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Three Falsehoods About Antisemitism — and One Truth



THE FIRST FALSEHOOD we tell ourselves about antisemitism is that it is mysterious: a force that has pursued us from one land and one age to the next for reasons that have no good explanation other than mindless hate or convenient scapegoating.

This is a foundational misunderstanding of the nature of antisemitism. It's an underestimation of the forces, interests, and ideas that undergird and animate it. And it's an injustice to the Jewish people's world-shaping role in history.

Jews have stood for a set of distinctive ideas for thousands of years. *Monotheism. Peoplehood. Freedom-seeking. Moral absolutes. Chosenness. An emphasis on literacy (including female literacy) and the written word. Argument for the sake of heaven.* These ideas long ago ceased to be

uniquely Jewish. They may not even be originally Jewish. But no people are as fully associated with them as the Jews.

We rightly take pride in these concepts. They are landmarks in the development of Western civilization, in both its religious and secular dimensions. Without a universal morality dictated by a single and all-powerful God, it would be difficult to conceive of the idea of human rights — rights that transcend political boundaries and cultural differences. Without the respect for differences of scriptural interpretation — the House of Hillel, the House of Shammai — we would have had a much dimmer notion of the inherent value of debate and dissent.

But these ideas are also radical, in their time and still in ours. They are a critique of the way things were, or are, done and a threat to the people who benefit from the status quo. And ideas with radical consequences tend to engender indignant and often furious reactions.

Consider it from the point of view of some long-ago king trying to deal with the challenge of a Jewish minority within his borders.

If there is only one God, he might reasonably ask, what happens to *my* gods — of the moon and sun, fertility and death, wisdom and war? If Jews can assert a degree of apartness as a people, how can I be sure of their fealty? If Moses could demand that Pharaoh let the Jewish people go, won't the oppressed minorities in my kingdom rally behind their own Moseses? If the morality of the Ten Commandments is absolute, what does that say about those of us with different moral ideals? If the Jews see themselves as chosen, does that mean they think they are better than we are? If Jews can read, does it not also give them power in my largely illiterate society? And won't the Jewish penchant for doubting, disputing, and second-guessing threaten the religious and ideological conformity that helps secure my rule?

Before we think of antisemitism as mere bigotry, then, it's worth also thinking about it as the expression of its own set of ideas:

anti-freedom, anti-particularity, anti-universal morality, anti-nonconformity—in all, the ideas of anti-Judaism. These ideas are wrong and, in the long run, self-defeating: The civilizations that have subscribed to them have either already perished or eventually will. They also have been popularized and weaponized in the form of conspiracy theories about Jews—theories that are themselves profoundly irrational, as we will discuss below. But they are still *ideas*, and, as such, intelligible, coherent, self-interested, and often instrumentally rational. To dismiss them as merely foolish is itself foolish.

It's also shortsighted: The road to wisdom when it comes to antisemitism begins when we stop underestimating its personal, political, and intellectual appeal.



The second falsehood is that antisemitism belongs in the same class of hatreds as racism and ethnic bigotry.

That's not to say that antisemitism hasn't, historically, contained powerful elements of each. From the *Sentencia* of 15th-century Spain to the Nazi and Fascist race laws of the 1930s, hatred of Jews has often expressed itself in starkly racist terms. And the restrictive covenants that kept Jews out of redlined neighborhoods and suburban country clubs were of a piece with the discriminatory practices that the old WASP establishment also inflicted on those who were Italian, Mexican, Irish, black—anyone who couldn't trace his lineage to Protestant England or at least western Europe.

But antisemitism is a much broader and more varied bigotry than racial or ethnic prejudice.

While all prejudices stem from “us”-versus-“them” thinking, antisemitism differs in its emotional basis. Racism and ethnic bigotry emerge from feelings of superiority, contempt, and fear. Antisemites are also

driven by feelings of envy and (paradoxically) inferiority. To what other minority group is the word “clever” affixed as an insult? Who else is charged with the crimes of fabulous wealth, control of media and finance, access to mysterious technologies, and secret control of the world’s governments? The racist and ethnic bigot thinks the objects of his bigotry are deservedly beneath him. The antisemite thinks the object of his bigotry is undeservedly above him.

This matters because it positions Jew-haters as underdogs, no matter how much power they possess; the victimized party, no matter how much damage they inflict. The antisemite, as historian Deborah Lipstadt has observed, almost always believes he is punching up; that his prejudice and cruelty is an act of courage and defiance. Antisemites speak the language of the oppressed, which is why Karl Marx (“What is the worldly cult of the Jew? Huckstering.”) was as much an antisemite as the 19th-century German nationalist historian Heinrich von Treitschke (“The Jews are our misfortune”). It is why antisemitism can sit as comfortably with the anti-capitalist Left of a Jeremy Corbyn as it can with the xenophobic Right of a Jean-Marie Le Pen.

Antisemitism is also often a religious hatred. It is bound up with ideas about good and evil, salvation and damnation, the wages of sin and the penalties for apostasy. This turns out to be true whether the religion in question is Christianity or Islam, or, in a more secular age, Nazism or Communism. By the very nature of our particularism, our refusal to give up on *our* God and give in to *their* beliefs, the Jews are a rebuke to any creed that seeks dominion over both our outer and inner lives.

To play that role in history—to be the people saying “no” when the societies around us demand that we say “yes” to their deeply cherished beliefs—makes us a target of their fury. There’s a reason religious persecutions are so cruel: Purity is achieved only through the most extreme forms of purgation. For all the horrific cruelties of

racism, it generally seeks subjugation, not elimination. It's the religious dimension of antisemitism that so frequently leads antisemites to seek a "solution" to their Jewish problem through mass expulsions or genocide.

Antisemitism is also a political ideology—because it sees Jews as representing a self-interested political force disingenuously disguised as liberalism, socialism, globalism, or Zionism. That is why the man who popularized the term "antisemitism," the 19th-century German journalist Wilhelm Marr, turned his hatred into a political movement, the *Antisemiten-Liga*, or League of Antisemites, which was followed by copycat movements such as Édouard Drumont's *Ligue antisémitique de France*, which was particularly active during the Dreyfus Affair. National Socialism may have been the ultimate expression of antisemitic politics, but it was far from the only one.

The fundamental political argument of the European antisemite is that Jews are imposters and swindlers—imposters for claiming to be fully German, Austrian, French, and so on when they are actually "Semitic"—swindlers for using all their cunning and power to deprive authentic Europeans of their wealth, power, and patrimony. Anti-Zionists make the same claim about Jewish Israelis: that they are imposters for claiming an indigenous connection to the Land of Israel when really, they are latter-day European colonialists, and swindlers for trying to take from Palestinians what, supposedly, is rightfully theirs.

This is why anti-Zionism (never to be mistaken for criticism of Israeli government policy) is a modern-day version of antisemitism: It is an attempt to organize politically and ideologically against Jews by employing the same false charges. The only difference is that, to the European antisemites of the 19th or early 20th century, the Jew is from the Holy Land; to the anti-Zionists of the late 20th and early 21st century, the Jew is from Europe.



The third falsehood about antisemitism is that education is the answer — particularly, education about the Holocaust.

To read the Biden administration’s well-meaning National Strategy to Counter Antisemitism, published in May and based on “listening sessions with more than 1,000 diverse stakeholders across the Jewish community and beyond,” is to see the extent to which the Jewish community believes this: The word “education” is mentioned 91 times, the word “Holocaust” 69 times. (Islamophobia is mentioned 21 times; Israel 10 times; Zionism not once.) “We need Holocaust education in schools to correct this lack of knowledge and help ensure that future generations learn about antisemitism and the history of the Holocaust, including how and why it happened,” the report suggests.

Knowledge of the Holocaust is obviously a good thing. If more non-Jewish children become familiar with it, it could deepen their understanding of history, sensitize them to a crucial dimension of Jewish consciousness, and make them better aware of the awful places to which unchecked bigotry and demagoguery may lead.

But what does this mean for the student who learns about antisemitism and the history of the Holocaust in high school, and is then told in college by the local chapter of Students for Justice in Palestine that Israel is deliberately killing Palestinian children — just like the Nazis did? Won’t that student conclude that the Jews must *truly* be awful if they came through the Holocaust only to adopt such methods? Might not the student think to himself that Jews must be guilty of *something* to have inspired so much hatred across the ages? Or wonder why there is so much teaching about the Holocaust but so little about other horrors such as the Ukrainian Holodomor or the Rwandan genocide — why do Jews get to “privilege” their trauma? Or might

the student conclude that Jews focus on the Holocaust only to play the victim card for their own political advantage, after they have long since ceased being the victim?

Educating students about the harm done to Jews in the Holocaust and other anti-Jewish attacks does not, by itself, explain why it is wrong to harm Jews. Antisemitism is not a problem of education: From Martin Luther to T.S. Eliot to Roald Dahl, there has never been a shortage of literate and even brilliant antisemites. It's a problem of philosophical orientation and logical reasoning.

Are the ideas of the Jewish people good things or not? And—to borrow a thought from Alvin Rosenfeld's essay in this issue of *SAPIR*—are the Jews presumed guilty or not?

By “presumed guilty,” we mean that antisemitism, as much as it might be founded in specific and intelligible political or religious considerations, almost always takes the form of a conspiracy theory. It is the belief that behind history's greatest crimes and the world's greatest ills lies the hidden hand of a Jew: the Jew as killer of Christ, as murderer of children, as bringer of plague, as financier of war, as underminer of morality, as instigator of 9/11, as replacer of the white working class in the United States, as displacer of native inhabitants in Palestine. It never ends.

The most important element of any conspiracy theory is that it is unfalsifiable—impervious to logical or evidentiary refutation. To the conspiracy theorist, contrary evidence doesn't diminish his argument; it thickens the plot. The antisemite's “reasons” emerge from his worldview and serve his interests. But, in a deeper sense, he has left the realm of reason: His deficiencies are epistemological, not educational. He is a version of Lewis Carroll's Queen of Hearts: Sentencing for presumed guilt—at least insofar as Jews are concerned—comes first. The nature of the crime is determined later.

If the Biden administration really wants to use education in the

fight against antisemitism, it would do better to invest much more in the teaching of critical-thinking skills than in the history of the Holocaust. The rise of antisemitism in 21st-century America has many causes; not the least of them is that too many Americans are emerging from high schools and colleges without having learned to weigh the credibility of evidence, make logical arguments, distinguish between reality and fantasy, facts and opinions, and to spot nonsense when they see it. As an antidote to credulity, an education in critical thinking might reach some of those not already predisposed to antisemitism by their philosophical orientation. But it can do only so much.



Which brings us to one truth about antisemitism: The Jews are not going to solve it. Not just because it is ultimately unsolvable, but because *it is not ours to solve*. Jews stand for a set of ideas that will always have fanatical opponents making fantastical claims against us. We can no more wish antisemitism away than we can wish ourselves away.

The real question, then, isn't how to solve antisemitism. It's how to thrive in the face of it. We could start by getting a good definition of it.

The International Holocaust Remembrance Alliance defines antisemitism as follows: "A certain perception of Jews, which may be expressed as hatred toward Jews. Rhetorical and physical manifestations of antisemitism are directed toward Jewish or non-Jewish individuals and/or their property, toward Jewish community institutions and religious facilities."

The IHRA definition has gained wide acceptance, including by the State Department and the British government. Mainstream Jewish organizations have embraced it, too, because among the "manifestations of antisemitism" it lists is "denying the Jewish people their right to self-determination"—a point that is surely correct, even if

progressive and anti-Zionist Jews furiously dispute it. At the moment, the IHRA definition is probably the best one on offer. But it remains inadequate: vague, clunky, unmemorable, raising more questions than it answers. We can do better.

Here is a suggestion:

Antisemitism is a conspiracy theory that holds that Jews are uniquely prone to using devious methods to achieve their malevolent ends, and that they must therefore be opposed by any means necessary.

What, then, is antisemitism? Not a “certain perception” but a *conspiracy theory* that, by its nature, cannot be answered with appeals to facts and reason. Not a “certain perception” but a worldview that specifically singles out Jews, by their very essence, as *uniquely prone* to evil behavior. Not a “certain perception,” but a very specific indictment about the supposed Jewish penchant for *devious means*, which has been a hallmark of antisemitism for centuries. Not a “certain perception” but a sense of self-righteous indignation from bullies who think of themselves as victims of *malevolent* Jewish plots. Not a “certain perception” but a call for *any means necessary* to stop Jews, thereby licensing violence against them.

If this is right, then the best answer to antisemitism isn’t to redouble investments in tolerance efforts or bus more high-school students to the nearest Holocaust exhibit or sponsor another round of “dialogues across differences.” It is certainly not to put antisemitism at the center of any sort of curriculum about what it means to be a Jew: To do so is to give the antisemite the first and last say in defining Jewish identity. “The antisemite makes the Jew,” Jean-Paul Sartre once said. It would be terrible to prove him right.

The alternative is simple: Invest in Jewish thriving—which is not the same thing as thriving Jews.

Thriving Jews are what we have now: Jews who are generally doing quite well when it comes to the careers they have chosen, the esteem in which they are held in their professions and communities, the power and influence they enjoy, the lives they lead. It is an individual ideal, in which thriving is central, Jewishness incidental.

Jewish thriving, on the other hand, is a collective ideal. It is a flourishing, secure, and morally self-confident State of Israel. It is a Diaspora that is proud of and knowledgeable about its own heritage. It is robust attendance at synagogue services and Shabbat dinners and Jewish cultural events. It is the desire to marry a fellow Jew (or an eager convert) and to raise children Jewishly. It is the conviction among all Jews, whatever their level of observance, that their Jewishness is the most cherished element of their identity, a precious inheritance from their forebears and a priceless bequest to their posterity.

We are still far from creating this kind of Jewish thriving. And if we ever do, it might well lead to more antisemitism, not less; it would certainly give those who hate us that much more to envy. But it would strengthen our self-confidence, attract friends and admirers, give us positive reasons to endure and flourish, widen our margin of safety, fortify our sense of Jewish pride, and offer the ultimate riposte to those who seek to diminish and destroy us.

“We are still here, better and stronger than ever” is always a fine reply to antisemitism. *

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