're thinking, when the university or where the Department of Education is thinking about what counts as whether there was antisemitism on campus, it should use the definition of antisemitism propounded by, broadly speaking, the IHRA definition. Now, that definition is itself controversial because its initial statement is very vague. It just says thinking about Jews in a bad way, more or less. But then it gives some examples that are much more controversial…

*<*[*CLIP*](https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=Y-R2lCAhry4)*> ILTV Israel News: The International Holocaust Remembrance Alliance's definition, including general hatred towards Jews, Holocaust denial, and denying Jews the right to self-determination, like by alleging that Israel's very existence is a racist or colonial endeavor*.

NOAH: And so what the law might do is it might direct the Department of Education to consider instances where people in the university have been expressing, through bullying or harassment, views of that sort as antisemitism and therefore as the university having failed to create an environment in which Jews, and Israelis as well, because they're included too there, would be fully protected under the law.

NOEL: Could you explain why some Jewish organizations have spoken out against the Antisemitism Aware, Awareness Act?

NOAH: Yes. Because the examples given by the I-H-R-A definition of antisemitism are not considered to be antisemitism by some Jews…

NOEL: Mm.

NOAH: … or are considered to be too broad a definition of antisemitism.

*<*[*CLIP*](https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=Q7fJPkRz4RU)*> Rep. Jerry Nadler: Even the chief author of the IHRA definition, Kenneth Stern, said, don't codify it into law because it can be violative of free speech. All of these are, provide examples of things which, in context, may be, may show antisemitism. But putting it into law could say that under certain circumstances, criticism of Israel would be considered antisemitic and that's a violation of free speech, and that's why the ACLU opposed it and various certain liberal Jewish groups opposed it too.*

NOAH: You know, these are very, very narrowly specific hard cases that arise under these circumstances. And lots of people think, like Congress seem to think, that there's a simple answer to them, but there just isn't, because what we're trying to do in every instance is balance the right of free speech, which is so important, especially in a university, against people's right not to be subject to discriminatory conduct like bullying or harassment or discrimination.

NOEL: Yeah. To that end, with respect to passing laws on this, I think about the fight for racial justice in America. I think about the civil rights movement. Right. Those laws needed to be passed. We're a better country for those laws. But those laws didn't end racism. Now, this is a terribly big question, and maybe there is no answer, but what else needs to be done other than laws to fight antisemitism or maybe even, like, just to improve where we are right now?

NOAH: The short answer is that laws are really good for interfering with discriminatory conduct. It says to people, you can't do that. Laws are not very good at changing people's hearts and minds. You have to be able to educate people by saying, look, you may not know this, but antisemitism has a long history and there are certain words, certain attitudes, certain points of view that Jews respond to in a certain way because of that history. And you yourself, the person who's expressing the antisemitic view, may not even know it's antisemitic. And that doesn't make you a bad person. But we're going to raise your consciousness, and we hope that by doing so, you'll think twice about it.

SCORING IN <Bees Ambient 2b + Bee’s Ambient 3 Marble>

NOAH: My own belief is that accusations of people presented in a very harsh way very rarely change their minds if they came to this thing somewhat innocently. You make a lot more progress by saying, hey, can I explain to you why it is that that feels super antisemitic to me, and that tends to be a better way to do it. So in the end, it's about conversation and education. That's what changes people's hearts and minds over time.

SCORING BUMP

NOEL: Noah Feldman, Harvard Law. His new book is “To Be a Jew Today.”

Today’s show was produced by Avishay Artsy, edited by Amina Al-Sadi, fact-checked by Laura Bullard, and engineered by Patrick Boyd and Andrea Kristinsdottir.

You may have read my colleague Abdallah Fayyad’s piece on anti-Palestinian racism and thought: well, why didn’t they talk about that too on the show!? Because I only have 26 minutes, you guys! *But do know* that that show is in the works; and you’re going to be hearing from Abdallah soon.

I’m Noel King. It’s *Today, Explained*.

**[10 SECONDS OF SILENCE]**