

she didn't understand why he was staring at her.

Marissa, a 27-year-old Web developer, joined a group of co-workers for lunch in their company's breakroom in Winter Park, Fla., in February 2020. She viewed the break as much-needed relief from a stressful morning working on a new website.

Good vibes filled the room as everybody enjoyed one another's company. But the young tech professional, who is Jewish, noticed a male colleague staring and smirking at her from across the table. Even when she looked away, he maintained his gaze.

Annoyed, Marissa jokingly asked him if there was food on her face.

"He responded with a comment about my physical appearance and the way Jewish people in general look," she recalls. "I remember just sitting there, stunned. I couldn't believe it."

It wasn't the first time Marissa had experienced antisemitism. Growing up, she had endured harsh comments about her Jewish heritage from friends and even adults. But this was the first time it had happened in a professional setting. And the worst part, she says, was that no one else seemed to care. A couple of her co-workers even laughed.

Marissa didn't report the incident to human resources because the person who made the remark was well-liked within the company, she says. And she was embarrassed by the situation.

"It's one of those things that you get over, but you never forget," Marissa says. "People think they're being funny when making offensive comments, but they're still hurtful. I don't think they fully realize what those comments can do to someone."

Racism and discrimination are rife in U.S. workplaces. The advent of the Black Lives Matter movement, the increase in anti-Asian-American violence and other recent racial atrocities have inspired companies to speak out against bigotry and strengthen their diversity, equity and inclusion (DE&I) programs.

But bias aimed at Jewish employees often goes unnoticed, despite a recent rise in antisemitism. Anti-Defamation League (ADL) data shows that business establishments were the fourth most common site of antisemitic incidents in 2020, with the incidents ranging from verbal abuse to physical intimidation.

More than half of Jewish workers reported dealing with workplace discrimination in their careers, according to a 2022 report by Rice University's Religion and Public Life Program. Respondents said they had experienced harmful comments, stereotyping and social exclusion.

The COVID-19 pandemic hasn't helped. Vlad Khaykin, national director of antisemitism programs at the ADL, says hate acts tend to increase during times of collective anxiety and uncertainty. Malicious words and actions can be spurred by pandemics, civil unrest, political instability or economic downturns.

"Human beings seek to identify the source of the threat, the source of suffering or anxiety, and antisemitism functions as a conspiracy theory which provides simplistic answers to what are complex, often systemic, problems in the form of a Jewish scapegoat," Khaykin says.

Social media doesn't help either.

The Center for Countering Digital Hate, a research organization, found 714 posts containing anti-Jewish sentiments on social media platforms such as Facebook, YouTube and Twitter between May and June 2021. Collectively, these posts had been viewed at least 7.3 million times.

Some individuals have conjured conspiracy theories about Jewish people, such as the false claim that Jews created the coronavirus with the sinister purpose of then being able to profit from developing an antidote.

In December 2021, for example, dozens of flyers containing this conspiracy theory were scattered throughout California and North Carolina, according to a Newsweek report. Both Jewish and non-Jewish residents woke to discover the messages in their yards, placed in plastic bags weighed down with pebbles. As of January 2022, police were still investigating the incident.