



A Reflection and Discussion Guide



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Note to Readers: Before you read this Discussion and Reflection Guide, keep in mind that there are both general and specific aspects of the play, including spoilers about the play’s ending, referenced throughout the guide. We suggest that you refer to the “Before You See the Show” and “About the Discussion Guide” sections first, and after seeing the show, read and use the rest of guide so as not to give away any information or spoilers.



Ben Platt and Micaela Diamond. Photo by Joan Marcus

Before You See the Show: Questions for Reflection

As you prepare to see *Parade* consider these reflection questions:

- What do you know about the story told in *Parade*? What have you learned about the themes, plot or characters of the show? What have you learned about this staging of the play and its significance?
- What is your experience with theater, including musicals? What makes experiencing a musical different from watching a dramatic play, or a TV show or film?
- In the past, have you experienced a form of art that is both entertaining and educational? Think about books, poems, visual arts, music, film/TV, or other art forms that you've enjoyed and from which you've also learned something. What expectations do you have for seeing *Parade*?

While you are at the theater, pay attention to your feelings and thoughts throughout the show. Notice the impact of the set and design elements on stage, the songs and choreography and the actors' choices. Watching live musical theater can be an all-encompassing experience. As you leave the theater and consider the moments that stick with you, refer to the rest of this guide to process and learn more about *Parade* and the story it tells.

About the Discussion Guide

This discussion guide about the musical *Parade* is for middle and high school students and adults. The guide will assist audience members and others to reflect upon and discuss the artistic elements and themes of *Parade*. Written by Alfred Uhry and music and lyrics by Jason Robert Brown, *Parade* was first performed on Broadway from 1998-1999, and then in 2023, received critical acclaim for its revival. The discussion guide includes a play synopsis, historical context, timeline of the case, exploration of the play's themes, musical and artistic elements to consider, reflection and discussion questions, contemporary applications, and additional resources.

Play Synopsis

Parade, which originally premiered in 1998, is a musical dramatization of the 1913 trial of Leo Frank. Leo and Lucille Frank are a newlywed Jewish couple struggling to make a life in Georgia. Leo, a factory manager originally from Brooklyn, is accused and convicted of the rape and murder of his thirteen-year-old employee, Mary Phagan. This pushes the couple into an unimaginable test of faith, humanity, justice and devotion. We learn that there is no legitimate evidence and much media hysteria about the case. Because Leo Frank's trial was filled with faulty testimony, misinformation and bias and lacked any clear evidence of his guilt, Georgia's governor commutes his sentence from death to life imprisonment. Leo is transferred to a prison in Milledgeville, Georgia, where, two years later, a hateful mob of vigilantes kidnaps and lynches him in Mary Phagan's hometown of Marietta, Georgia.

The play delves into issues of antisemitism and racism, while exploring post-Reconstruction and early 20th Century life



and relationships in the South. The “parade” in the show's title refers to the annual parade held on Confederate Memorial Day. It was on that day in 1913 that the rape and murder of Mary Phagan took place. The parade (which is seen at the start, middle and end of the musical to mark the passing of years) was a rallying point for Southerners still affected by their defeat in the Civil War.

Historical Context

Parade takes place in Atlanta, Georgia in the post-Reconstruction era in the early 20th Century, from 1913-1915. During this time, Atlanta, the capital of Georgia, had been undergoing economic and social change. Many people left their homes in the countryside to relocate to Atlanta to serve the growing economy, which was fueled by industrialization (which is when the economy shifts its focus from agriculture/farming to manufacturing). Understanding more about the Southern part of the U.S. during that time period, including how Jewish people and Black people were regarded and treated and the bias and oppression they faced, will help to deepen your understanding of the play.

In Atlanta during that time, the Jewish population had grown from 600 people in 1880 to 4,000 in 1910. Jewish people increasingly encountered anti-immigrant and “anti-foreign” attitudes that were beginning to take hold across the nation. Jewish people owned some of Atlanta’s largest stores and factories and ran a number of pawn shops and saloons in the city. As a result, they became associated with the evils of industrialization and were blamed by some for the economic problems of the city’s poor people. At this time, the Jewish community was facing antisemitism and overt discrimination. Leo expressed feeling like an “outsider” and the “other.” By early 1913, antisemitic stereotypes had become enough of a concern that Leo, as local president of the Jewish organization B’nai B’rith, appointed a committee “to investigate the complaints against Jewish caricatures that are becoming so frequent on the local stage.” It was against this backdrop that Frank— only weeks later—was accused of murdering a Christian girl who worked at the pencil factory he managed.

The idea that negative “racial attributes” were assigned to Leo Frank because he was Jewish is significant. Historically, antisemitic attitudes were tied to the religious beliefs and practices of Jewish people, not to their supposed inborn qualities. During the mid to late 1800s, however, a new so-called “science” developed, based on false theories of racial superiority and inferiority. The idea of a superior white race, which was used to defend enslavement and colonialism, was also used to set apart Jewish people as different and “alien.” Replacing traditional religious bias with a new anti-Jewish bias may have shaped public perception of Leo Frank. Many people falsely believed that Jewish people were naturally sly and cunning. In the local newspapers, Leo was branded as “shrewd,” “egotistical” and a “fluent talker.”

These antisemitic attitudes were aggravated by the growing numbers of immigrants from Europe and migrants from different parts of the country who arrived in Atlanta at the time. Between 1900 and 1910 more than 8 million immigrants arrived in the U.S., and Atlanta’s population grew from 90,000 to over 150,000. Prejudices against non-Christians, foreigners and “outsiders” intensified in this climate. Frank was considered an outsider on several counts—not only was he a “Yankee” (i.e., from the North) and a capitalist, but he was also Jewish.

During the 1870s and 1880s, the Black population of Atlanta nearly tripled as formerly enslaved people arrived in search of jobs and educational opportunities. By 1910, a third of Atlanta’s



Courtnee Carter and Douglas Lyons. Photo by Joan Marcus

150,000 residents were Black and the city was home to many successful Black business owners. Much of the white establishment felt threatened by the freedom, growth and prosperity of Black people and set out to oppress and keep Black people “in their place” through a combination of lawful regulation and lawless violence, including lynching and other racial violence. The lynching of Black people was significant and devastating. From 1877 to 1950, more than 4,000 Black people were lynched in cities and towns in Southern states. Georgia trailed only Mississippi in the total number of lynchings by state.

Georgia was also among the first states to enact “Jim Crow” laws, which required segregation in all areas of public life. Everything from schools to hospitals to streetcars to restrooms became segregated. Despite efforts to isolate Black people, racial tensions in Atlanta grew and in 1906—after a series of news stories blaming “black fiends” for increasing crime and attacks on white women—a violent race riot broke out. For two days, thousands of well-armed rioters

destroyed Black-owned shops, terrorizing Atlanta’s Black community, killing more than 20 people and wounding over 100 people.

Industrialization and economic options created the opportunity for Black people to flee the racial violence and discrimination by moving to other parts of the U.S. The “Great Migration,” began in the 1910s and continued through the 1970s. Approximately 6 million Black people migrated from the rural South to the urban North and Midwest to escape racial violence, pursue jobs and educational opportunities, and seek freedom from the segregation and oppression of Jim Crow laws.

It is noteworthy that the Leo Frank case drew national attention to antisemitism, and helped to underscore the need for the newly founded Anti-Defamation League (ADL) as an important and influential civil rights organization, fighting “to stop the defamation of the Jewish people and to secure justice and fair treatment to all.” The case also led to the increased activity of the Ku Klux Klan in the South.

Timeline of the Leo Frank Case

April 26, 1913:

Mary Phagan is murdered; her body is found in the National Pencil Company basement.

April 27, 1913:

Newt Lee, a Black factory night watchman who discovered the body, is arrested on suspicion of murder.

May 1, 1913:

Jim Conley, a Black worker at the factory, is arrested after being found in the basement rinsing out a blood-stained shirt.

May 23, 1913:

Leo Frank, a Jewish man, is indicted for the murder of Mary Phagan.

July 28, 1913:

The trial of Leo Frank begins. Mary Phagan's mother and Newt Lee testify.

August 4-5, 1913:

Jim Conley testifies as the chief prosecution witness against Leo Frank.

August 18, 1913:

Leo Frank takes the stand in his own defense.

August 25, 1913:

The trial concludes and it takes less than two hours for the jury to find Frank guilty. The next day the judge sentences Frank to hang, and an execution date is initially set for October 10, 1913.

August 1913 – April 1915:

More than a dozen appeals are filed by Frank's defense team; all are denied. After the U.S. Supreme Court rejects the final appeal on April 9, 1915, Frank's execution is set for June 22, 1915.

February 24, 1914:

Jim Conley is sentenced to a year on a chain gang for his part in the murder. He would serve ten months and get out early for good behavior.

June 20, 1915:

Governor John Slaton commutes Frank's sentence from death to life in prison.

July 18, 1915:

Leo Frank's throat is slashed by another prisoner, William Creen. He survives the attack.

August 16-17, 1915:

Leo Frank is kidnapped from prison by 25 armed men and driven over a hundred miles to Marietta (Mary's hometown), where he is lynched.

March 4, 1982:

Alonzo Mann, a former office worker at the National Pencil Company, signs an affidavit claiming that he saw Jim Conley carrying Mary Phagan's body the day of the murder.

March 11, 1986:

The Georgia Board of Pardons and Paroles grants Leo Frank a posthumous pardon based on the State's failure to ensure his safety. However, the pardon does not officially clear Frank of the murder.



Ashlyn Maddox and Charlie Webb. Photo by Joan Marcus

Exploration of Themes

In this section, you can explore some of the play's central themes. Each theme includes some analysis, musical excerpts, questions for reflection and contemporary applications of the theme.

SETTING: The Post-Reconstruction South

Parade opens in 1862 with a young soldier preparing to go off and fight for the Confederacy in the Civil War. As he sings goodbye to his lover, he expresses how he longs to protect the virtues and purity of the South from the dangers thought to be posed by the North as a direct challenge to their way of life:

**I go to fight, for these old hills remind me
Of a way of life that's pure
Of the truth that must endure**

...

**Pray on this day as I journey beyond them
These Old Red Hills of Home
Let all the blood of the North spill upon them
'Till they've paid for what they've wrought
Taken back the lies they've taught
And there's peace in Marietta
And we're safe again in Georgia
In the land where Honor lives and breathes
The Old Red Hills of Home**

(Song: The Old Red Hills of Home)

As the scene shifts to Atlanta in 1913, we see the same soldier, now 50 years older. He's dressed in his old military uniform as everyone prepares for the Confederate Memorial Day Parade. As he sings, the soldier reflects on how the South has changed after losing the Civil War:

**We gave our lives for the old hills of Georgia
The Old Red Hills of Home
Not much survives of the old hills of Georgia
But I close my eyes and hear
All the treasures we held dear**

(Song: The Old Red Hills of Home)

As other cast members join the soldier on stage in the opening number, audiences are now transported to the culture and social-political environment of a post-Reconstruction Atlanta, which is experiencing the rapid change of industrialization. While the society was previously defined by traditions of farming life and defending the virtues and purity of young women, suddenly we find ourselves in a new world in which children have moved to big cities to work in large

factories. Some of these factories are run by Northerners who do not understand the traditional "Southern Values." This is explicitly referenced in the beginning of Leo Frank's trial as proof that "Southern Values" are under attack and this directly led to Mary Phagan's murder:

**People of Atlanta fought for freedom to
their graves
And now their city is a factory and their children
are its slaves
People of Atlanta swing their city gates wide
And look at what you've wrought!**

(Song: Twenty Miles from Marietta)

The fact that Mary Phagan was murdered on Confederate Memorial Day heightens their hatred for everything and everyone that challenges the memory of the Confederacy. As Southerners try to make sense of the post-Reconstruction South, they are still trying to cling to the past and former values they held dear. These are the beliefs and perspectives that largely make up the setting of *Parade* and pave the way for subsequent actions to unfold.

Now it's your turn! Consider these questions:

- How would different characters describe life in Atlanta, Georgia in 1913? What is Leo Frank's view of life in Atlanta? How does it differ from other characters' perspectives? Why?
- Whose view of life in Atlanta, Georgia most closely matches yours? Why do you think that is?



Alex Joseph Grayson. Photo by Joan Marcus

THEME: Stereotypes and Scapegoats

The songs and scenes of *Parade* portray stereotypes that have both historical and contemporary significance. A **stereotype** is an oversimplified generalization about a person or group of people without regard for individual differences. Stereotypes are often based on observations about some members of a group, and then applied to all members of that group. As demonstrated in *Parade*, stereotypes are more intentionally harmful. Early in the show, characters express a desire to blame someone, not just for the murder of Mary Phagan but for the collective grief and anger of the white Christian townspeople of Atlanta. Some characters, like Tom Watson (politician and editor of *The Jeffersonian*) and Hugh Dorsey (the prosecutor), use **scapegoating**, which means blaming an individual or group for something based on that person or group's identity when the person or group is not responsible:

It's in his hands.
See how he rubs 'em both together
Like he's tryin' to get 'em clean?
It's in his eyes.
Wonder why he stares at the floor
And he won't look you straight in the face?
somethin' ain't right.
I can tell somethin' ain't right.
I can see it in his eyes, boys.

[But we got no evidence]

You want evidence? Look at those clothes
and that big fancy talk.
You want evidence? Look at him sweatin'
from ev'ry pore!
Can't you see him just standin' there,
watchin' that little girl bleed?
He smells of it.
He stinks of it.
What more do you need?

(Song: *Somethin' Ain't Right*)

Various parts of the play portray overt antisemitic stereotypes about Leo Frank. Britt Craig, reporter for the *Atlanta Georgian*, is one character who particularly leans into these tropes when writing his newspaper articles:

**So give him fangs, give him horns
Give him scaly, hairy palms!
Have him droolin' out the corner of his mouth
He's a master of disguise
Check those bug-out creepy eyes
Sure, that fella's here to rape the whole
damned South!**

(Song: Real Big News)

Tom Watson writes a similar characterization in *The Jeffersonian*: “Hugh Dorsey was not fooled by the slippery Jew’s oily demeanor. He took one look at Leo Frank’s bulging satyr eyes and protruding sensual lips and nailed him for the pervert sodomite he is.”

These personifications play out in the blocking and choreography of the song “The Factory Girls/Come Up to My Office” when Ben Platt as Leo Frank “acts out” the girls’ testimonies, fully embodying the qualities outlined in earlier stereotypes. With these seeds planted of viewing a Jewish man as a monster wielding power over innocent girls, the people of Atlanta see Leo as the ideal scapegoat when looking for someone to hold responsible:

**See them laugh when an Angel dies!
See them tell all their Jew-loving lies!
But they'll run on the Judgement Day!
Someone's gonna pay when the flood comes!
See the blood as a city grieves!
See the stain that the Jew-money leaves!**

(Song: Where Will You Stand When the Flood Comes?)

It’s important to remember that these kinds of tropes and stereotypes are not only in the past. ADL’s 2023 [survey about antisemitic attitudes](#) in the U.S. shows that 85% of Americans believe at least one anti-Jewish trope today. Tropes are common or recurring patterns, messages and devices that repeat throughout history.

Now it’s your turn! Consider these questions:

- What stereotypes were communicated through the show? How did characters’ dialogue, songs, and choreography show these stereotypes?
- What stereotypes were directed at Jewish characters, like Leo Frank? What stereotypes were directed at Black characters, like Jim Conley or Newt Lee? What stereotypes were directed at young white women characters, like Mary Phagan? How do these stereotypes tell a story about the murder? Do you think this story is accurate? How can you tell?
- What did it feel like to watch Leo Frank’s character playing a stereotypical role in the song Come Up to My Office? Why do you think some people (historically and today) believe these stereotypes are true?



Jay Armstrong Johnson. Photo by Joan Marcus

THEME: Misinformation and Disinformation

Throughout *Parade*, the characters demonstrate the power of misinformation and disinformation to generate strong emotional responses and even lead to violence. **Misinformation** is false or misleading information that is spread without malice or intent to mislead, and those who share it genuinely believe it to be true.

Disinformation, on the other hand, is false or misleading information that is spread with malice and intent to mislead. Those who share it **are aware** the information is false or misleading. Disinformation is often used for social movements, political influence or financial gain.

Throughout the song “Real Big News,” with its notably upbeat tempo and melody, reporter Britt Craig highlights the ways that disinformation can spread:

Look! You just scribble it down
And it covers the town like molasses or mud!
Look! For us drunken ol' bums
Opportunity comes in a magical flood!
Look! You might never be sure
If your motives are pure, but your profits
are clear!

(Song: *Real Big News*)

Apart from the news stories, we see the characters in *Parade*, especially the young characters, struggle with the implications of the story they’re telling. People of all ages may experience similar situations today, given the prevalence of gossip and rumors both at school and on social media. While often used interchangeably, there is a difference between these two terms. **Gossip** is information that is shared about the behavior and personal

lives of other people that may or may not be true. **Rumors** are information or stories about someone that are spread and have not been proven to be true.

I saw this little kid
Said, "Look what Leo did!"
And then she run and hid
Go on, go on, go on, go on now!
He sat down next to me
His hand went on my knee
I had to shake it free!
Go on, go on, go on, go on now!

(Song: *Real Big News*)

The composer Jason Robert Brown wrote "Real Big News," a song entirely focused on disinformation and how information was being spread during Leo's trial and conviction. By using visual projections in this production that show the real headlines published in 1913, *Parade* reminds the audience that this isn't fiction – it really did happen and it could happen again.

Now it's your turn! Consider these questions:

- What are some characters who spread misinformation? What are some examples of characters who spread disinformation? What about gossip versus rumors? What is the impact of these examples on the plot and ending of the play?
- Who do you think is responsible for the narrative that is created about Leo Frank? Consider all the different characters who contributed to news stories, testimony, and other forms of communication.
- What are some examples of disinformation and misinformation being spread today?
- In what ways have you experienced or engaged in misinformation and disinformation? What thoughts do you have about how to challenge and reduce it?



Jay Armstrong Johnson. Photo by Joan Marcus

THEME: Violence and the Prevalence of Hate

Violence, although present before and during the Civil War, became a feature that characterized the post-Reconstruction South. As shown in *Parade*, this time was also defined by the domination and control of Black people, as depicted towards several Black characters, and ultimately by the violence portrayed in the lynching of Leo Frank. Rather than a disruption or exception to the ideals of Georgian life, this violence is a key feature that maintains the order of society.

One way to understand the extreme violence in *Parade*'s ending is through a model called the Pyramid of Hate. The **Pyramid of Hate** presents a visual image to demonstrate how **bias-motivated violence** occurs in a society in which bias and hate are normalized. The base of the pyramid consists of **biased attitudes** and **biased acts** and supports a section called **systemic discrimination**.

The trajectory outlined in the Pyramid of Hate exactly reflects the escalation of thoughts and actions that occur in *Parade*, especially due to the stereotypes and disinformation discussed earlier. In the song "Where Will You Stand When the Flood Comes," the mob searches for revenge at any cost with Dorsey even seeming to foretell the violence to come:

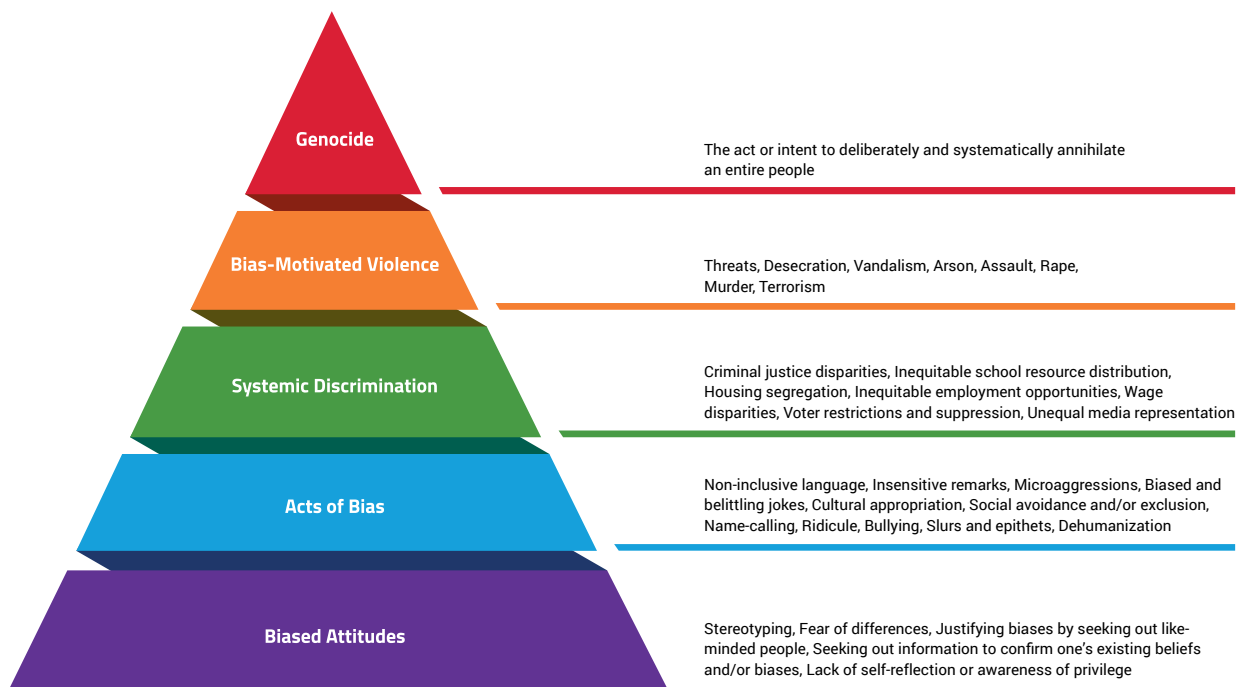
[ALL]

Will you beg for the Jew's reward
Or walk with us at the side of the Lord?
Put your soul in the Devil's hand?
Well, where will you stand when the
flood comes?

[DORSEY]

Yes, I see through the fog and dust
So let the mob do whatever they must

(Song: *Where Will You Stand When the Flood Comes?*)



Pyramid of Hate © 2021 Anti-Defamation League

It's this mob mentality that allows the crowd to feel powerful with a sense of safety in the "righteousness" of their collective actions. This type of behavior could be observed at the Capitol insurrection on January 6th and the calls to hang former Vice President Mike Pence. The Equal Justice Initiative describes lynching as a form of racial terrorism, characterized as a systematic use of violence and threats to intimidate, coerce and control. The lynching of Leo Frank, however, often stands apart from the more than 4,000 lynchings of Black people that took place across the United States (primarily in the South) between the 1870's and the 1950's. In *Parade*, we see the Black characters reflecting on this abnormality:

**'Cause a white man gonna get hung, you see.
There's a black man swingin' in ev'ry tree
But they don't never pay attention!**

(Song: A Rumblin' and a Rollin')

How did the people of Atlanta come to project this need for control upon Leo Frank rather than the Black suspects, Newt Lee or Jim Conley? Pastor L. O. Bricker, the real-life pastor of Mary Phagan's church, [explained his thoughts at the time](#): "My feelings, upon the arrest of the old Negro watchman, were to the effect that this one old Negro would be poor atonement for the life of this innocent girl. But, when on the next day, the police arrested a Jew, and a Yankee Jew at that, all of the inborn prejudice against Jews rose up in a feeling of satisfaction, that here would be a victim worthy to pay for the crime." Dorsey expresses these same ideas in *Parade*: "Ah, let him go. Hangin' another [Black person] ain't enough this time. We gotta do better." This statement illustrates that the prejudice against Leo Frank as a Jewish man from the North is

motivated by the perception that he is a threat to the "southern way of life" from before the Civil War.

Now it's your turn! Consider these questions:

- *Parade* shows characters demonstrating biased attitudes and acts of bias in seemingly small ways; for example, Lucille Frank drops a hairpin and leaves it for Minnie, the Black housekeeper to pick up. What do you think is the purpose of including examples of bias, like this, in the play?
- Lynchings often took place in public spaces in front of enormous crowds. The creators of *Parade* chose to tell a story that ends with a violent spectacle that is watched by both characters in the show as well as the audience members. What details did you notice as you watched the scenes where a group of characters abducted and lynched Leo Frank? How did you feel watching the scenes? Why do you think you felt that way?
- In its curriculum on lynching, the [Equal Justice Initiative](#) states, "Black people who were brutally lynched based on allegations of crime were almost never legally convicted of any offense. Many lynching victims who were demonstrably innocent of the crimes alleged were lynched anyway. Race, not culpability, determined lynching victims' fate. This was a form of terrorism because it demonstrated that guilt or innocence was not the point of the lynchings." How is the lynching of Leo Frank a tool to maintain the power and dominance of white Christian people over other groups in post-Reconstruction Atlanta?



The company of PARADE. Photo by Joan Marcus

Here are some questions to reflect on the play overall:

- What is your biggest takeaway from watching *Parade*?
- What did you learn that you didn't know before? How is that information useful in terms of reflecting on present day issues of stereotypes, antisemitism, mis/disinformation and the prevalence of hate?
- How did you feel while watching the play? Were there any parts that were particularly evocative and if so, why? Did you have different feelings as you watched?
- Does watching *Parade* challenge your thinking in any way? If so, how? What actions can you take yourself, with others and within society as a result of watching and reflecting on *Parade*?

Additional Resources

[Audit of Antisemitic Incidents 2022](#)

[Antisemitism Today](#) (Table Talk parent/family discussion guide)

[Antisemitism Uncovered: A Guide to Old Myths in a New Era](#)

[Gossip, Rumors and Identity](#) (Lesson Plan)

[Noose Incidents and their Historical Context](#) (Lesson Plan)

[Race Talk: Engaging Young People in Conversations about Race and Racism](#) (Teaching Tool)

[Remembering Leo Frank](#) (Film Discussion Guide)

[The Dangers of Disinformation](#) (Table Talk parent/family discussion guide)

[Fake News and What We Can Do about It](#) (Lesson Plan)

[The Pyramid of Hate: Understanding and Interrupting the Escalation of Bias](#) (Student digital mini-lesson)



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