

Description

Antisemitism and Inclusion: Towards Jewish Cultural Safety

Laura Godfrey-Isaacs (she/her) – Midwife, artist, writer and co-founder, Shifrah UK

@godfrey_isaacs

Jessica Falk Perlman (she/her) – Midwife and co-founder, Shifrah UK

@jessfalkperl

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Summary

This article calls on individuals and organisations to recognise the impact of antisemitism on Jewish families and maternity staff, and work towards their inclusion in cultural safety work. It provides an introduction to common antisemitic tropes and invites the reader to reflect on their own attitudes to Jewish people and consider what they can do to provide culturally safe care for Jewish women, birthing people and families.



The world's oldest hatred

The last fourteen months have seen surging hate and discrimination against Jewish individuals and institutions, with antisemitic incidents in the UK reaching a record high in the immediate aftermath of the October 7, 2023 terror attacks on Israeli civilians.[1] The ensuing war and intolerable loss of life – of both Palestinians and Israelis – unleashed division and rupture in our communities, including the birth world.

Antisemitism, often referred to as the world's oldest hatred, is far from a modern phenomenon. The Jewish people – a tiny ethno-religious group comprising just 0.2% of the global population[2] – have long been discriminated against for their difference, demonised and persecuted for millennia. The late Rabbi Lord Sacks referred to antisemitism as being like a virus that mutates.[3] Other scholars argue that antisemitism should be conceptualised less as an external force such as a virus, but a set of myths embedded within societies, vestiges of mediaeval intolerance and violence, recycled over the centuries.[4]

The last fourteen months have seen antisemitic discourse entering the mainstream once again. Modern-day accusations often – although not always – substitute the term 'Jew' for 'Zionist', however the themes remain the same:

- Blood libel refers to the myth that Jews murder and mutilate children and consume their blood or use it in rituals. This millennia-old lie has led to countless pogroms (antisemitic riots) in Europe and the Middle East, involving murder, sexual violence and the destruction and looting of property.[5] This motif is evident today in the myth that Jews/Israelis deliberately harm children, relishing in innocent bloodshed.[4]
- Jewish power and wealth is a pernicious canard that grew from the role of some Jews as money-lenders in the Middle Ages. It reached its apogee in 'The Protocols of the Elders of Zion,' a propaganda piece which presented a bogus Jewish plot for world domination. Today conspiracy theories imply Jews/Israelis control global politics, media and financial institutions.[5]
- Dual loyalty refers to the myth that Jewish people are more loyal to their fellow Jews (and now to the State of Israel) than to their non-Jewish neighbours and governments.[5] Thus they cannot be trusted and must be defended against. This insidious trope leads to the violent marginalisation of Jewish voices, placing Jews in the impossible position of never being believed.

Reflective point 1

What did you learn about Jewish people growing up? Do you recognise any of these myths about Jews?

Antisemitism, health and health outcomes

Routine data collection on health outcomes for Jewish communities in the UK – beyond crude measures such as life expectancy – has been lacking. In 2020 the COVID-19 pandemic threw health inequalities for Jews into focus. Jewish people were more likely to die from coronavirus than their Christian counterparts.[6] Now, the NHS Race and Health Observatory is investigating health inequalities in Jewish communities for the first time. Their review will look at increased breast cancer rates and lower immunisation uptake among other health indicators, as well as the impact of communications on cultural competency and antisemitism.[7]

As with other forms of racism and discrimination, antisemitism can permeate every corner of society including healthcare services. A survey of Jewish healthcare professionals found that 73% had experienced at least one instance of antisemitism since October 2023,[8] the majority of which came from fellow staff. Unconscious bias and incivility in healthcare are not only distressing for staff and clients, but associated with worse care.[9,10]

> "As with other forms of racism and discrimination, antisemitism can permeate every corner of society including healthcare services."

Towards cultural safety for Jewish women, families and birth professionals

Cultural safety and anti-racist work in maternity are essential. Work by birth professionals and activists from Five X More,[11] Birthrights[12] and Muslim Women's Network[13] have created life- saving discussions and real-world changes for

families and staff. While antisemitism surges, it is essential that Jewish people are included in efforts to create maternity services that are culturally safe, in recognition of their status as both a protected religious and ethnic group, per the Equality Act 2010. It is also critical to remember that Jews hold broad and intersecting identities, with many nationalities, languages, levels of religious observance, sexual orientations, gender identities and political views represented within the family of the Jewish people.

We advocate for beginning with education. Practically, this will involve efforts to understand who the Jewish people are and to learn about cultural practices, alongside bolstering knowledge of antisemitism and how it manifests. Maternity units can adopt the International Holocaust Remembrance Alliance definition of antisemitism,[14] and seek training from the Community Security Trust or other Jewish civil society organisations. In addition, the Nursing and Midwifery Council should make it clear to registered professionals that engaging in antisemitic speech or actions constitutes a violation of The Code.[15] **TPM**

Reflective point 2

Think back to when you have cared for a family from a heritage you do not share. How did you take steps to educate yourself to best meet their needs? If you looked after a Jewish woman or family during childbirth, where would you look for this information?

Further reading

- Everyday Hate: How Antisemitism is Built into our World and How You Can Change It[4]
- Antisemitism Uncovered: A Guide to Old Myths in a New Era[5]
- Exploring Jewish Birth and Culturally Sensitive Care[16]
- Bearing Witness: Tracing Jewish Midwifery Practices – From Torah and Talmud to Today[17]

We recently launched Shifrah UK, named after Shifrah and Puah, the courageous Hebrew midwives mentioned in the Bible. This initiative represents the coming together of a broad range of Jewish birth workers to help educate and inform those working in maternity services, as well as to support Jewish birth workers and families. shifrah.org.uk

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