WEXFactor
LEADING CONVERSATIONS

Welcome to the WEXFactor Room

JANUARY 2024

Welcome to the WEXFactor Room where we invite Wexner alumni from across our network of programs to come together for a Leading Conversation about a pressing topic relevant to the exercising of creative, effective, and joyful leadership. On December 18, 2023, we gathered **Tziona Koenig-Yair** *(WIF 24)*, **Greg Landsman** *(WHP Cincinnati 13)*, **Deb Leipzig** *(WFF 3)*, and **Hindy Poupko** *(WGF/DS 19)* to discuss:

ANTISEMITISM

Framing the Topic

According to the ADL, 2021 was the highest year on record for documented reports of harassment, vandalism and violence directed against Jews, since they began tracking these incidents in 1979. “These record-breaking numbers present as part of a consistent, five-year upswing in the number of antisemitic incidents, unprecedented in the ADL's three plus decades of data collection.” The same picture is described in **this brief Kirkus review** of Diana Fersko’s recent book (August 2023), *We Need to Talk about Antisemitism.* And in the summer of 2023, Sapir journal published this range of deep work and thinking about antisemitism in that moment: **https://sapirjournal.org/issues/antisemitism/**.

What we’re seeing is “old-school, classic modern antisemitism coming from the 1870s and eighties and nineties into the 20th century…” Dr. Joshua Shanes, a Jewish Studies professor at the College of Charleston explains. "There's rhetoric that's accepted today that simply never would have possibly been accepted a generation ago, not since the 1930s, really, " Shanes adds.

Since October 7th, 2023, **EJP reports** and the **ADL Center on Extremism** indicates that, as of October 25th, “incidents of harassment, vandalism and assault increased by 388% over the same period last year.”

Plus, in addition to the actual war on the ground, we are immersed in a war of narratives, especially pervasive on university campuses which has led to a **crisis for Jewish students.** ADL and others are working to **debunk myths** about the Israel-Hamas war.

We have seen these terrifying patterns throughout history, but maybe – just maybe – this time is different, as Ambassador Lipstadt, U.S. Special Envoy to Monitor and Combat Antisemitism, suggested at the May 2023 unveiling of the U.S. National Strategy to Counter Antisemitism:

“This is a historic moment in the modern fight against what’s known as the world’s oldest hatred. For the first time, the United States Government is not only acknowledging that antisemitism is a serious problem in this country but laying out a clear plan to counter it. The collaboration among so many agencies and partners to reach this goal and develop these solutions is, simply put, breathtaking. This plan – unveiled in this location, with input from dedicated leaders across this Administration and beyond – reflects an unprecedented determination to fight antisemitism.”

WE ASKED THIS GROUP OF WEXNER ALUMNI:

How do you define antisemitism?

"...I think antisemitism has become a little bit easier to define; it's anti-Zionism that I think has become more tricky..."

Meet **Deb Leipzig** | dleipzig@adl.org

Wexner Field Fellow 3

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This is something that the world is certainly struggling with right now. I'll go back to something my boss Jonathan Greenblatt says, which is, "this is not new, now we're really seeing what's behind the curtain." And in what was a pretty controversial moment at the time, a couple of years ago, he made the statement that anti-Zionism is antisemitism. How we define anti-Zionism is where we continue to see this ongoing misinformation and people not being careful with words. "Well, that's not what I mean," we hear. In some ways, **I think antisemitism has become a little bit easier to define; it's anti-Zionism that I think has become more tricky,** and a very slippery slope into antisemitism, whether conscious or unconscious.

Deb Leipzig is the Vice President of Leadership for ADL, where she provides strategic direction and oversight of ADL's governance structure and its volunteer engagement bodies and opportunities.

Meet **Greg Landsman** | greglandsman1@gmail.com

Wexner Heritage Program Cincinnati 13

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Yeah, I would agree with that. Obviously, antisemitism is on the rise and that's an understatement. It's exploding all over the world. And here, it's not just college campuses, although college campuses are clearly what's in the news, and you're seeing it for good reason. I think part of the issue is that a lot of people think of antisemitism as Nazism or Neo-Nazism. And so, if you don't have swastika tattoos and you're not a skinhead, you're not antisemitic. However, that's obviously not how it works. There is a discussion about what is and isn't antisemitism, and I think Deb is 100% right that some or a lot of it is tied up in Zionism right now. Working through that is going to be really important for me. I had to vote on this the other day, and I voted, yes, that anti-Zionism is antisemitic. Because for me, and this is where I'll land the plane here in terms of how I'm thinking about this right now. **For me, denying Jews a state is antisemitic.** Zionism is the idea of a Jewish state. If you say I am against that, it would be similar, if not the exact same as saying, I do not believe the Palestinians should have a state that would be anti-Palestinian or Islamophobic. And you can replace that with any group of people. So, I do believe that being clear about Zionism, at least for me, being about a Jewish state and denying a Jews a state is antisemitic, I also say, look, there are some Jews who do not feel that way that doesn't make it less antisemitic to me and other Jews.

Congressman Greg Landsman is a first-term member of Congress from Cincinnati, Ohio. Greg has spent his entire career advocating for children and families, especially those most marginalized. He has visited Israel and the wider region more than a dozen times over the years, and is a leading Jewish voice in Congress in support of Israel and a two-state solution, and against the rise of antisemitism.

"For me, denying Jews a state is antisemitic."

"[Antisemitism is] a conspiracy theory that holds that Jews are uniquely prone to use devious means to achieve malevolent ends and

Meet **Hindy Poupko** | hindypoupko@gmail.com

Wexner Graduate Fellow/Davidson Scholar 19

CLICK TO LEARN MORE ABOUT HINDY

I prefer the Bret Stephens definition of antisemitism: **"A conspiracy theory that holds that Jews are uniquely prone to use devious means to achieve malevolent ends and must therefore be opposed by any means necessary."** Often, what we see today is Jews being held to a unique standard or double standard. Whether it's being accused of being colonialists or communists, whatever society deems as the worst possible thing to be - that's what we are often accused of; hence today, being accused of being the oppressor.

must therefore be opposed by any means necessary."

Hindy is the Senior Vice President for Community Strategy and External Relations at UJA Federation of New York.

Meet **Tziona Koenig-Yair** | tzionak@gmail.com

Wexner Israel Fellow 24

CLICK TO LEARN MORE ABOUT TZIONA

To be honest, I'm not sure I agree that anti-Zionism is antisemitism. And I've been struggling with this over the last two months. You have a lot of populations coming out as anti-Zionist, just by virtue of them being pro-Palestinian, without differentiating between the two. And for me, it's much more complex. You can be in favor of a Palestinian state, but still be a Zionist, right? What is shocking to me today, **what I find very, very disturbing is that antisemitism is sort of the chic thing to be,** whereas antisemitism was once more underlying or hidden. It's scary to see that some people are proud to be antisemitic. If you go on social media, it's one of the trends. And that, to me, is shocking, disturbing, frightening.

Tziona Koenig-Yair is the VP of the Claims Conference in Israel, the former Director General of the Ministry of Diaspora and former Equal Employment Opportunities Commissioner. She has studied, taught, and implemented the adaptive leadership framework over the past decade in Israel.

"...what I find very, very disturbing is that antisemitism is sort of the chic thing to be..."

How do you experience antisemitism locally, nationally, globally?

Tziona

TZIONA WANTS YOU TO HEAR THIS IDEA – LISTEN HERE.

Here is a short anecdote from my year at Harvard, as a Wexner fellow. I was taking an advanced philosophy course that was very difficult. There were 20 people in the course, mostly from the military, some people from Israel, and then a couple of foreign students. At the end of the year, I went to Professor Applebaum (who is Jewish, which is relevant for the story), because I wanted to get some advice on the course I was taking and the paper I was trying to write, not very successfully. And when I walked in and sat in his office at HKS (Harvard Kennedy School), he said to me, "before we start talking about your paper, I want to ask you a question." And I said, "go ahead." I was sure it would be something related to the Wexner fellowship, something about what we had been doing throughout the year, this was already the beginning of May.

And he said to me, "how do you live with a racist name?" It was the first and only time somebody asked me that.

The name Tziona. Wow. And I stuttered. I said to him, "What do you mean?" Because I was born in the States, I made Aliyah. I had four grandparents who were Holocaust survivors and came to Ellis Island and my parents named me Tziona because they wanted to make Aliyah. They were Zionist. But this is what he's asking. And I said to him, "Listen, can we stick to the paper?" I tell the story often because I'm still sorry that I didn't say to him, "How could you ask me if Zionism is racism, is antisemitism?!" All of that comes together there. I wish I had asked him, "How could you even ask me that as a Jewish professor?" I find it so troubling that people would think that Zionism is racism.

Greg

Personally, I have felt it recently more than I have in a long, long time.

I'm feeling on my heels with a lot of people who wonder, isn't my being Jewish clouding or biasing my opinion or perspective on Israel, as if being Jewish is somehow not a legitimate sort of entity.

I don't know if I'd be questioned the same way if it were something else other than being Jewish. I've had people question whether or not it was appropriate for me to bring my Jewishness to the question of what should happen as it relates to Israel and Hamas. And we've taken several votes on the House floor around antisemitism. I've heard from colleagues that they're tired of having to take these votes. That has been really hard to hear. It does suggest that people don't think of it as seriously as other things like racism or sexism or hate against LGBT communities; that antisemitism is something you can be tired of and ask why are we still talking about this. Also, I have just personally felt that my being Jewish and wanting to be part of a Jewish community in Congress is an issue. That plays out with our attempt to create a Jewish Caucus. There are just a lot of people and some of our Jewish members who say, "Hey, let's not do that." In part, it's because they don't want it to play into the conspiracy theory, let's not create a Jewish Caucus, so that it doesn't, that would play into the conspiracy theory that Hindy referred to. They say let's not create a Jewish caucus, so we won't be accused of running the show or pulling the strings. This is so annoying and frustrating, and it's also sad to me that we're having a really hard time creating a Jewish caucus.

Deb

I'm not comfortable wearing anything with the ADL logo outside the office.

We've been asked to not make ourselves targets, especially leaving the ADL building. And remember that first Friday after October 7, there was a call for a "day of rage?" People were going back and forth - do we send our kids to school? So, when I was asked if my stepdaughter, who's 12 and in 7th grade at Jewish Day School, should go, I said absolutely - it's probably the safest place for her to be and it's an important message to be sending. And she went. What I did not know until later was that she wore her IDF t-shirt. I love her for that. But then, after school, her mom picked her up to go run some errands and asked if she wanted to keep the shirt on. Mena said, "Yes." And her mom said, "Well, what do you think Deb would say?" And she said, "I think Deb would tell me to be a proud Jew." But she was wrong. I would have said to change the shirt. And I don't know how I feel about that. But it's true.

Hindy

HINDY WANTS YOU TO HEAR THIS IDEA – LISTEN HERE.

On the Upper West Side, I've had an Israeli flag pin on my coat since October 7, because I feel I need to show New York Jews that

if we can't do this in New York, where the hell can we possibly feel free to be ourselves in this country?

> Antisemitism is a certain perception of Jews, which may be expressed as hatred toward Jews. Rhetorical and physical manifestations of antisemitism are directed toward Jewish or non-Jewish individuals and/or their property, toward Jewish community institutions and religious facilities.
>
> **Definition of Antisemitism**
> *International Holocaust Remembrance Alliance (IHRA)*

Tziona

This is a crazy conversation. I can't believe what I'm hearing. We're in the middle of a war on two different fronts. We wake up every morning to four or five soldiers who were killed in action, I go from funeral to funeral, I go from Shiva to Shiva, and I wear blue and white every day. I wear this dog tag around my neck every day with the message BRING THEM HOME to honor the hostages still in Gaza- civilians abducted and held hostage in Gaza by Hamas. We sing Hatikvah on the street, as a metaphor, if you will. Yeah, I feel safe. Besides the first three days when we were told to lock down – I live in the south where we locked down – we didn't go out. We didn't see anyone, we didn't buy food, we didn't get water. So, besides the first three days from October 7 to October 10, this is the safest place to be. We just had our leadership council of the Claims Conference here in Israel. They were shocked. We walked to the Kikar Chatufim/ Hostages Square in Tel Aviv, right near the museum. And people were singing on the streets, with Israeli flags. So, to me,

when we talk about antisemitism *globally*, it's two different worlds.

In terms of day-to-day life, here, we're all out of Israeli merchandise, you can't get enough of it, there are no more white t-shirts to be bought. So, that is so different.

Greg

GREG WANTS YOU TO HEAR THIS IDEA – LISTEN HERE.

That is so powerful. And it makes the case for why it is so important that we have this Jewish democratic state. Within the State of Israel, you can be Jewish in a way that is challenging in other places, certainly around the world, and even in the United States.

It makes the case for the state.

Hindy

I was in Israel last week for the first time since 10/7. It certainly put things in perspective. Our domestic challenges pale in comparison to actual war. I wanted to say to every Israeli, "we got this, you guys are fighting the war. Don't worry about America - we got your back."

We can still opt in or opt out. Israelis have no choices.

There's no opting out of what's happening in Israel right now.

What, if any, may be the most successful ways of responding to antisemitism, in Israel, North America, or beyond?

Hindy

If our goal is to change hearts and minds as opposed to just behavior, it is a far more complex endeavor.

And the only proven mechanism for that is education.

Study after study shows that when someone actually knows that the Holocaust happened, when they know how many Jews there are in America, they are much less likely to believe antisemitism conspiracy theories. Similarly, the only proven thing that also reduces anti-Zionism is education; really explaining to young people that we did not appear in 1948. And when individual respondents reflect an understanding that we were there before 1948, they are much less likely to call us colonialists. So, the hard truth is, we probably need to be spending billions of dollars in a far more robust K through 12 education, which many organizations including the ADL and others, have been hard at work at for years. But I think as a community, we never prioritized them. It wasn't in our face in the same way that it is now. At this moment, I think we need a combination of short-term and long-term approaches. Yes, let's incentivize people to do the right thing. Let's get the right policy to protect Jews on campus, at work, on the streets. And at the same time, we need to educate people.

Tziona

I agree with Hindy - *kol milah*, we say in Hebrew, every word. I just want to bring in one more point. I don't think we're at the stage where we're even ready for the short-term solutions. I think that the temperature is so high - to use some adaptive leadership language - that what we have to do is to make sure that the spotlight stays on that. And I think that what The Wexner Foundation did with detaching our Israeli leadership programs from Harvard at a time like this raises the temperature and sends the right message to Harvard, to the world –really bringing to the forefront what the conflict is about. I think that for so long, we've been so timid and cautious around facing the conflict of antisemitism. We've known about antisemitism on campuses for at least a decade, but virtually nothing has changed. We poured millions of shekel from the Israeli government, from the Ministry of the Diaspora, into combating antisemitism on campuses, and nothing really moved. So, I think that right now, we're at a point in the conflict where it's hot, it's problematic. There's a real clash. And I think

our responsibility right now, before solving the problem, is really staying in that painful space,

and making sure that it stays in the eye of the public, and that people are talking about it, dealing with it. And people are doing things that continue to raise the temperature, leaving universities that are allowing antisemitism, engaging in certain protests, there are hundreds of examples of actions that are happening globally. Before we go to solutions, I think that we need to be living in this traumatic problem.

> It is emotional, it is not at all rational. Other than diving into the dark corners from which it emanates, there is almost no true response or method to combat Jew-hatred. The only way to confront Jew-hatred is to make it unacceptable in public, Jew-hatred needs to be rejected. Racism is unacceptable, and so is Jew-hatred. Xenophobia is unacceptable, and so is Jew-hatred.
>
> **Micah Halpern**
> *Opinion, Jerusalem Post (Nov. 15, 2022)*

Deb

DEB WANTS YOU TO HEAR THIS IDEA – LISTEN HERE.

Tziona, I think you're right. And Hindy, I agree with you as well. I would say, though, when I look at the Micah Halpern quote, the part I don't like is about there being only one right way. I think that that is one of our biggest problems. There is no silver bullet, there is no "only way," be it short or long-term strategies. I purposely don't say solutions yet, but there are short-term and long-term strategies. And I think K through 12 education is important. But I think it's also super relevant that we're seeing so much antisemitism from those in their 20s who are just starting out in the workplace. All of these companies have DEI programs and almost none of them have components about Jewishness or recognizing/combating antisemitism. It speaks again to that double standard that Hindy talked about. Right now, I think we are in triage. Ultimately what we need, and certainly what ADL is focusing on, is strategy for all different demographics.

It can't just be K through 12, it has to be K through everybody.

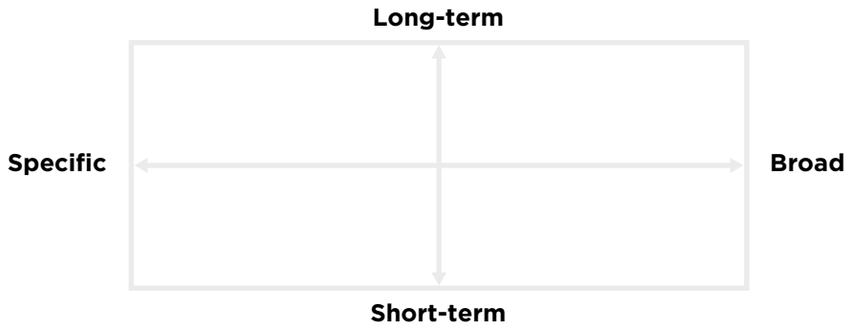
> All this is likely to get worse: A **Harvard-Harris poll** conducted this month finds that 44 percent of Americans ages 25 to 34, and **a whopping 67 percent of those ages 18 to 24, agree with the proposition that "Jews as a class are oppressors."** By contrast, only 9 percent of Americans over 65 feel that way. The same generation that received the most instruction in the virtues of tolerance is now the most antisemitic in recent memory.
>
> **Bret Stephens**
> *New York Times Opinion: Why I Can't Stop Writing About Oct. 7 (Dec. 19, 2023)*

Greg

My dad asked me this very question recently, who's doing this well? We know who's doing it poorly, but who's doing it well? I didn't have an answer for that. I completely agree that

it's just too hot right now.

And we're not going to have healthy, productive conversations. A part of me feels that schools dealing with this here in Cincinnati should just let everyone take a break and come back after the first of the year. And I agree this has to be broken up into short-term and long-term strategies. And I would add two more dimensions of strategies: specific and broad. For example, there is a short term surgical specific approach, which is to reach out to those students, make sure that they feel like they've been heard and to answer some questions, because a big chunk of them do not really know what they're saying. And then short term broader, what is the message to the community, versus those long-term code of conduct fixes and other policy changes. So, in my mind, there are those four boxes.



What may you have learned, unlearned, or relearned about antisemitism in this conversation?

Hindy

That we need to be more specific about where our problems are or aren't. Instead of saying, Americans are X or Y, we need to be really specific and say, "people over the age of 26 generally agree, Israel has a right to exist, Israel has a right to defend itself."

But there's something particular happening with the 18 to 26 cohort.

And unless we are specific enough in defining the challenge, my concern is that our strategies - not solutions - are just not going to be effective. It's a case of needing to define the problem clearly before moving to responses. We need to be incredibly specific, and do so in a way that is true to who we are.

Deb

I think the urgency of this moment demands new ways of thinking.

The anti-Zionist groups have been building and layering their campaign for years, which is why they're so organized, which is why we're seeing this all over campus. They have followed a plan they have executed on that plan. They have talking points. They are very specific. They've made it into sound bites, it's all social media friendly. They're leaning in. And Jewish organizations are responding with, "oh, here are five text heavy slides that provide the additional context that you need..."

Tziona

I also think that Jewish identity is a big piece of this that we haven't touched on. For a lot of people, Jewish identity has been taken for granted. When you have a State, you'll come for your Bar Mitzvah, you'll go to the Kotel, you'll do what you do, you won't pay for Jewish education or bring up your children Jewish. Jewish identity doesn't have to be a big piece of your day to day attention. Israel is there to fall back on, to some extent. And when I say Israel, it's a metaphor for Jews - our collective Jewish identity. When we have that collective Jewish identity, no need to do anything else. After October 7, right? People are panicked. Why are they panicking? This is a deliberate choice of that word. Because Jewish identity, as Jewish identity, is being threatened. The State of Israel, that is part of our collective Jewish identity is being threatened. And if the police force in Sderot was overrun and captured by Hamas for four days, then our collective Jewish identity might just burn up and leave us with nothing. And I think that that's a great reason to be panicked around that, that it is bringing in people all over the Jewish world to start to care about Jewish identity, about Israel, and about what they practice and what they don't. I think we need a pathway out of it. But that's the point that we're at now. And I for one am not happy that we're there. But if we are there, then let's at least rally around that,

go deep into what Jewish identity means to each and every Jewish person worldwide.

Greg

Honestly, this is one of the reasons I love the Jewish community, being Jewish, and being part of these conversations. We argue and we push and we prod. This is a very Jewish conversation. And it's so healthy. All of it resonated with me. Yes, there were disagreements. It is really good that people are saying, "oh my gosh, we don't want this thing taken away from us and that people are worked up and they should be. But Hindy's right. There is a need for us to be eyes wide open about what some folks are saying, who's saying it. We need everyone to take a breath here. From a political standpoint, it resonated with me because

I see all these people whom I'm not entirely sure care about me or the Jewish community or Israel,

but they're jumping on this in a way that makes me nervous. So, it's just important to be eyes wide open about it.

Thank you for joining us in the WEXFactor Room! The participants would be happy to continue the conversation. Please feel free to reach out to them at their emails above.

Expand the room! We encourage you to use this text to continue the conversation about antisemitism with your staff, your boards, your Shabbat tables...