

Understanding Jewish Communities in the Light of History and Present Circumstances

Background

It is important not only to show respect for Jewish communities, but also to appreciate the **religion, culture, and historical experience** that have enabled Jewish people to maintain their identity as minorities across many societies and centuries.

In many places Jews faced **systematic discrimination**, recurring **pogroms**, and ultimately the **Holocaust**. In relatively few contexts did they enjoy privileged positions, yet in many societies they made **disproportionate contributions** to medicine, trade, science, culture, and civic life—contributions for which they were often resented rather than credited.

This long experience of vulnerability, exclusion, and sudden reversal of tolerance is essential background for understanding Jewish attitudes today.

Jewish History in Britain since the Late 19th Century

The experience of Jews in Britain from the late nineteenth century onward is particularly relevant.

Most Christian denominations in Britain were broadly sympathetic to Jews. Many supported, often romantically, the idea of a “return to the Promised Land,” while a significant strand of **Christian Zionism** viewed Jewish restoration as a sign of the imminent return of Jesus.

However, attitudes changed sharply when **Jewish refugees settled in large numbers** in crowded urban areas such as **East London and Liverpool**. There they encountered persistent hostility—not primarily driven by theological antisemitism, but by **economic competition** for scarce housing and employment.

Jewish migrants were:

- visibly identifiable because of religious dress and practices,
- concentrated in deprived areas,
- and easily scapegoated for social problems they did not cause.

This pattern closely mirrors contemporary hostility toward **asylum seekers and “boat people”**. Social stressors—housing shortages, poverty, insecure work—are redirected toward a visible “other,” often amplified by **right-wing political opportunism**.

Antisemitism as Lived Experience

While classic antisemitic tropes certainly existed, much everyday hostility historically—and today—operates at a **low-level, ambient intensity**:

- verbal abuse,
- social exclusion,
- casual stereotyping,
- and threats that rarely escalate into physical attack, but are **persistent enough to generate fear**.

This matters. The psychological impact of constant hostility should be taken as seriously as similar experiences reported by **Black and Muslim communities**.

A brief historical summary of key events triggering antisemitism up to **7 October 2023** would be useful here, but even without it, the **cumulative memory** of persecution remains central to Jewish self-understanding.

Religious Jewish Community Life

Understanding Jewish society—especially **religious Jewish communities**—requires recognising that Judaism is not simply about synagogue attendance or festivals.

Jewish religious life is:

- **family-centred**, with many festivals celebrated in the home,
- **communal**, including shared practices such as building temporary shelters for Sukkot (Tabernacles),
- **geographically concentrated**, for example in **Golders Green/Finchley, Stamford Hill**, and **parts of Manchester**.

Family and extended family networks are exceptionally strong. Crucially, **almost all religious Jewish families have close relatives in Israel**. As a result:

- Israeli events are experienced as *personal* rather than distant,
- Israeli government narratives often circulate unchallenged within families,
- and alternative perspectives—especially Palestinian ones—are frequently absent.

Unlike many immigrant communities, where close-knit identity softens after one or two generations, **religious Jewish cohesion often intensifies**. Any antisemitic incident—anywhere—is rapidly shared, reinforcing a sense of collective vulnerability.

The Impact of 7 October 2023

Since **7 October 2023**, the situation has changed dramatically.

There is **no synagogue or Jewish school in the UK** that has not felt the need for enhanced security. This parallels the situation now faced by MPs more generally, but the emotional context for Jewish communities is distinct.

Jayne Wernick’s book *A Voice from the Heart: A Year of War* provides a day-by-day account of incidents following 7 October. She describes herself as “not political” and shows little engagement with Middle Eastern or UK politics. Her remark that her family came to Britain in the 1920s “to settle, not to change things” is revealing.

Unwittingly, it highlights a blind spot: **Jewish migration to Palestine in the same period did change things profoundly**, for Palestinians. When I spoke with her after she mentioned the Nakba, I gently pointed out that **the Nakba is banned from the Israeli school curriculum**—a fact unknown to many well-intentioned British Jews.

Fear, Amplification, and Media Consumption

Jewish fear is further amplified by high-profile incidents such as:

- the **Heaton Park** incident,
- the **Bondi Beach attack**.

Through family links, many British Jews personally know someone killed or taken hostage in Israel. News consumption tends to follow **trusted communal sources**; few regularly read critical outlets such as *Haaretz*.

This environment makes it extremely difficult for Palestinian narratives—particularly those describing **genocide in Gaza** or **ethnic cleansing in the West Bank and East Jerusalem**—to be heard as legitimate rather than existential threats.

Palestine Recognition and the Charge of “Rewarding Hamas”

There is strong hostility within Jewish communities toward decisions by states to recognise Palestine, commonly framed as “rewarding Hamas.”

What can reasonably be said is that such decisions are typically **carefully considered**, rooted in international law and long-standing diplomatic failure. In my view, it is regrettable that recognition did not come much earlier.

Genocide, the Holocaust, and False Equivalences

Many Jews strongly reject accusations that Israel is committing genocide, arguing that:

- the legal threshold has not been met,

- and that using the term diminishes the Holocaust.

This argument is flawed. The existence of **multiple genocides** does not diminish the Holocaust; the word “Holocaust” rightly remains specific to that event. Recognising genocide elsewhere does not relativise Jewish suffering—it acknowledges universal moral standards.

Protests, Intifada, and Miscommunication

There are grave concerns within Jewish communities that pro-Palestinian marches sometimes **enable antisemitic behaviour**, especially when demonstrations take place outside Jewish institutions.

Certain chants—such as “**Death to the IDF**” or “**Global Intifada**”—are particularly alarming. While it is true that:

- the **First Intifada** was largely non-violent,
- and only later met with brutal Israeli repression,

the word *intifada* is now widely associated with violence due to the **Second Intifada**. In the current climate—especially following ISIS-linked violence such as the Bondi attack—many hear the term as a call to violence, regardless of protesters’ intent.

Conclusion

This account is offered to explain **how many Jewish people feel**, not to justify Israeli government policy.

Jewish fear must be understood against a background of centuries of antisemitism and the Holocaust. But that history **does not excuse**:

- settler violence,
- IDF actions in Gaza,
- genocidal statements by Israeli ministers,
- or the intimidation of international bodies investigating genocide allegations.

Understanding Jewish fears is necessary for justice—but **justice also requires full recognition of Palestinian suffering**, including genocide in Gaza and ethnic cleansing in the West Bank and East Jerusalem.

Both truths must be held together.

Q&A on understanding UK Jewish feelings and attitudes

Below is a **Q&A sheet**, incorporating a **clear, careful section on the IHRA definition of antisemitism**, its **legitimate use and frequent misuse**, and the **distinction between**

criticism of Israel and different forms of Zionism.

Understanding Jewish Fears, Zionism, and Palestinian Reality

Q&A for Pro-Palestinian Campaigners

Q1. Why should Palestinians and their supporters try to understand Jewish fears at all?

Because **understanding is not endorsement**.

Jewish fears are rooted in centuries of persecution, culminating in the Holocaust. Ignoring that history allows Israeli state violence to be framed as “self-defence” against an existential threat, even when it clearly is not.

Understanding Jewish fear helps:

- challenge Israeli government narratives more effectively,
 - avoid language that alienates potential allies,
 - and insist on Palestinian rights **without being dismissed as antisemitic**.
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Q2. Isn't Jewish fear exaggerated or manipulated?

Often it is **amplified**, but it is rarely invented.

Low-level antisemitism—verbal abuse, threats, graffiti, online harassment—is common and cumulative. Even when physical attacks are rare, persistent hostility creates fear.

That fear is then **politically instrumentalised** by Israeli leaders and some communal organisations to justify:

- permanent occupation,
 - collective punishment,
 - and the silencing of Palestinian voices.
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Q3. Doesn't focusing on Jewish fear minimise Palestinian suffering?

No—if done carefully.

Jewish fear explains **why many people accept Israeli government narratives**, not why those narratives are true. Palestinian suffering is not diminished by recognising Jewish fear; rather, it exposes how **fear is being used to rationalise injustice**.

Explanation is not excuse.

Q4. Why do many British Jews instinctively defend Israeli government actions?

Several factors converge:

- **Family ties:** Most Jewish families have relatives in Israel; violence feels personal.
- **Community media ecosystems:** Many rely on Israeli or communal news sources.
- **Education gaps:** The Nakba, occupation, and Palestinian history are absent from Israeli education.
- **Collective memory:** Jewish history teaches that threats can escalate quickly if ignored.

As a result, criticism of Israel is often experienced as **a threat to Jewish survival**, not as a policy disagreement.

Q5. Why is there such anger at recognising Palestine as a state?

Many Jews have been told—repeatedly—that recognising Palestine:

- “rewards terrorism,”
- “delegitimises Israel,”
- or is a step toward Israel’s destruction.

This framing ignores that recognition:

- affirms Palestinian self-determination,
- reflects international law,
- and corrects decades of diplomatic failure.

The fear is emotional and historical; the objection is **not legally or morally sound**.

Q6. Why do accusations of genocide provoke such strong reactions?

Because many Jews believe:

- genocide is synonymous with the Holocaust,
- and that using the term elsewhere diminishes Jewish suffering.

This belief is **incorrect**.

There are multiple recognised genocides. The Holocaust remains unique and named precisely because of its scale and intent. Applying the legal term genocide to Gaza does not relativise Jewish suffering—it insists on **universal moral standards**.

Refusing to name genocide when legal criteria are met **undermines international law**.

IHRA, Antisemitism, and Legitimate Criticism

Q7. What is the IHRA definition of antisemitism, and why is it controversial?

The **International Holocaust Remembrance Alliance (IHRA)** working definition of antisemitism was intended as a **non-legally binding tool** to help identify antisemitic hatred.

It defines antisemitism as hostility toward Jews *as Jews* and includes illustrative examples—some of which relate to Israel.

The controversy arises because:

- the definition is often **treated as legally binding when it is not**,
 - its examples are **frequently used selectively**,
 - and it is sometimes deployed to **shut down legitimate political speech** about Israel.
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Q8. Does the IHRA definition forbid criticism of Israel?

No. Explicitly not.

The IHRA text states that:

“Criticism of Israel similar to that levelled against any other country cannot be regarded as antisemitic.”

Criticising:

- Israeli government policy,
- military conduct,
- occupation, apartheid, or genocide,
- or calling for sanctions and accountability

is **clearly permitted**.

Claims that “the IHRA bans criticism of Israel” are **false**.

Q9. How is the IHRA definition commonly misused?

Misuse occurs when:

- criticism of Israel is **automatically equated with antisemitism**,
- Jewish discomfort is treated as proof of antisemitic intent,
- Palestinians are denied language to describe their lived reality,
- or institutions adopt IHRA without safeguards for free expression.

This misuse harms everyone:

- it weakens the fight against real antisemitism,
 - erodes trust in anti-racist frameworks,
 - and shields Israeli state violence from scrutiny.
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Zionism: Why This Is More Difficult

Q10. Why is criticism of Zionism more contentious than criticism of Israel?

Because **Zionism is not a single ideology**.

It includes:

- cultural Zionism,
- religious Zionism,
- socialist Zionism,
- liberal Zionism,
- and ethno-nationalist / messianic Zionism.

For many Jews, Zionism is tied to:

- survival after persecution,
- refuge after genocide,
- or cultural renewal.

As a result, blanket condemnation of “Zionism” is often heard as a rejection of Jewish collective existence.

Q11. Is it antisemitic to criticise Zionism?

Not necessarily—but **precision matters**.

It is legitimate to oppose:

- forms of Zionism that justify **dispossession of Palestinians**,
- permanent occupation,
- ethnic cleansing,
- or denial of equal rights.

It is not legitimate to:

- treat all Jews as Zionists,
- deny Jews the same rights to safety and dignity as others,
- or suggest Jews have no right to collective identity at all.

A helpful distinction is:

Some forms of Zionism are compatible with justice; those that require dispossession are not.

Q12. Are pro-Palestinian protests fuelling antisemitism?

Sometimes—unintentionally.

Problems arise when:

- protests take place outside Jewish schools or synagogues,
- chants are ambiguous or historically loaded,
- organisers fail to challenge antisemitic behaviour.

This does not negate the legitimacy of protest, but it **requires responsibility**.

Q13. Why is the word “intifada” so controversial?

Historically:

- the **First Intifada** was largely non-violent,
- the **Second Intifada**, involved armed attacks and suicide bombings.

Today, *intifada* is widely understood—rightly or wrongly—as implying violence. Many Jews hear it as a threat, especially after extremist attacks.

Intent does not control interpretation.

Q14. Does Jewish fear justify Israeli actions in Gaza or the West Bank?

No.

Fear explains behaviour; it does not legitimise:

- genocide in Gaza,
- ethnic cleansing in the West Bank and East Jerusalem,
- settler violence,
- or intimidation of international courts and investigators.

Jewish historical trauma **does not override Palestinian human rights**.

Q15. How should pro-Palestinian activists respond responsibly?

- Acknowledge Jewish fear **without endorsing false narratives**.
 - Reject antisemitism **clearly and consistently**.
 - Insist on Palestinian rights **without euphemism**.
 - Distinguish Judaism from Israeli state policy.
 - Speak precisely about Zionism and name harmful forms directly.
 - Refuse the false choice between Jewish safety and Palestinian freedom.
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Q16. What core truth must be held together?

Two truths at once:

- Jewish fear is real, historically grounded, and emotionally powerful.
- Palestinian suffering is real, ongoing, and being inflicted now.

One must **never be used to erase the other**.

Being careful what we say and don't say!

Below is a **practical Language Guide** designed for **pro-Palestinian activists**, meetings, marches, churches, unions, and public statements.

It aims to **protect Palestinian advocacy**, **reduce avoidable harm**, and **prevent bad-faith accusations**, without diluting the truth about Gaza, the West Bank, or East Jerusalem.

Language Guide

How to Speak for Palestine Without Feeding Antisemitism Claims

Core Principle (read first)

Precision protects the message.

Vague or emotionally loaded language is easily weaponised against Palestinian advocacy. Clear, specific language strengthens it.

1. Distinguish Clearly: Jews, Israelis, Israeli State

✓ Say

- “The **Israeli government**”
- “The **Israeli military / IDF**”
- “The **Israeli state’s policy**”
- “Settler organisations” / “settler violence”
- “This government / this coalition”

✗ Avoid

- “The Jews”
- “Jewish power”
- “The Zionists” (without clarification)
- “They” (when it’s unclear who “they” are)

Why:

Collective language collapses **Jewish identity** into **state power**, which is the core mechanism of antisemitic misinterpretation.

2. Criticising Israel: What Is Clearly Legitimate

✓ Safe and accurate

- “Israel is committing **war crimes**.”
- “There is credible evidence of **genocide in Gaza**.”
- “The occupation violates **international law**.”
- “The settlement project constitutes **ethnic cleansing**.”
- “Israel operates a system of **apartheid**.”

✓ Strengthen by adding

- “according to international law...”

- “as defined by the Genocide Convention...”
- “as documented by UN bodies / human rights organisations...”

Why:

Legal framing protects you. Emotional framing alone leaves you exposed.

3. Zionism: Be Precise or Don't Use the Word

✓ **Better formulations**

- “**Ethno-nationalist Zionism**”
- “**Settler-colonial Zionism**”
- “**Religious-messianic Zionism**”
- “Forms of Zionism that **require dispossession**”

✓ **Helpful clarifying sentence**

“Some forms of Zionism seek safety or cultural renewal; others justify dispossession and domination. It is the latter we oppose.”

✗ **Avoid**

- “Zionism is racism” (without explanation)
- “All Zionists are...”
- “Zionism = Nazism” (this will derail everything)

Why:

Zionism is plural. Treating it as singular allows critics to claim you are attacking Jewish identity itself.

4. IHRA Definition: How to Handle It Calmly

✓ **Say**

- “The IHRA definition explicitly allows criticism of Israel.”
- “IHRA is **non-binding guidance**, not law.”
- “Misusing IHRA undermines the fight against real antisemitism.”
- “We oppose antisemitism and all racism consistently.”

✗ **Avoid**

- “IHRA is just censorship” (too dismissive)

- “IHRA is antisemitic” (counterproductive)

Why:

You don’t need to reject IHRA outright—only its **misuse**.

5. Genocide Language: Use Carefully, Not Hesitantly

✓ Say

- “Genocide is a **legal term**, not a comparison.”
- “Multiple genocides exist; the Holocaust remains unique.”
- “Naming genocide does not diminish Jewish suffering.”

✗ Avoid

- “This is worse than the Holocaust.”
- “They’re doing to Palestinians what Nazis did to Jews.”

Why:

Comparisons trigger trauma and defensive shutdown. Legal naming does not.

6. Protest Chants and Slogans

✓ Better choices

- “End the occupation”
- “Ceasefire now”
- “Freedom, justice, equality”
- “Palestinian lives matter”
- “Stop arming Israel”

⚠ High-risk language (use only with explanation)

- “Intifada”
- “From the river to the sea” (must be clearly framed as equal rights)

✗ Avoid

- “Death to the IDF”
- Chants near synagogues or Jewish schools

Why:

Intent does not control interpretation—especially in a climate of fear.

7. When Accused of Antisemitism: How to Respond

✓ Calm response template

“I oppose antisemitism completely.

I am criticising state policy and actions, not Jewish people.

Palestinian human rights and Jewish safety are not in conflict.”

✗ Don't

- Get defensive
- Argue about intent
- Say “that’s ridiculous” (even if it is)

Why:

The goal is to **keep the focus on Palestinian rights**, not to win a side argument.

8. Acknowledge Jewish Fear Without Ceding the Argument

✓ Say

- “Jewish fear is historically grounded and real.”
- “Fear does not justify collective punishment.”
- “Safety for Jews cannot be built on the destruction of Palestinians.”

✗ Avoid

- “They’re just paranoid”
- “They’re using the Holocaust card”

Why:

Dismissal hardens opposition. Acknowledgement disarms it.

9. What Not to Say — Even If You Believe It

Avoid:

- Conspiracy language (media control, secret influence)
- Collective blame
- Historical analogies to Nazis
- Dismissing antisemitism as “just a tactic”

These **will be used against the entire movement**, not just you.

10. A Strong Closing Frame (Use This Often)

“We reject antisemitism absolutely.

We reject Islamophobia absolutely.

We reject the killing and dispossession of Palestinians absolutely.

Justice requires equality, accountability, and international law—for everyone.”