

# The Holocaust Needs a Beginning

What Our Students Are Not Being Taught

The 1,500-year history that made the Holocaust possible — and the civilization it nearly destroyed

**New York State requires students to learn how Jews were murdered.**

**It has never required them to learn how Jews lived. No state has. This is that petition.**

Recently, I traveled to Italy with my family. In Rome, I walked through the Jewish Ghetto — the one Pope Paul IV built in 1555. Then in Venice, in the *Geto Nuovo* (*Ghetto Nuovo*, in modern Italian), where Jews were first locked in at sunset in 1516, beginning a system of enforced Jewish ghettos in Europe that did not end for another 354 years. These ghettos were the direct institutional ancestors of every ghetto the Nazis revived. I picked up a high school Global History textbook. One page on Judaism. No homeland named. The chronology inverted. Christianity and Islam across multiple chapters. That question — why isn't any of this being taught? — became this petition. I am a parent to children in New York public schools.

## The Problem — Every Holocaust Curriculum Begins in 1933. The Story Doesn't.

New York State requires Holocaust education — but every existing curriculum begins in 1933, the year Hitler came to power. Students receive the last chapter of a 1,500-year story with none of the preceding ones.

What Every Student Should Know	What That Gap Is Producing
How Christianity originated within Judaism and why the separation produced 1,500 years of antisemitism. The Jewish ghetto is 500 years old — and describes a system the Nazis inherited, not invented.	1 in 5 Americans aged 18–39 believe the Holocaust is a myth or exaggeration (Claims Conference, 2020)
That Jews were first required to wear identifying badges by Church law in 1215 — not 1939. That the last European ghetto closed in 1870 — five years after American slavery ended. That the Dreyfus Affair proved legal equality had not ended antisemitism — and set in motion the events that brought most of American Jewry to the United States.	9,354 antisemitic incidents in the US in 2024 — the highest in 46 years of ADL tracking; more than 25 per day
That in 1938, thirty-two nations met to address the Jewish refugee crisis — and almost universally refused. Their refusal was a green light. This is the most important civic lesson the Holocaust offers. It is currently not taught anywhere.	83% of Jewish college students experienced antisemitism in 2024; 41% hid their Jewish identity (ADL / Hillel International)
That Judaism is absent from the curriculum between antiquity and the Holocaust — while Christianity and Islam are taught as civilizations that shaped the world. That Judaism shaped both of them.	2025 was the deadliest year for Jews globally in over 30 years: 20 killed in 4 attacks across 3 continents (Tel Aviv University, April 2026)

This failure does not begin in high school. The **widely adopted Grade 6 world history textbook** (McGraw Hill's New York Edition) covers Judaism in approximately eight pages under the heading 'The Israelites,' ending at the Babylonian exile — no Shabbat, no holidays, no living practice, nothing post-biblical. The high school textbook confirms the gap with one page that inverts the chronology and disappears until Auschwitz. A student who has gone through both has encountered Judaism twice: once as an ancient people, and once as victims.

When did you last hear a student describe what Shabbat is?

When did you last hear one explain why the Passover story resonated with enslaved African Americans?

**They can't answer. Because it was never taught.**

## The Ask — Not a New Subject. A Beginning to the One Already Being Taught.

Two to three additional class periods — 150 to 200 minutes — added before existing Holocaust instruction in every New York State high school. The content exists. The infrastructure exists. What is missing is the direction to include it. Those class periods would cover:

- **The theological roots:** how Christianity originated within Judaism, why the separation produced hostility, what Pope Paul IV's 1555 Roman Ghetto decree was designed to do, and Jules Isaac — the Holocaust survivor who persuaded the Pope to change Church doctrine in 1965
- **The pre-Holocaust persecution timeline (586 BCE–1945):** the Babylonian destruction of the First Temple and the diaspora it began; Rome's destruction of the Second Temple in 70 CE; the deicide charge and 1215 badge mandate; Crusade massacres; Black Death pogroms; the Spanish Expulsion (1492); the Russian pogroms (1881–1921) and the origin of American Jewry; the Dreyfus Affair and its consequences for modern Jewish history; American antisemitism — the 1915 Leo Frank lynching and the modern KKK, university quotas, the 1939 Madison Square Garden Bund rally, and how exclusion concentrated Jewish immigrants into Hollywood and other open industries
- **The Jewish ghetto system 1516–1870:** the yellow badge, locked gates, forbidden professions, the direct parallel to Nazi policy — and the fact that the last European ghetto closed just five years after American slavery ended
- **The Evian Conference (1938):** thirty-two nations, one chance to act, and the door that closed — the most important civic lesson the Holocaust offers, and currently not taught anywhere
- **Judaism as a living civilization** — the Temple, Jerusalem, the Western Wall, core beliefs including teshuvah and tikkun olam, Shabbat, the High Holidays, the Passover Seder, the Talmudic method of argument, and the extraordinary diversity and survival of the Jewish people across 3,500 years — taught at the same depth as Christianity and Islam
- **What this civilization built:** Maimonides and the Golden Age of Spain, the rescuers (Wallenberg, Winton, Denmark, Albania), the Nobel Prize data: 0.2% of the world's population, 22% of all Nobel Prize recipients — so students learn Judaism as a living civilization, not only as a historical victim

## The Larger Argument — One Major Religion Is Missing from the Curriculum

Consider what this curriculum would look like applied to Christianity. Christianity appears throughout the NYS curriculum — the Crusades, the Reformation, European colonialism, the shaping of Western civilization across a thousand years. Judaism is named once in the same standard and then disappears entirely until the Holocaust. The Reformation challenged the Catholic Church and reshaped the Western world — students learn this. The Jewish communities those same Reformation-era societies were simultaneously expelling, confining to ghettos, and forcing to wear identifying badges — students learn none of this. The same centuries. The same geography. One civilization treated as the agent of history. The other treated as its footnote.

Two to three periods is the floor, not the ceiling. Students can describe the Five Pillars of Islam. They should be able to describe Shabbat, Yom Kippur, and the Passover Seder — and why that story of liberation from slavery has resonated with every oppressed people that has ever encountered it.

Judaism is the only civilization taught in American schools as a set of historical endpoints rather than a living tradition. Jewish history deserves the same full textbook treatment as Greece, Rome, the Islamic world, and China. This petition asks for the beginning of that conversation.

## Why This Is for Every Student — How Bystanders Choose

How states use law to isolate a minority, how institutions enable persecution, how rights are granted and revoked, how bystanders choose — these are lessons about democracy, power, and civic responsibility that every student needs. This is not minority history. It is world history. And it is the missing foundation of a story every student is already being taught.

The Evian Conference alone — thirty-two nations met in 1938, one chance to act on the Jewish refugee crisis, almost universal refusal — is the most important civic lesson the Holocaust offers about what democracies do when they look away. It is currently taught nowhere.

## The Full Document — The Complete Case, Fully Sourced

The attached comprehensive petition (11 sections, fully sourced) includes:

- The complete theological history: how Christianity began within Judaism, the deicide charge, the Counter-Reformation ghetto decree, and Jules Isaac’s journey from Auschwitz survivor to the man who changed Church doctrine in 1965
- The full pre-Holocaust persecution timeline (586 BCE–1945): pre-ghetto persecutions, the ghetto system in detail, the Russian pogroms, the Dreyfus Affair, the Evian Conference, and the American chapter — each with its specific meaning for students today
- A full section on what Judaism is as a living civilization: the Temple, Jerusalem, and the Western Wall — and why students cannot understand current events without this history; core beliefs, Shabbat, the High Holidays, the Passover Seder, the Talmudic method of argument, the diversity of the Jewish people, and the extraordinary survival of this civilization across 3,500 years
- What this civilization built: Maimonides and the Golden Age of Spain, the Talmudic academies, the rescuers (Wallenberg, Winton, Denmark, Albania), the Nobel Prize data, and the disproportionate Jewish contribution to science, medicine, law, literature, and thought
- Grade-level integration recommendations from middle school through AP courses, aligned to existing NYS standards; direct responses to the ‘no time’ and ‘why Jewish history’ objections; case for a full textbook chapter; complete institutional, academic, and legislative sourcing

Note: A companion document is available upon request — “The Holocaust Needs a Continuation” — covering the post-1945 period: how Nazi influence spread antisemitism across the Arab world in the 1930s and 1940s, the founding of Israel through three decades of international legal decisions, and the expulsion of nearly one million Jews from Arab countries where they had lived for thousands of years.

Every empire that tried to destroy the Jewish people is gone.  
Egypt is a museum. Greece is a museum. Rome is a museum.  
Judaism is a synagogue open this Friday night.

The civilization that survived all of it is the one our students know only as a set of victims.

Rome expelled the Jews in 70 CE. The Jewish ghetto is 500 years old.

The yellow badge has Church precedent going back to 1215.

The civilization that survived all of it — for three thousand five hundred years,  
through every empire that tried to destroy it — is the one our students know only as a set of victims.

I am asking as a partner — not for a new subject, but for the beginning of the one already being taught.

**Orit Yakuel**