DEBORAH LIPSTADT

ANTISEMITISM
HERE AND NOW

BOOKS BY DEBORAH LIPSTADT

Beyond Belief: The American Press and the Coming of the Holocaust, 1933–1945
Denying the Holocaust: The Growing Assault on Truth and Memory
Denial: Holocaust History on Trial
  - The Eichmann Trial
Holocaust: An American Understanding
CONTENTS

V. HOLOCAUST DENIAL: FROM HARD-CORE TO SOFT-CORE
A Matter of Antisemitism, Not History 139
Inverting Victims and Perpetrators 146
Branding Victims as Collaborators 152
De-Judaizing the Holocaust 156

VI. THE CAMPUS AND BEYOND
Toxifying Israel 187
BDS: Antisemitism or Politics? 177
Campus Groupthink: Not-So-Safe Zones 184
Progressivism and Zionism: Antisemitism by Subterfuge? 192
Responding to the Progressive "Critique" 205
Myopia: Seeing Antisemitism Only on the Other Side 211

VII. JOY VERSUS J oy: REJECTING VICTIMHOOD
Missing the Forest for the Trees: A Dental School and a
Fraternity 225
Speaking Truth to Friends: Beyond Victimhood 234
Celebrating the Good in the Face of the Bad 239
Acknowledgments 243
Notes 245
Index 375

A NOTE TO THE READER

This has been a challenging project. I was surprised by the difficulties I encountered in writing this book, for it was hardly my first foray into addressing painful topics. I have been writing, teaching, and speaking about the Shoah, one of the most all-encompassing examples of state-sponsored genocide, for decades. Given that I have already spent so much of my scholarly and personal time skulking in the sewers of antisemitism and genocide, why should this project have been any different from the many others that preceded it? The answer became clear as I wrote. As horrific as the Holocaust was, it is firmly in the past. When I write about it, I am writing about what was. Though I remain horrified by what happened, it is history. Contemporary antisemitism is not. It is about the present. It is what many people are doing, saying, and facing now. That gave this subject an immediacy that no historical act possesses.

But it is not just about the present. It is also about the future. Where are the troubling phenomena addressed here leading? And that question points to yet another difficulty. Most historians avoid speculating about the future. We eschew predictions because we know how quickly things can change. Often, those historians who have relied on their knowledge of the past to prognosticate have erred. And yet, when one writes about a contemporary problem, it is hard not to predict. Aware of this, I try very hard in this book to avoid doing so. After addressing some basics of the issue—defining antisemitism, categorizing the antisemite, and figuring out how best to spell the word—I try to unpack what it is we are witnessing. Is today's antisemitism the same or different from what we have seen before? Where is it coming from: the right or the left?
Is it, as some would contend, all about Israel? Are we seeing antisemitism where it is not? Are others refusing to see antisemitism where it clearly is?

While there seems to have been a decided increase in both physical acts and rhetorical expressions of antisemitism in recent years, our conversation should not be rooted in or motivated by numbers or by antisemitic acts. This would suggest that, if the numbers decrease, our worries should abate. I remember that during the 2000 American presidential campaign many Jews predicted that Al Gore’s selection of Joseph Lieberman as his running mate would precipitate a rise in antisemitism. It didn’t happen. Some pundits then opined that perhaps antisemitism was dead. They looked at the American social landscape and saw Jewish presidents presiding over universities that once had strict quotas. They saw Jews sitting on the boards of major corporations and being elected to public office from regions without a significant Jewish population. Even the skyrocketing rate of intermarriage, a source of angst within the Jewish community, could be spun into something positive. If so many non-Jews are so willing to have Jews in their families, how prevalent could antisemitism be? But today, antisemitism is “back” (I am not sure it ever really went away.) An accurate accounting of the uptick in antisemitic incidents is important because it does provide necessary empirical evidence. Nonetheless, numbers should not be what drive us. What should alarm us is that human beings continue to believe in a conspiracy that demonizes Jews and sees them as responsible for evil. Antisemites continue to give life to this particular brand of age-old hatred. They justify it and the acts committed in its name. The historical consequences of this nefarious passion have been so disastrous that to ignore its contemporary manifestations would be irresponsible.

Another reason numbers should not drive us is that antisemitism is a worldview, a conspiracy theory. It therefore cannot simply be measured by the number of recorded antisemitic acts or by the number of people being categorized as antisemites. A recent study in Great Britain called the approach I have taken the “elastic” view of antisemitism. If Jew-hatred is an attitude, it exists, like all attitudes, “in society at different levels of intensity, and with different shades to it... Some people may be strongly antisemitic, others less so; and while still others may not fit into either of these categories, they may still hold certain [antisemitic] attitudes—even if these are small in number and weak in intensity.”

Since antisemitism affects Jews, some readers may be inclined to think that only Jews should be concerned. That would be a mistake. Jews, as the intended target of the antisemite, may indeed be more sensitive to it. Such is the case with any expression of particular hatred and prejudice. But the existence of prejudice in any of its forms is a threat to all those who value an inclusive, democratic, and multicultural society. It is axiomatic that if Jews are being targeted with hateful rhetoric and prejudice, other minorities should not feel immune; this is not likely to end with Jews. And, conversely, if other minority groups are being targeted with hatred and prejudice, Jews should not feel immune; this is not likely to end with these groups, either. Antisemitism flourishes in a society that is intolerant of others, be they immigrants or racial and religious minorities. When expressions of contempt for one group become normative, it is virtually inevitable that similar hatred will be directed at other groups. Like a fire set by an arsonist, passionate hatred and conspiratorial worldviews reach well beyond their intended target. They are not rationally contained. But even if the antisemites were to confine their venom to Jews, the existence of Jew-hated within a society is an indication that something about the entire society is amiss. No healthy society harbors extensive antisemitism—or any other form of hatred.

I have organized this book as a series of letters to two fictional people with whom I have become “acquainted” at the university at
which I teach. One is "Abigail," a whip-smart Jewish student who has taken many of my courses and who is trying to understand the phenomenon of antisemitism. The other is "Joe," a colleague who teaches at the university's law school. A non-Jew, he has a deep appreciation for both the successes and travails of the Jewish people, and he counts some of his Jewish colleagues as his most important conversation partners on campus. Abigail and Joe are composites of many people who have turned to me during the past few years to express their confusion, worries, and distress about antisemitism in general and about what they are personally witnessing. They may be fictional figures, but the questions they ask and the concerns they express belong to very real people. I have structured the letters to reflect the situation as of summer 2018.

While the contemporary nature of the events discussed made this a challenging book to write, the pace of recent events made it an almost impossible book to finish. It seemed that every day a new development—the murder of a Holocaust survivor in Paris, elections in Hungary in which the winning side relied on overtly antisemitic tropes, a Polish law rewriting the history of the Holocaust, white power demonstrations in the United States, campus anti-Israel campaigns that easily morphed into expressions of antisemitism, Labour Party antisemitism in the United Kingdom, the growing resiliency of white supremacist groups, and so much more—demanded analysis and inclusion in this work. Sadly, given the unending saga that is antisemitism, I feel comfortable predicting that by the time this book appears there will have been new examples of antisemitism that should have been part of the narrative.

Some readers may find themselves agreeing with me at one point and being outraged by what I say at another. Irrespective of my readers' positions on various issues, I ask that they read with nuance, the same nuance with which I have tried to write. Some may think that I have either exaggerated or understated the severity of the situation. Some may accuse me of finding antisemitism at the "wrong" end of the political spectrum. Should some consider me too willing to see the glass as half empty and others consider me too willing to see it as half full, I (ever the contrarian) will then assume my analysis is just right.

I know from personal experience how easy it is to make pronouncements and to declare others wrong, particularly when the subject is so disturbing. I have tried hard to avoid doing that here. I have attempted, as much as possible, to set my passions aside and see matters with a scholarly analytical perspective. But we are who we are. I cannot, therefore, claim to have been totally dispassionate about what I have encountered. I have tried to avoid writing a call to arms or a cri de coeur, but I recognize that on some level this book is precisely that. It is written with the conviction that action starts with understanding, which will be applied differently by different people in different circumstances. My attempt to explore a perplexing and disturbing set of circumstances is written with the hope that it will provoke action. What precisely that action is remains in the hands of the reader.

Atlanta, Georgia
August 2018
THE PERPLEXED

Dear Professor Lipstadt:

I write to you because I am worried and confused. I hope you don't mind this intrusion, but after studying with you these past few years, I feel that you are the person to whom I should turn.

Over the last few months I've had a number of extended conversations about anti-Semitism with classmates, most of whom are not Jews. I have asked them to speak freely. And they have. One, somewhat hesitantly, posited that given that anti-Semitism has lasted so long, the Jews must, at least on some level, be responsible for it. Another picked up on this theme and, with great hesitancy, wondered if a people who has been so hated for so long might have done something to cause it. They both kept repeating that they consider me a good friend and meant nothing personal. And I don't think they did. But I felt uncomfortable. The most distressing part of this entire encounter was that I didn't know what to say to them without sounding defensive. I guess I am asking for your help in both understanding what is happening and figuring out how to respond.

They did listen soberly as I told them that Jews must take precautions in Brussels, Paris, and a myriad of other cities. I explained how on a trip to Europe some years ago, I visited Jewish sites without a second thought. In contrast, this summer I shall join a small group of Jewish students for a tour of
major European sites. One member of our group wears a kip-
pah and, without our even asking, he assured us that he would wear a baseball cap during the trip. The other guys, in a show of solidarity, agreed to wear caps as well. I promised not to take along my backpack that has the name of my Jewish youth group emblazoned on it. The fact that outward manifestations of Jew-
ishness have become something one has to keep under wraps in many places in the Western world is both troubling and puzzling to me.

I have no reason to fear for my physical safety here on campus. I feel comfortable as a Jew, except maybe when Israel is the topic of discussion. But this encounter with my friends has left me feeling confused and, I admit, a bit insecure. I’m not sure exactly what I’m asking you to tell me, but I thought that after three years of classes and conversations with you, I would ask for your help in making sense of all this.

Yours,
Abigail

Dear Deborah:

It was good to see you, however briefly, on campus. You were correct in your observation that I didn’t seem to be quite my usual self. Though my semester has been productive, I’ve been in a funk as I’ve continued to ponder the ever-increasing divisiveness in the United States and throughout so much of the world. While I’ve long been aware of inequities in our country, I believe that the level of contempt that various groups have for one another has become far more open and mainstream over the past few years. I trace much of it to the 2016 presidential campaign. The campaign and subsequent events didn’t create this animosity, but they certainly encouraged it. Expressions of racism, homophobia, Islamophobia, and, of course, Antisemitism seems to be escalating on a daily basis.

I have a strange request. Antisemitism is something I’ve long abhorred, but also something that I fear I do not fully understand. I know there is much on your plate, but if you would be willing to help me try to comprehend it, I would be very grateful.

Yours,
Joe

Dear Joe and Abigail:

Joe, meet Abigail Ross, a rising senior who has been one of my students for the past few years. She has taken a number of courses relating to different aspects of the Holocaust. Abi-
gail, meet Joe Wilson, a professor at the law school who teaches about law and religion. Joe and I have been in frequent conversa-
tion about prejudice and hatred.

Both of you have written to me with questions about the seeming rise in antisemitism in the United States and beyond and have asked if we might engage in an exchange on the topic. I’m happy to do so, not just because two people about whom I care deeply are perplexed about it but also because I believe such an exchange will help all of us get a handle on this vexing
situation. Since our schedules are so varied, let's do it in writing. And, if you are both willing, let's share all of our letters with one another. That way, we can all be part of this ongoing conversation.

And because I believe things should have a beginning, a middle, and an end, let's set a time frame of a year for this exchange.

Yours,
DEL

DELSION

Dear Abigail and Joe:

Both of you are looking for a way to explain "why antisemitism?" and to figure out what we can do about it. At the risk of disappointing you, let me start by saying caveat emptor, by which I mean that I don't think I can satisfactorily answer either of these questions. It is hard, if not impossible, to explain something that is essentially irrational, delusional, and absurd. That is the nature of all conspiracy theories, of which antisemitism is just one. Think about it. Why do some people insist that the moon landings took place on a stage set someplace in the American West? Despite the existence of reams of scientific and personal evidence to the contrary, they believe this because they subscribe to the notion that the government and other powerful entities are engaged in vast conspiracies to fool the public.\(^1\) Governmental chicanery is the prism through which their view of the world is refracted. However irrational their ideas may seem to us, they make sense to them. Conspiracy theories give events that may seem inexplicable to some people an intentional explanation. If we were to provide these conspiracy theorists with evidence that proves the landing was indeed on the moon, they will a priori dismiss what we say and assume we are part of the conspiracy. To try to defeat an irrational supposition—especially when it is firmly held by its proponents—with a rational explanation is virtually impossible. Any information that
does not correspond with the conspiracy theorists' preferred social, political, or ethnic narrative is ipso facto false. Social scientists have described such theories as having a "self-sealing quality" that makes them "particularly immune to challenge." Conspiracy theories reduce complex issues to the simplest denominator and infuse them with heated exaggerations, suspicions, and fantasies that have no connection to facts. Some people are inclined to dismiss conspiracy theories as relatively benign. They consider people who promulgate them to be mentally unbalanced, right up there with folks who wear tinfoil hats to protect themselves from pernicious radio signals emitted by the government. While one can indeed question how rational these people are, they can still cause real damage.

The delusional aspect of antisemitism became strikingly clear to me in 1972, during my first trip to the Soviet Union. "Refuseniks," those Soviet Jews who were openly fighting the government for the freedom to emigrate, marveled at how the Communist regime managed to blame so many of its problems on Jews. At the same time that the government was persecuting Jews and spreading antisemitism, many Soviet citizens who hated the Communist regime believed it was a conspiracy of Jews. In a not atypical Jewish reaction to persecution, Refuseniks created a genre of jokes to ease their pain and illustrate the delusions of their oppressors. One has stayed with me. I share it with you in the hope of getting what will inevitably be a sobering exchange off to a humorous—or, more properly put, ironic—start.

The USSR suffered chronic shortages of consumer goods. Early one morning a rumor circulated in Moscow that a store was to receive a shipment of shoes. A queue formed immediately outside the store and continued to grow exponentially. After people had been waiting for an hour or so, the manager emerged and announced, "We will not receive enough shoes to accommodate everyone. Jews, leave the queue and go home." And they did. A few hours later he emerged again and said, "We will not receive enough shoes to accommodate everyone. All non-veterans, go home." And they did. A few hours later he emerged yet again and said, "We will not receive enough shoes to accommodate everyone. All those who are not members of the Communist Party, go home." And they did. As dusk was falling, he emerged for a final time and said, "We will not receive any shoes today. Everyone go home." Deeply disappointed, two exhausted and shivering loyal Communist Party members, both of whom were World War II veterans, walked away from the store. As they did, one turned to the other and bitterly proclaimed, "Those Jews, they have all the luck!"

Delusional? Irrational? Antisemitic? All of the above? Let's try to figure it out.

Yours,

DEL

P.S. Abigail, I smiled when I read about the suggestion that the guys on your European jaunt wear baseball caps instead of kippot. During a recent trip to Berlin, a friend gave me directions to an out-of-the-way synagogue. After some intricate explanations, he added, "When you get to the street that it's on, look out for the police with submachine guns; they're standing in front
of the synagogue. But if you have trouble finding the street, just watch for men in baseball caps and follow them. They will lead you to the synagogue." I smiled. Sometime later, my friend and I passed a group of tourists. The men were all in baseball caps. He leaned over to me and whispered, "Jews." I smiled at his certitude. The next day I saw the same group in a synagogue. The caps had been replaced with kippot. As you may well know, in recent years many local Jews have encouraged their coreligionists not to wear kippot in Berlin and other major German cities. Lest you think this is only a German phenomenon, let me disabuse you of that notion. During a recent trip to Italy I was looking for a highly recommended kosher restaurant. I got tangled up in a maze of old circuitous streets and alleyways. Then I saw some guys in baseball caps. On a whim, I followed them and, sure enough, they led me right to the restaurant.

So, baseball caps might not do the trick. But maybe a fruitful exchange of ideas will.

Yours,
DEL

A DEFINITION

Dear Professor Lipstadt:

Thanks for the response. Your focus on the delusional, irrational, and conspiratorial aspects of antisemitism was very helpful. What you seem to be saying is that antisemitism is illogical and, therefore, cannot be explained. I accept that. But if we can't explain it, can we at least define it? Is every negative thing that is written or uttered about Jews an expression of antisemitism? I know that not everything negative written or said about Israel is necessarily antisemitic, but where does one draw the line? Is antisemitism always intentional? Can someone be an unintentional antisemite? I am a bit embarrassed to ask this. My roommate, who is reading this over my shoulder, insists that, given that I have taken your courses and am Jewish, I should know the answers to these questions. She's right. I feel as though I should know. But I don't.

I do remember your recounting in class that old joke that an antisemite is someone who hates Jews more than is absolutely necessary. But now I'm looking for a more substantive answer.

Yours,

Abigail
Dear Deborah:

As you had predicted, I'm already learning from Abigail, who may be surprised to know that, despite all of my writings about prejudice, I've never systematically thought about how to best define antisemitism. It would seem that I should be able to define something about which I am so perturbed. Is it simply hatred of Jews? I believe it's more complex than that. "Someone who hates Jews more than is absolutely necessary" is certainly an intriguing place to start the conversation.

Yours,
Joe

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Dear Abigail and Joe:

Let me reassure both of you that you need not be the least bit uncomfortable or frustrated by the fact that you can't quite define antisemitism. You are hardly alone. Much of the general public can't define it. Even scholars in the field can't agree on a precise definition. In fact, there are people, particularly Jews, who eschew definitions and argue that Jews can feel antisemitism in their bones, the same way that African Americans recognize racism and gays recognize homophobia. Their position is best articulated by United States Supreme Court Justice Potter Stewart's famous comment about hard-core pornography as set forth in the Court's 1964 decision on whether Louis Malle's film *The Lovers* fit that category and, according to the law at the time, could therefore be banned because it was not consider-

"protected speech." In his opinion that the film should be considered protected speech, Stewart set down one of the most quoted phrases in Supreme Court history:

I shall not today attempt further to define the kinds of material I understand to be embraced within that short-hand description [hard-core pornography], and perhaps I could never succeed in intelligibly doing so. But I know it when I see it, and the motion picture involved in this case is not that.¹ [Emphasis added.]

We should be grateful to Justice Stewart not only for expanding the boundaries of artistic expression but also for giving us this highly utilitarian concept. We may at times find it hard to precisely define antisemitism, but we certainly know it when we see or hear it.

Equally useful, though slightly less elegant than Justice Stewart's formulation, is the term "Click!" which was introduced by Jane O'Reilly in an article in the inaugural issue of *Ms.* magazine, in December 1971. In her groundbreaking essay, O'Reilly described those moments in the workplace when a woman realizes that her opinion is being ignored, a man is being credited for her ideas, or she is expected to do something—serve refreshments or watch the boss's child—that no man is ever asked to do. If she complained to her male colleagues, they would be completely befuddled. Oblivious to the obvious gender discrimination, they might declare her oversensitive, if not a bit paranoid. O'Reilly dubbed that moment of her recognition "Click!!"²

Abigail, I am glad you remember my aside that "an antisemite is someone who hates Jews more than is absolutely neces-
sary." It makes us laugh, but it should also make us think. This pithy observation, which is often attributed to the late philosopher and intellectual giant Isaiah Berlin, provides a simple and useful tool for identifying prejudice. Imagine that someone has done something you find objectionable. You may legitimately resent the person because of his or her actions or attitudes. But if you resent him even an iota more because this person is Jewish, that is antisemitism. Let's concretize this by considering a hypothetical example. Imagine a driver who has been deliberately forced off the road by an erratic driver who happens to be black. The person who has almost been hit can legitimately complain to the other people in the car about the dangerous driver. But if he decries "that black guy" who has done this, he has crossed the line into racism. The driver's race is unrelated to his driving skills. Mentioning it can be considered a racist "dog whistle" that subliminally telegraphs the speaker's contempt for black people in general. (However, including the driver's race in your description of him to a police officer is of course not racist; it is simply one of the ways the driver can be physically identified by the cops who are trying to apprehend him.)

Now imagine someone telling his friend about a person whom he feels has cheated him in a business transaction. Complaining about that "crooked real-estate developer" is one thing. Complaining about that "crooked Jewish real-estate developer" is—Click!—antisemitism. But this example of the need to distinguish between a justifiable private grievance and a group-defaming prejudice may not take us far enough. I think it's important to recognize it as a Jewish joke complete with its implicit derogation of Jews in the midst of its defense of them. "Absolutely necessary" in Jewish hands means "Of course we are annoying but don't get carried away and try to kill us."

But "knowing it when you see it" and "Click" work only if we can identify antisemitism's essential elements, its building blocks. We need to unpack the contents of this hatred. Once it's identifiable, we can allow our instincts to check in. If you cannot define something, you cannot address it or fight it. So let's move on to more formal definitions. The International Holocaust Remembrance Alliance's descriptor, which has now been adopted by the European Parliament, identifies it as:

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. [Emphasis added.]

Non-Jews, too? Yes, indeed. In Arthur Miller's 1945 novel Focus, a man, who himself is passively antisemitic, develops blurred vision and must start wearing glasses. His boss and his neighbors decide that, based on his new look, he must be Jewish, and they subject him to prejudice and, eventually, physical violence. Though not a Jew, he is, ironically, the object of antisemitism.

The historical sociologist Helen Fein includes in her definition some additional important elements:

A persisting latent structure of hostile beliefs towards Jews as a collectivity manifested in individuals as attitudes, and in culture as myth, ideology, folklore, and imagery, and in actions—social or legal discrimination, political mobilization against Jews, and collective or
state violence—which results in and/or is designed to
distance, displace, or destroy Jews as Jews.* [Emphasis
in original.]

Note the operative word here: persisting. It doesn’t go away;
it’s not a onetime event. Though its outer form may evolve over
time, its essence remains the same. It is not unlike a stubborn
infection. Medication may alleviate the symptoms, but the
infection itself lies dormant and may reemerge at an opportu-
nity moment in a new incarnation, a different “outer shell.”
While the shape of the hatred may be adapted and massaged,
the basic ideas or illusions that are at its core remain constant.
In ancient and medieval times antisemitism was religious in
nature. Jews were hated because they refused to accept Chris-
tianity and, later, Islam. In the eighteenth century, racial and
political rationales were added to the religious one. Voltaire was
contemptuous of the Church’s hierarchical structure, but he was
equally contemptuous of Jews. (“You have surpassed all nations
in impertinent fables, in bad conduct and in barbarism. You
deserve to be punished, for this is your destiny.”)

By the nineteenth century, those on the political right were
accusing all Jews of being Socialists, Communists, and revolu-
tionaries. Those on the political left were accusing all Jews
of being wealth-obsessed capitalists who were opposed to
the social and economic betterment of the poor and working
classes. Further complicating the matter, the pseudoscience of
the eugenics movement posited that Jews were inferior in their
genetic makeup. Some of those who subscribed to this pseudo-
scientific claim simultaneously argued that Jews possessed
not just these inferior traits but superior ones as well. Jews
were maliciously intelligent, and because they were able to eas-
ily mix with non-Jews, they used those traits to wreak havoc
with non-Jews’ lives. That this was a contradiction in termssimultaneously superior and inferior—presented no problem
for the antisemite. This toxic brew of race, religion, politics, and
pseudoscience became the cornerstone of Nazi antisemitism
and is today a cornerstone of the white power movement and
white supremacist antisemitism.*

The structure of antisemitism means that it’s not just a bunch
of haphazard ideas, but it can result in, as Fein notes, “actions—
social or legal discrimination, political mobilization . . . and
collective or state violence.” It also has an internal coherence.
This coherence might be delusional and absurd—just like the
Communist who was sure Jews had all the luck because they
were kicked off the line first and did not have to wait hours in
the freezing cold—but it makes perfect sense to the antisemite.
Irrespective of whether the antisemitic manifestations were reli-
gious, political, social, racial, or some amalgam of them all, the
same themes or tropes remain embedded in them. We know
them well: Jews may be small in number, but they have the abil-
ity to compel far more powerful entities to do their bidding.
That bidding invariably involves aiding Jews at the expense of non-
Jews. Jews, over the course of millennia, irrespective of whether
they lived in close proximity to one another or were separated
by continents, have honed a cosmopolitan alliance that facili-
tates their evil deeds. The historical template for these charges

* I have chosen to use the terms “white power” and “white suprema-
cist” interchangeably. While the two terms may have shades of differ-
cence between them, they both speak to the racism, separatism, violence,
hate of Muslims, opposition to immigrants, and antisemitism that is
fundamental to these movements.
is to be found in the New Testament’s depictions of the death of Jesus. Irrespective of the fact that everyone involved in the story was Jewish—except for the Romans who did the actual crucifixion—the way the story has been told by generations of Church leaders is that “the Jews” killed Jesus, thereby depriving humanity of his wisdom, goodness, and glory. They did so because he demanded that the money changers be evicted from the Temple area, which would have threatened the income of the Temple hierarchy. According to Christian doctrine as it was taught for millennia, Jesus was crucified because, among other things, he threatened Jews’ power and financial well-being.

The Church had an institutional motivation in blaming and castigating the Jew. Judaism and Christianity were competing faiths. Christianity was Judaism’s “offspring,” and its success was threatened by the fact that there were Jews who refused to accept the new “truth.” A related historical building block in the evolution of this animus was the declaration by the apostle Paul that a “man is justified by faith without the deeds of the law” and that for Jesus “neither circumcision nor uncircumcision accomplishes anything.” In other words, belief in Jesus and his teachings replaced Jewish law and tradition. Supersessionism, or replacement theology—the declaration by Paul that Christianity is the one true faith and therefore supersedes or replaces Judaism, both in belief and in deed—became an essential tenet of the new faith. Pauline doctrine marginalized Jews, particularly those who continued to practice Jewish traditions, and depicted them as blind to the truth. Jews, Paulists argued, repudiated this new faith because of their inherent maliciousness. This formulation rendered Judaism more than just a competing religion. It became a source of evil. It is this that makes antisemitism different from other prejudices. Anti-Semitism is not simply the hatred of something “foreign,” but the hatred of a perpetual evil in the world. Jews are not an enemy but the ultimate enemy. This hatred is ubiquitous. It has persisted through the millennia, through different cultures. It has been present in many geographic areas—including those with no Jews in residence. It has permeated an array of ideologies, even the ostensibly atheistic Marxism.

It’s important for you to understand that antisemitism, as is the case with any prejudice, exists independently of any action by Jews. Sometimes, an accusation against a particular Jew, or even a group of Jews, may be correct. There are some Jews who are obsessed with money and who mistreat their employees. But the same can be said about certain non-Jews. Saying that “of course X is obsessed with money; he’s a Jew, isn’t he?” is antisemitic. Anti-Semitism is not the hatred of people who happen to be Jews. It is hatred of them because they are Jews.

Given the absurdity of antisemitic accusations, why do they gain any traction? One explanation may be that, having been embedded in society for millennia, they have gained a staying power that is hard to eradicate. Antisemitism also became a means of explaining otherwise inexplicable situations. For example, when the bubonic plague raged across Europe in the fourteenth century, Jews were accused of poisoning the wells and spreading the disease. For people schooled in millennia of Church-based anti-Semitism, it provided an easy, straightforward, and logical explanation for a seemingly inexplicable disease. Economic downturns, political tensions, unsuccessful military actions, and a myriad of other crises were explained away by attributing them to the interference of Jews. This blaming of the Jews for the suffering of others served only to further reinforce the power of anti-Semitism.
Some, however, argue that there is no internal coherence to antisemitism. Jean-Paul Sartre, for example, insisted that antisemitism is a "passion" and rejected the notion that it was an empirical idea. Antisemitism, according to Sartre, made no intellectual sense and thus should not be dignified by being called an "idea." Sartrès notion of the irrational seems to discount the historical and religious origins of Jew-hatred. Echoing and expanding on Sartre is Anthony Julius who, while fully cognizant of the historical lineage of this hatred, argues that antisemitism must ultimately be seen as a "discontinuous, contingent aspect of a number of distinct mentalities and milieus... It is a heterogeneous phenomenon, the site of collective hatreds, and of cultural anxieties and resentments." By rejecting the notion that antisemitism possesses an intellectually credible framework or unified field theory, Sartre and Julius call attention to both the irrational nature of this animus and the reason it's so hard to fight. Julius adds something else to our discussion. He refuses to elevate the antisemite in stature and importance. Consider the exchange I had with Julius, who was my lawyer when I was sued for libel by David Irving for calling him a Holocaust denier, an antisemite, and a racist. Shortly before the trial was to begin, upset at the personal burden of this legal battle, I told Julius that I was intent on decimating Irving. "He's not that important," Julius replied. I was flabbergasted. He and his firm had worked on my case pro bono for close to two years. He despised the way Irving fabricated history and spread antisemitism. How could he say he was unimportant? Sensing my confusion, he explained what he meant. It's not antisemitism that is inconsequential, it's the antisemite himself. "Think of fighting Irving as the equivalent of what you must do when you step in dirt left by a dog on the street," he said—except he used a far more graphic term than "dirt." "The dirt has no intrinsic value. There is nothing interesting about it. Nonetheless, one must carefully clean it off one's feet prior to entering one's home. If you fall to do so and track it into the house, then you face a serious and long-term problem. So, too, with the antisemite." Julius was right. He knew the lies and prejudice Irving spewed had to be relentlessly fought. Our challenge was and continues to be to fight the antisemite without elevating him or her in stature. Antisemites must be fought, especially if there is a chance that their passion or ideology stands a chance of becoming part of a national policy, but they are people of no consequence. Can something have a coherent structure while at the same time be a heterogeneous passion? I would argue that it can. This is part of its "elastic" quality. Sometimes it may present itself as a passion. In other instances, it may present itself as normative. But whatever form it takes, we must always insist that antisemitism has never made sense and never will. Fight it. But don't elevate it or its purveyors in importance.

Yours,
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