

NORWAY: KNOW THY NEIGHBOR

The Jewish Pathfinders project is a remarkable intervention by the Jewish Community of Oslo, designed to familiarize young Norwegians with Jews and thereby reduce the potential for antisemitism in tomorrow's society. The project is worthy of attention because of its apparent success and its potential role as a model for similar interventions in other countries and contexts.

Norway's Jewish community numbers just 1,500 people (0.03% of the population), about half of whom are registered members of the two Jewish communities, one in Oslo and one in Trondheim. Few Norwegians have met a Jew, and even fewer know any Jews personally. The Pathfinders project came about as a publicly funded Jewish initiative to show young people what it is like to be a young Jew in Norway, using the power of personal encounters to spread knowledge about Jews and Judaism and thereby prevent antisemitic prejudice.

Norway is a low scorer in international surveys measuring antisemitic attitudes. Nevertheless, recent decades have witnessed an increased sense of threat among Jews, especially during periods of escalation in the Israeli-Palestinian conflict. Early signs of a changing climate came in 2002, with reports emerging of Norwegian Jews receiving death threats and accusations such as "child-murderers." A Jewish spokesperson told reporters at the time that Jews in Norway "stick to themselves, they dare not wear a kippa on their head, they see that their children are bullied at school and kept out of friendship groups."¹

In 2006, an Islamist armed with an automatic rifle fired several rounds at the synagogue in Oslo. In 2009, during the Gaza War, an anti-Israel protest turned into scenes of antisemitic violence.² In 2011, an investigation found that 60% of pupils in Oslo schools said they sometimes used "Jew" as an insult and that a third of Jewish pupils experienced antisemitic incidents on a weekly basis.³ Following the October 7, massacre of Israeli citizens by Hamas, the Jewish Community of Oslo issued a rare statement warning of a rise in threatening incidents targeting Jews and Jewish families."⁴

The specter of antisemitism encouraged the establishment of the Jewish Pathfinders project in 2015. Its purpose was, and remains, to familiarize young people with Jews and Judaism through personal meetings and classroom dialogue. The Norwegian government supported the project from the start. In 2016, the government launched its first four-year "Action Plan against Antisemitism," a multi-pronged program later renewed for 2021-2024. The project continues to receive public funding through the Action Plan under the new center-left government.

¹ Kjell T. Barøy, "Norske jøder har fått drapstrusler," *NTB*, April 1, 2002, <https://www.aftenbladet.no/utenriks/i/z6yXw/norske-joeder-har-faatt-drapstrusler>.

² Eirik Eigladd, *The Anti-Jewish Riots in Oslo* (Porsgrunn, Norway: Communalism Press, 2010).

³ Anette Holth Hansen, "Ett av tre jødiske barn hetset på skolen," *NRK.no*, June 7, 2011, <https://www.nrk.no/osloogviken/en-av-tre-hetses-pa-skolen-1.7664103>.

⁴ Det Mosaiske Trossamfund, "Bekymringsmelding – et varsko for det norske demokratiet," ND, <https://www.dmt.oslo.no/bekymringsmelding/>.

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Now in its ninth consecutive year, the project each year sends two young Norwegian Jews out on a nationwide tour to visit school classes, mainly at the upper secondary level. In the course of 2022, a total of 224 classes were visited.⁵

The visits take place upon invitation from the schools and typically take the shape of a 90-minute session in which the Pathfinders talk about what it is like to be a young Jew in Norway. The presentations are designed to bring about a dialogue in the classroom, in which students are encouraged to discuss and reflect on universal topics such as belonging, prejudice, identity, and diversity.

The Pathfinders themselves are recruited from the small cohorts of Jewish youths. Becoming a Pathfinder is no small matter and significant resources are devoted to their training. Candidates must complete a one-year educational program designed to provide a foundation of knowledge and a set of skills necessary to fill the Pathfinder role.

The educational program, called Shvilim (Paths), is organized by the Jewish community in partnership with academic institutions and NGOs in Norway, Israel, and the United States. For the 2023-2024 program, contributing institutions include the Theological Faculty at the University of Oslo, the Upper Galilee Leadership Institute, and the Anti-Defamation League. The program gives prospective Pathfinders an opportunity to gain knowledge about Jewish history, religion, and culture. It educates on how to lead and conduct democratic dialogue. They are also encouraged to explore their own Jewish identity. As such, the program has a broader purpose to “educate knowledgeable Jewish youths motivated to vitalize Jewish life in Norway, both internally and as part of the open, multicultural society.”⁶

One of the initial Pathfinders, who has been closely associated with the project subsequently and, as other interviewees, asked not to be named for reasons of privacy, described the typical in-class presentation. He called it “very dynamic,” with the content of the talks and discussions changing with each visit based on the questions arising from the class and the experiences accumulated by the Pathfinders.

Some things remain at the heart of the presentations: normalizing and “taking back” the word “Jew,” putting an ordinary face on the concept of a Jew in the minds of young Norwegians, and explaining some basic ideas students typically wonder about, such as circumcision, the idea of being a “Chosen People,” the challenge of antisemitism, and Jewish life in Norway in general.⁷

“I didn’t know that it [antisemitism] was so widespread, but now I am aware, and I wish to contribute to preventing such hatred.”

– A student’s reaction to a Jewish Pathfinder visit⁸

⁵ Det Mosaiske Trossamfund, “Informasjonstiltak mot antisemittisme: Sluttrapport 2022,” p. 14.

⁶ Det Mosaiske Trossamfund, “Informasjonstiltak mot antisemittisme: Sluttrapport 2020,” p. 27.

⁷ Interview with the author, October 31, 2023.

⁸ Det Mosaiske Trossamfund, “Informasjonstiltak mot antisemittisme: Sluttrapport 2021,” p. 13.

“We put a face on Norwegian Jews. A lot of people have never met a Jew before, and sometimes they can exclaim: ‘What, you are Jewish? But you don’t look Jewish, and you are completely ordinary!’”

– Nadine, a 2022 Pathfinder⁹

“A girl in this class had displayed quite strong antisemitic attitudes on social media. And it was, in fact, pretty nasty what she had written [...] When someone behaves like that, you assume that this person is acting out of some lack of awareness, or opinions picked up at home, or some image you have constructed in your head. And then, when we finished speaking, I had a chat with her, and she had [later] written to us and said she cried, asked for forgiveness and was completely in despair; she didn’t know how she could sort of make up for all she had said on social media. At that time, we had apparently made such an impression that she regretted everything she had said and was completely distraught.”

– A Jewish Pathfinder’s testimony¹⁰

“I have learned about what it’s like to be a Jew in Norway and a lot about the religion itself. I got to learn how you view yourself and others. We are all more alike than we think.”

– A student’s reaction to a Jewish Pathfinder visit¹¹

“I didn’t learn much about Judaism in school and so it was easy to generalize or fail to see the diversity among Jews. It was just fantastic to be able to ask about anything on our minds and I got a much more nuanced view of Judaism. It doesn’t feel as distant as it did previously.”

– A student’s reaction to a Jewish Pathfinder visit¹²

When the Pathfinders enter a classroom, a commonly heard first response is something like this: “Where are these Jews they said would come? I haven’t seen any.”

It follows that the most obvious impact of the Pathfinders project is that tens of thousands of young Norwegians have encountered a pair of real-life Jewish peers, something they would otherwise likely not experience. They have had the opportunity to engage in dialogue with the Pathfinders about not just the joys, sorrows and diversity of Jewishness, but also larger questions of belief, identity and prejudice in their own lives.

⁹ Frida Wattne Lindland, “Jeg er norsk og jødisk, og det går veldig fint an å være begge deler på en gang!,” *NRK P3*, November 1, 2022, <https://p3.no/jeg-er-norsk-og-jodisk-og-det-gar-veldig-fint-an-a-vaere-begge-deler-pa-en-gang/>.

¹⁰ Nina Gacic, “‘Jøss, er du jøden?’: En kvalitativ studie av interaksjonen med jødiske veivisere, stereotypiske forestillinger om jøder og norsk skolehverdag,” MA Thesis, Norwegian School of Theology, Religion and Society (2019), pp. 59-60.

¹¹ Det Mosaiske Trossamfund, “Informasjonstiltak mot antisemittisme: Sluttrapport 2020,” p. 12.

¹² Det Mosaiske Trossamfund, “Informasjonstiltak mot antisemittisme: Sluttrapport 2021,” p. 13.

The feedback from students and teachers is reported to be very positive. Judging from excerpts produced in the annual reports by the Jewish Community of Oslo, students tend to find the meetings engaging, thought-provoking, and enlightening, especially regarding the diversity of Judaism and the issue of how antisemitism affects young Jews.

The Pathfinders themselves also indicate that the encounters are positive and have a real impact on reducing prejudice. As one of them stressed, the vast majority of classroom interactions are experienced as positive and rewarding. Each in-class visit tends to be followed by half an hour of informal conversation outside the classroom, where some students approach the Pathfinders to continue discussions. The Pathfinders find these exchanges to be particularly fruitful.

One of the 2021 Pathfinders, Talia, found that the students would respond with all sorts of questions about religious ideas and practices, life as a Jewish youth and whether Jews can drink alcohol. She was once asked whether Jews could wear bikinis.¹³

There have also been negative incidents, and some serious ones, but they are few and far between and are typically handled responsibly by the school in question.¹⁴

The Israeli-Palestinian conflict is the single most difficult issue the Pathfinders face in their classroom interactions. It is, as one of the Pathfinders told me, “the question they dread the most.”¹⁵ One way they handle the issue is by always coming in pairs so that the Pathfinders can support each other in case of tension.

One of the Pathfinders explained how she decided to “take ownership of the whole issue” at the very outset by telling the class about her personal experiences of being confronted and held responsible, as a Norwegian Jew, for real or imagined actions taken by the State of Israel. She would purposefully “employ a lot of pathos” to hammer home this point, to have students understand the troubling and hurtful consequences of such experiences. At the same time, the Pathfinders note in their presentations that all Jews have some relationship with Israel – through family, religion, culture, or some combination, but that it is up to each individual Jew to define the nature of this relationship.¹⁶

While these approaches often prove effective, some Pathfinders have nevertheless decided not to disclose their personal relationship to Israel, e.g., having grown up there, simply because they feared the potential repercussions.¹⁷ And some of them chose not to discuss the topic in class at all, as they did not want to enter into a political discussion.¹⁸

It is no secret that antisemitic attitudes exist in some Muslim communities in Europe. Jakob, one of the 2022 Pathfinders, emphasized the importance of building bridges not only from

¹³ Birgitte Vågnes Bakken, “Dana (21) har blitt møtt med nazi-helsing og ‘jævla jøde,’” *Framtida*, May 25, 2022, <https://framtida.no/2022/05/25/unge-jodar-i-noreg>.

¹⁴ Interview with the author, October 31, 2023.

¹⁵ Ibid.

¹⁶ Ibid.

¹⁷ Ibid.

¹⁸ Bakken, “Dana (21) har blitt møtt med nazi-helsing og ‘jævla jøde.’”

minority to majority, but also between different minorities. In particular, he noted that the Israeli-Palestinian conflict often impacts Jewish-Muslim relations in Norway:

“A lot of people, also non-Muslims, have trouble distinguishing ‘Jew’ from ‘Israeli.’ When a part of the population is prejudiced towards Jews, the significance of dialogue is even greater, and we work particularly hard to enable a dialogue with Norwegian Muslims.”¹⁹

Jakob said that his most fruitful Pathfinder visits were in the parts of Oslo where there is a large share of immigrants from Muslim-majority countries:

“Here I feel that I have established the best rapport and had the best experiences. Often the students have had this impression that Jews and Israelis are bad people, and when they encounter a Norwegian Jew who instead chooses to focus on the similarities we have, bridges can really be built.”²⁰

This sentiment was echoed by Yuval, another Pathfinder who served in 2021: “We say that we are different, and the Muslims recognize themselves in this. Then we get a good dialogue, and we can learn something from them, too.”²¹

Another former Pathfinder I spoke to noted that conversations with first-generation immigrants, including Palestinian youths, were “very good.” Moreover, as Jews who believe in God, the Pathfinders would often feel they had more in common with faithful Muslim youths than with the majority of Norwegians because they shared a belief in God. This became an important common ground upon which understanding could be built.²²

In 2023, a report evaluating the government’s Action Plan against Antisemitism was published. The report found that the Pathfinders project was seen by most in the Jewish community as a high-quality and high-value measure. Though no survey figure is available, this assessment is based on an interviews-based study in which Jewish respondents all spoke positively of the program.

Respondents praised the program for providing a “perspective from within,” emphasizing that the fight against antisemitism should not be reduced to history and Holocaust education, but should also include familiarizing people with Jewish life and culture in Norway today.²³ As one of the 2022 Pathfinders put it, “half the job is already done when we enter the classroom,” because most students’ knowledge about Jews and Judaism is related to “contexts that take the extreme as a point of departure.”²⁴

¹⁹ Claudio Castello, “Jødisk veiviser vil motvirke fordommer,” *Utop*, February 16, 2022, <https://www.utrop.no/nyheter/ansikt-i-fokus/294513/>.

²⁰ Ibid.

²¹ “Får spørsmål om hvorfor de dreper barn i Gaza,” *Dagen*, August 1, 2021, <https://www.dagen.no/nyheter/far-sporsmal-om-hvorfor-de-dreper-barn-i-gaza/>.

²² Interview with the author, October 31, 2023.

²³ PROBA Samfunnsanalyse, *Evaluering av handlingsplaner mot antisemittisme, 2016-2023* (Oslo, 2023).

²⁴ Det Mosaiske Trossamfund, “Informasjonstiltak mot antisemittisme: Sluttrapport 2022,” p. 8.

The Pathfinders, in other words, broaden young people’s view of Jews, showing them that a Jew is more than a Holocaust victim or an “exotic” religious person. The Pathfinders show that Jews are a diverse mosaic of living, breathing, ordinary people with a shared history and ethnic-religious background.

Nevertheless, the Pathfinders do speak about the Holocaust in Norway. The topic is usually introduced by talking about the anti-Jewish paragraph in the Norwegian Constitution, which banned Jews from entering the country from 1814 until 1851. This becomes a gateway to the topic of the deep roots of antisemitism as well as the Holocaust in Norway. From this, they also try to convey an understanding of the Zionist movement and the birth of Israel. The current climate, in which hostility toward Jews and the State of Israel has intensified amid the Gaza conflict, has made things difficult for the Pathfinders who visit schools. They have encountered negative remarks from some students about “playing the ‘Holocaust Card.’”

Policy Recommendations

1. **Sustain Funding and Institutional Support.** Norwegian authorities should continue to provide consistent financial support and institutional backing to the Jewish Pathfinders project, recognizing its value as a long-term investment in fostering intercultural understanding and countering antisemitism. They should ensure that the program remains accessible to schools and educational institutions across Norway to maintain its positive impact on future generations.
2. **Invest in Robust Research.** Funding should be allocated for a comprehensive and systematic study to assess the long-term impact of the Jewish Pathfinders project on reducing antisemitic prejudice among young people in Norway. High-quality research is essential to measure the program’s effectiveness and provide empirical evidence of its effects on attitudes.
3. **Explore Possibilities for Exporting the Model.** Relevant stakeholders should explore sharing this innovative model with other countries. The argument for exporting the model could potentially be strengthened through a systematic research study.

– *Dr. Johannes Due Enstad*