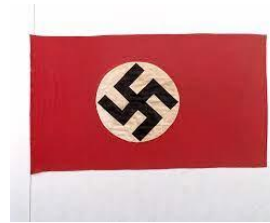




## It's Never Okay

### A Lesson Plan

#### Addressing Symbols that are Linked to Hatred and Discrimination By Kenra Mroz\* for the Centre for Holocaust Education and Scholarship (CHES)



#### Rationale:

Unfortunately – and far too often – words, images and gestures which are connected to hatred and discrimination are not taken seriously . . . or are not addressed at all. This is problematic for a number of reasons. Besides the fact that such symbols are inappropriate and hurtful, they also serve as “triggers” which can provoke lasting trauma. When incidents involving these damaging symbols are not addressed, then hatred and discrimination are allowed to persist. In some cases, there is a clear intent to cause harm and, in others, the harm is caused through ignorance. Either way, fear, anxiety and unhappiness are the resulting effects upon the people who are, effectively, the unwilling “targets” of hatred – and those who might not be specifically targeted often feel offended on behalf of those who are. Equally concerning is the fact that, in witnessing these incidents (where the problem is not addressed), some people will learn and absorb the wrong lesson: that it must be “okay” to do these things. In this way, the cycle of hatred and discrimination, and its resulting negative effects, are perpetuated.

Canada, along with the rest of the world, is facing the growth of extremist hate groups, antisemitism, and racism, combined with misinformation and false news on social media. This development has had an increasingly significant and negative impact on our youth. Nazi symbols are often used by young people today in the school and outside the school without comprehending what they represent. Nazi symbols are often misappropriated out of lack knowledge or information. This lesson is meant to help students understand the meaning behind the Nazi symbols used today

As educators, we have the responsibility of ensuring that young people are learning the correct lessons regarding incidents of hatred and discrimination – one of which is the fact that it is *never*

“okay” to perpetuate prejudice and intolerance; nor is it “okay” to ignore words, behaviour, and actions that cause harm to others. The lesson plan that follows is specific to promoting awareness, education and action regarding combatting antisemitism; however, these exercises and activities can be applied towards combatting any form of discrimination.

### **Pre-Lesson Activity:**

Ask your students to come up with some examples of things that they find offensive and / or hurtful. Their examples can cover a wide range of topics, as long as they are reflective of things that the students would find to be upsetting. You may wish to emphasize that the students should focus upon words, images and actions.

This is something that the students can be asked to do in advance of the next day’s class, so that they shall have time in which to think about possible examples to select. It is also something that can be done in class prior to beginning the lesson, as long as the teacher provides time in which the students can consider and reflect upon the question and record their thoughts.

The three-step lesson plan that follows can take anywhere from two days to a full week, depending upon the direction that the educator wishes to take. There are many opportunities for further exploration and discussion regarding each of the lesson components.

### **Pre-Lesson Discussion:**

Take some time, prior to the activities that are specific to antisemitism, to invite your students to share their examples and explain why they are hurtful. Students should be encouraged to comment and build upon one another’s observations. It is important for the educator to emphasize the fact that, just because something that is shared might not strike every student as being offensive / hurtful, everybody must work to listen to and understand each perspective that is being voiced. It is also necessary to take some time (should this become part of the discussion) to examine and discuss why we might not always recognize things that are offensive towards others, and why it is important to develop a stronger awareness and understanding in regard to this.

If students are NOT comfortable sharing their examples and thoughts as part of a discussion, then they should have the option of submitting their work to the teacher privately. The teacher can then share these examples, without identifying the student who provided them, so that the class can learn from these anonymous examples, as well.

### **Lesson Introduction:**

Following the discussion of the examples that have been provided by the students, the teacher shall explain that the class is now going to take a look at some examples that are specific to the issue of antisemitism. In taking some time to think about, reflect upon and discuss these specific examples, and how they promote hatred and discrimination, the students shall have an opportunity to make

connections to their own examples (some of which may connect directly to the issue of antisemitism).

Symbolism – In order to better take part in, and understand, the lessons that follow, a working knowledge of symbolism – and the function of a symbol – is important. Ask the students to look up the definition of “symbolism” and take some time in which to discuss what it means for something to have “representational value.” The teacher may also wish to lead the students in an exercise where they discuss “universal” vs “personal” symbols (universal symbols being ones with which most people would associate a common meaning and personal symbols being ones which are more specific to a particular person in terms of their meaning) and come up with some examples to illustrate them.

At this point, the teacher can ask the students to provide some examples (based upon what they know – or think that they know) of words, images and gestures that are considered to be symbols of antisemitism.

*\*Prior to the lesson, educators should take some time to find images depicting Nazi swastikas, yellow Stars of David and the “Heil Hitler” salute. These images shall be used during the following three-part lesson plan.*

### **Part One: The Nazi Swastika**

Begin by sharing one (or more) visuals depicting the Nazi swastika. Allow the students time in which to study and process the image.

Ask the students what they know (or think that they know) about the Nazi swastika. Once the students have shared their thoughts, the teacher shall provide additional information.

It is important to note that the swastika is an ancient religious icon in various Eurasian cultures. The word, itself, is derived from Sanskrit and means: “conducive to well-being.” Both the left and right-facing forms were (and continue to be) used in spiritual practices as a means of ensuring good fortune and prosperity. When Hitler came into power, he and his Nazi Party appropriated a right-facing swastika to use as an emblem to represent the Aryan race. The swastika was used as a distinguishing symbol of the Nazi Party during the time of Hitler’s chancellorship – and it continues, in this present day, to be associated with the “ideals” which the Nazi Party promoted (including antisemitism and white supremacy).

At this point, the teacher may wish to consider leading a discussion regarding cultural appropriation (i.e. – taking something that is strongly connected to a certain community’s cultural identity and practice and misrepresenting / misusing it).

Depending upon whether or not the class has learned about the Holocaust prior to this lesson, the teacher can also take some time in which to educate the students regarding what the Holocaust was (and is), and how the Jewish community was the main target of Hitler and the Nazi regime.

CHES's website provides several testimonials from Holocaust Survivors that are excellent resources.

Yad Vashem's website ([www.yadvashem.org](http://www.yadvashem.org)) is also an excellent resource regarding the History and Legacy of the Holocaust.

Students can be invited to write down some observations and thoughts regarding why the displaying of the Nazi swastika continues to cause harm to members of the Jewish community, as well as to other communities who were not considered to be part of the "Aryan race." A discussion should follow so as to enable the students and teacher to build upon these points, as well as upon the fact that antisemitic behaviour (including the displaying of Nazi swastikas) continues to occur today.

The class can take some time in which to come up with current-day examples of the display of the Nazi swastika (i.e. – the recent "trucker convoy" protests in Ottawa).

## **Part Two: The Yellow Star of David**

Begin by sharing one (or more) visuals depicting the yellow Star of David. Allow the students time in which to study and process the image.

Ask the students what they know (or think that they know) about the yellow Star of David. Once the students have shared their thoughts, the teacher shall provide additional information.

It is important for the teacher to emphasize the fact (if it has not already been mentioned by the students and developed by the teacher) that the Star of David, in and of itself, is NOT an offensive symbol. It is something that represents the Jewish faith, and many members of the Jewish community choose to wear a Star of David as a means of displaying pride in their Jewish identity.

Once again, a working knowledge of Holocaust history and legacy is going to be very important with respect to examining and exploring the reasons as to why displaying a yellow Star of David is something that can cause both anxiety and harm.

Students can be invited to write down some thoughts as to what it means to be considered "other." The yellow Star of David was used as a means by which to distinguish members of the Jewish community and separate them from "mainstream society." It represented a loss of basic human rights and was meant to shame and demean people with a Jewish identity. Once again, students should have the option of voicing their thoughts, or of sharing them privately with the teacher (to be shared anonymously for the purposes of class discussion).

Another exercise that can provide an opportunity to reflect and share is to ask students to think of a time wherein THEY felt excluded from something – and to note how they felt and why. Survivor testimony can help to further the point regarding the fact that "historical" dictates which promoted hatred and discrimination – through encouraging people to think of other human beings as "less

than” and “other” – continue to have an impact today, as their symbolic connections have not been forgotten.

Current-Day Connections – Students can be invited to think about, and discuss, current examples of the yellow Star of David being used as a means by which to discriminate, segregate and cause fear. They can also take some time in which to think about current-day examples of communities or individuals who are regarded and treated as being “less than” or “other.”

### **Part Three: The “Heil Hitler” Salute**

Begin by sharing one (or more) visuals depicting the “Heil Hitler” salute. Allow the students time in which to study and process the image.

Ask the students what they know (or think that they know) about the “Heil Hitler” salute. Once the students have shared their thoughts, the teacher shall provide additional information.

By this point, the students shall have had time in which to learn about the history and legacy of the Holocaust, as well as to have thought about and discussed the harm that is caused by symbols like the Nazi swastika and the yellow Star of David.

Thought Reflection Exercise – Provide some time (this can be done in class or assigned for homework to complete for the next class) for students to respond to the following two prompts:

*Why is it NOT appropriate for the “Heil Hitler” salute to be treated as a joke?*

*Why is it NEVER OKAY to display images like the ones that we have studied in these lessons?*

There are a few options regarding how to approach the sharing of this information (so that it can be discussed with the class).

- a) The teacher can request that the students hand in their responses so that the teacher can read them first and then create a list of observations to address and discuss.
- b) The teacher can “open the floor” once the responses have been completed (either that same day or the following day) for students to volunteer to share their responses for consideration and discussion.
- c) The teacher can direct the students to do a ‘pair and share’ exercise wherein they choose a partner (or form a group of three) and share their responses with one another. After some time has been set aside for these smaller pair / group discussions, then the teacher can ask each group to share their thoughts, one at a time, with the rest of the class.

Once again, this discussion should serve as a means by which to highlight points that have already been addressed and explored regarding the Nazi swastika and the yellow Star of David. It is important for this series of lessons to conclude in a way that enables students to understand that

words, images and gestures have a serious impact and that it is “never okay” to downplay their potential to cause harm.

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