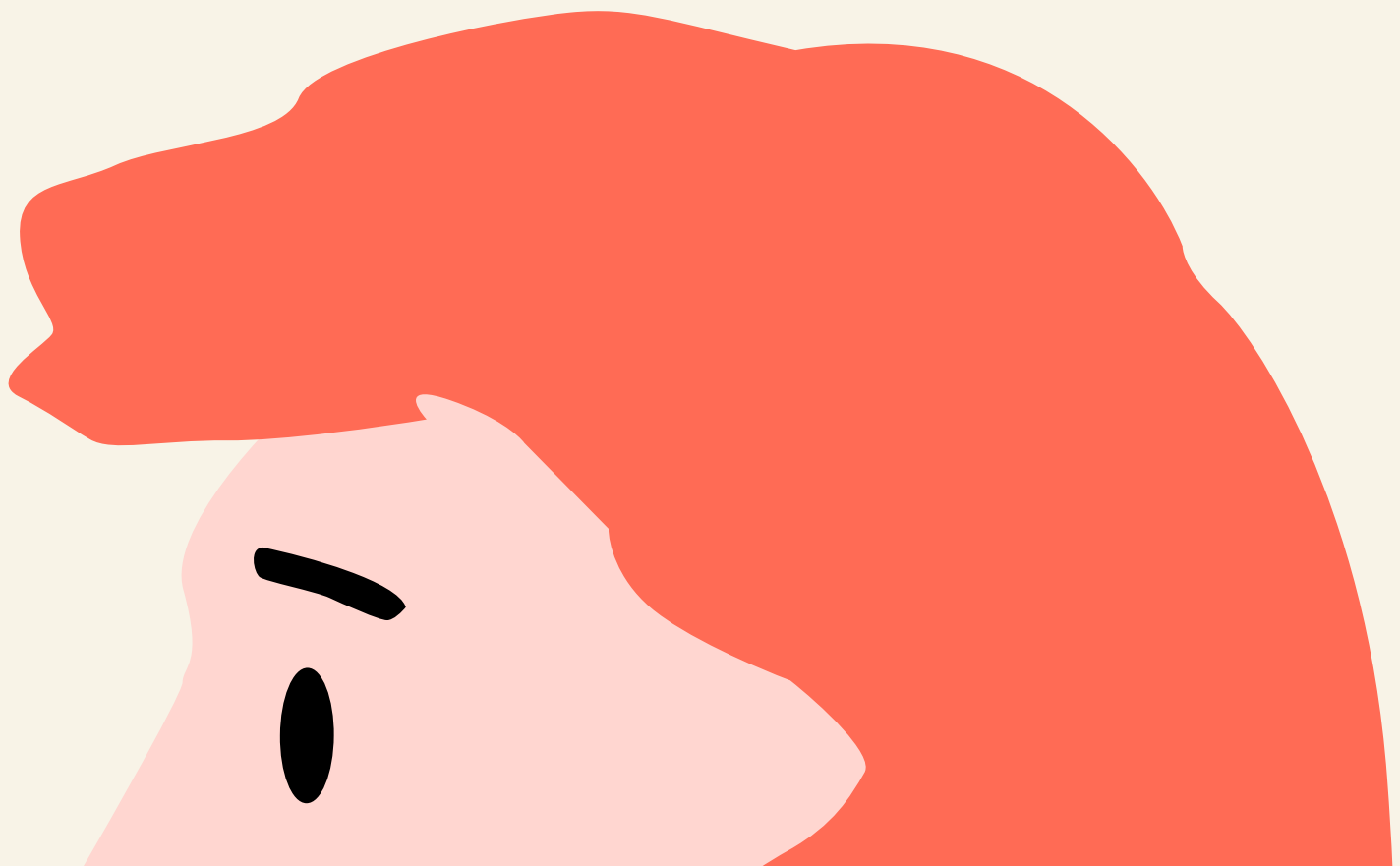


HE REALLY
DIDN'T
KNOW



HE REALLY DIDN'T KNOW

This fictionalized story explores how Jewish leaders should respond when a political candidate uses antisemitic language, as well as exploring the limits and benefits of apologies.

***Important note:** This story fictionalizes a real situation that may still be recognizable. We have deliberately changed one key detail to serve the discussion, not to influence readers' understanding of the actual events. This change is clearly identified and footnoted.*

“Are you telling us he genuinely didn’t know that a blood libel is antisemitic?”

“I really believe he didn’t know.”

To my left, Elaine snorted. I turned to her.

“Elaine, I know it sounds crazy to us, but people really are that ignorant. Not everyone studied antisemitism at Sunday school. You remember when I gave that sermon on a Pew Report a few years ago – how less than half of all Americans even know that 6 million were killed in the Holocaust. And now we’re expecting them to know about the medieval origins of a conspiracy theory?”

“Rabbi, that’s exactly the point. He isn’t just anyone. This is a candidate for the United States Senate. A leading politician. An up-and-coming politician. He should know better.”

There were nods around the room. I was feeling distinctly uncomfortable. Elaine was right. He really should have known better. The candidate is a really bright guy. Charismatic, great smile, and I could get behind pretty much all of his policies except his take on Israel. You know what, between us, I could even find some common ground with a lot of his critique of

HE REALLY DIDN'T KNOW

Netanyahu's government. But his language. Even my jaw dropped when I heard him on TV accuse Israel of being "thirsty for the blood of Palestinian children."***

For me that was when he crossed the line. I don't know how many books and theses have been written in the past three years about the difference between anti-Zionism and antisemitism, but I'm reckoning they'd all agree that the blood libel is a pretty good differentiator. I mean, it's one thing to accuse Israel of callousness, killing Palestinian children as collateral damage in a war against Hamas. Many politicians have done that. But it's another thing entirely to draw on European antisemitic tropes and vampire legends to impute satanic intentions to Jews.

To be honest, what astonished me most was the candidate's own astonishment.

I'd called his office and asked for a private meeting. I'm a long-time donor to the Party, and I'm the senior rabbi of a very large congregation – the candidate agreed to meet with me. He had limited time, so I got right down to it. I explained to him the history of the blood libel in Jewish history. I tell you his jaw dropped. I saw it with my own eyes. He had had absolutely no idea. I saw the realization begin to dawn on him, that he – Mr. DEI himself – had happily spouted an ancient racist slur on live TV.

"Elaine, you are absolutely right. He should know better. He should know more. But right now, he doesn't. So shouldn't we try to educate him?"

"Call him in, instead of calling him out?" asked Jeff sardonically, echoing the progressive language. "I don't buy it. If he was so ignorant of the origin and meaning of "blood libel", why doesn't he use that phrase all the time? When Iran started massacring its citizens, did he talk of children's blood? Is that his go-to accusation for China? Sudan? Or is it only for the Jewish state? Come on, rabbi. When it walks like a duck and talks like a duck, it's an antisemite."

HE REALLY DIDN'T KNOW

“I get what you’re saying, Jeff. I do. But sometimes antisemitism is so ingrained in a culture that it’s only through knowledge that you avoid it. Jew-hatred is such a well-worn path in the forest that it’s the default route to take without even choosing it. I think we progressive Jews are in the very best position to lead him on a process.”

I swallowed.

I’d only just got back from the meeting with the candidate, and my committee was in my office waiting for my report. I wish I’d had a little bit more time to put my thoughts together. I bit the bullet.

“I told him that he ought to apologize publicly and explicitly for using an antisemitic trope. And I told him that if he does so, I would invite him to join the other candidate for services next Shabbat and let them both hold a town hall meeting after kiddush.”

Everyone knew that it was my prerogative to offer the invitation and set the conditions for it: The committee had given me that authority. But that didn’t mean they were going to like it.

Elaine’s disgusted response set the tone:

“A Jew-hater gets to perform an “apology” and for that we boost his election campaign?”

**** Truth and fiction ****

On August 5th, 2026 then-Senate candidate Abdul El-Sayed was on Morning Joe. He did not accuse Israel of any thirst for the blood of children. His exact words were “I understand that Netanyahu is a big reason why they’ve gotten so aggressive and, frankly, so bloodthirsty under his reign...”

OPENING QUESTION

- Was the rabbi right to invite the candidate to the congregation once he apologized for the antisemitic trope?

SECONDARY QUESTIONS

- Are there any apologies that must never be accepted?
- Should a synagogue remain neutral in the matter of American elections?
- If an apology is explicit and public, does it matter if it is not genuinely felt?
- If the candidate in the story had not mentioned children at all, and had only suggested that Israel was “bloodthirsty,” to what extent would that alter your opinion?
- To what extent does this story map on to the reality as you see it in Michigan, and your opinion? Is there anything you would want to add to the discussion that does not arise in the story?

BACKGROUND + PEDAGOGICAL MUSINGS

For the Sake of Argument was approached by Rabbi Josh Whinston of Temple Beth Emeth in Michigan to co-write an argument-story based on a real situation that arose during the state's 2026 Senate race, and which resonates far beyond Michigan.

Working with Rabbi Whinston and a community steering committee, we developed a fictionalized version of events surrounding Senate candidate Abdul El-Sayed, who had described Israel's conduct under Netanyahu as "bloodthirsty." The decision to fictionalize the story, and particularly to alter the candidate's language to refer to the blood of children, proved more consequential than we anticipated.

Our argument-stories aim to focus discussion on a limited number of essential questions. Real events, however, rarely lend themselves to such neat distinctions. In the real Michigan situation, we identified three interconnected questions.

The first concerns the blurred line between criticism of Israel and antisemitism. El-Sayed had not used a traditional blood libel, but his characterization of Israeli conduct as "bloodthirsty" raised an important question: Was this an expression of outrage at Israeli actions, however harshly worded, or did it draw on an antisemitic tradition of portraying Jews as uniquely evil? More broadly, **when does particularly harsh criticism of Israel become antisemitic?**

A second question concerns forgiveness and the possibility of repair. If a politician uses antisemitic language, deliberately or unconsciously, can they make amends? Can the damage caused by such language be undone?

The third concerns the responsibilities of Jewish leadership. Regardless of whether the criticism itself is antisemitic, **should a Jewish leader extend an olive branch to someone whose rhetoric about Israel has caused deep offense or alarm within the community?**

Each of these questions deserves serious consideration. But addressing all three simultaneously risks the discussion shooting off in several directions. Some participants might argue about whether El-Sayed's actual words were antisemitic. Others might question whether hostility to Israel is inherently antisemitic, regardless of the language used. Still others could focus on forgiveness, slander, repair, and the possibility of engagement. All rich conversations, but put all together into a short encounter, and neither one gets explored to satisfaction.

We therefore made a deliberate pedagogical choice. By replacing El-Sayed's actual words with an invented, more explicit antisemitic trope, we hoped to remove the first question from the discussion and concentrate on the other two. Rather than debate whether the candidate's words were antisemitic, participants could explore how a Jewish leader should respond once that premise was established beyond doubt.

We were thinking about pedagogy. We were not thinking enough about politics.

Despite our intention to distinguish the fictional candidate from El-Sayed, the story remained recognizably based on his candidacy. As a result, some participants in the first workshop about this story understood the invented quotation as an attempt to attribute more explicitly antisemitic language to El-Sayed himself. What we intended as a fictional device was perceived as political misrepresentation, even fake news!

This was far from our intention. We had assumed that fictionalization would allow participants to move beyond the particulars of a real controversy. Instead, the alteration of those particulars became a controversy in its own right.

The experience leaves us reflecting on two broader questions.

The first concerns the American Jewish community's relationship with increasingly fierce criticism of Israel. How much criticism of Israel can or should American Jews accept? When does such criticism become a threat to Jewish safety? And when might a (perhaps justified) perception of antisemitism prevent Jews from engaging with legitimate criticism of Israeli actions?

The second concerns our own pedagogy. **What are the strengths and limitations of fictionalized argument-stories compared with factual case studies?**

The particular complexities of El-Sayed's, Mamdani's, or any politician's relationship with Israel may be secondary to the larger questions about criticism, antisemitism, forgiveness, and engagement that their stories raise. There is real educational value in setting aside the specifics of a case to explore the underlying values.

Yet those specifics matter profoundly to the people involved. A change that appears pedagogically useful to an educator may appear politically manipulative to a participant. The same fictional device that opens a path toward deeper discussion can undermine the trust required for that discussion to happen.

We are left with a tension at the heart of our work: How can we distill real-life controversies enough to explore their essential questions, without distorting the very realities that give those questions their urgency?