New Clothing, Old Hatred: Changes and Transformations of Antisemitism

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Antisemitism: Contemporary America

I want to share a tale which is not fake news. Many years ago, the American business man turned ambassador to England Walter Annenberg hired Bernard Lewis, distinguished Dodge Professor of Near Eastern Studies at Princeton University and tasked him with eliminating antisemitism. One year later Annenberg unceremoniously fired the professor because antisemitism persisted. This story should alert us to the tenacity of Jew-hatred and the necessity of our being even more tenacious in combatting this longest lasting social pathology. My remarks address five concerns; what is antisemitism, the duration and corrosive power of anti-Semitic tropes, the Leo Frank lynching as American precursor, right and leftwing Jew-hatred, and Is America different?

Recently, the American Jewish Committee released the results of its initial concurrent surveys of Jewish opinion in the United States, Israel, and France, the world's three largest Jewish communities. American and French Jews fear for their safety amidst growing antisemitism. Following the murders at the tree of Life Synagogue in Pittsburgh and a HaBaD synagogue north of San Diego, 65% of American Jews feel that the status of United States Jews is less secure than one year ago. Moreover, antisemitic incidents in America rose almost 60% in 2018. Only 15% of Jews feel safer today.

What is anti-Semitism?

What exactly is antisemitism? Judeophobia has a long and inglorious history beginning not with Christianity, but with paganism in the Greco-Roman world. Against the pagan practice of emperor deification, the Jewish God was invisible, covenanted with His people, and attested to a morally superior set of values. Jews were disliked because they were unlike the majority. Their customs, religious practices, especially the laws of keeping kosher, and endogamous marriage set them apart from the majority, with the advent of Christianity the animus was clearly theological. Christianity had "replaced" Judaism. The Christian teaching of contempt led to frequently fatal conclusions spearheaded by the false accusation that the Jews were "decide people, e.g., they murdered God.

So-called "scientific" racism only emerged in the nineteenth century. At a time when science emerged as a kind of demi- god, crude terms like Jew-hatred were no longer deemed acceptable. "Antisemitism" was a neater more antiseptic sounding term. Two names closely associated with this pseudo-scientific racism are Wilhelm Marr, founder of the League of Antisemites, and Arthur de Gobineau who helped legitimize racism, opposing an imaginary Aryan Master Race to an alleged inferior Jewish race. Marr, a German agitator, in addition to founding his anti-Semitic league, contributed to the rise of antisemitism by popularizing the term.

Duration and corrosive power of anti-Semitic tropes

A certain strand of rhetorical antisemitism is captured in the statements of two Jewish intellectuals. Sir Isaiah Berlin is the alleged author of this definition of an anti-Semite: “One who hates Jews more than is necessary.” Professor Deborah Lipstadt, in her book *Antisemitism Here and Now* explains this by contending that it describes a person who identifies an entire group based on the act of an individual member of that particular group.[1] The distinguished literary critic, Irving Howe aphoristically stated: “Inside the warmest of hearts there is a cold spot for the Jews.” This statement refers to Christian theological triumphalism which, unfortunately, still lingers in certain quarters of the religion and serves as a persistent challenge to those seeking genuine dialogue.

Moving to more recent times, Yossi Klein HaLevi, speaking at a Leadership conference sponsored by the Anti-Defamation League in June, 2019, in Washington, D.C. defined antisemitism as the “transformation of the Jew into a symbol for whatever a society sees as its greatest threat or most objectionable quality.” Translated, this means that for Christianity Jews were Christ killers; For Marxists Jews become the exemplars of capitalism; and for the isolationist Alt-Right Jews are globalists. Paradoxically, Jews are seen simultaneously as too clannish and too universal. Israel becomes the most hated nation in the world. In the post-colonial era Israel is attacked by the Left as an apartheid state.

Many anti-Semitic tropes are taken from *The Protocols of the Learned Elders of Zion*, a notorious forgery produced by the Czar’s secret police in 1903. A vicious propagandistic work, the *Protocols* became the world’s most read anti-Semitic work. Falsely claiming a conspiracy by world Jewry to take over the planet, the book portrays an imagined religious, cultural, and economic plot by the Jews to subdue the earth. Sadly, the book still exercises influence. The late unlamented Saudi King Faisal habitually presented copies of this literary hoax to newsman accompanying American Secretary of State Henry Kissinger on diplomatic missions to the kingdom. Several years ago, on a trip to Argentina, my wife and I noticed that the *Protocols* were for sale in a bookstall near a central Buenos Aires subway stop. The volume is also sold in Japan where there is no substantial Jewish population.

The lynching of Leo Frank, precursor of right-wing Jewish hatred

The Leo Frank lynching as a precursor of right-wing Jew hatred. Leo Frank (1884-1915) was a supervisor in an Atlanta, Georgia pencil factory. He was falsely accused of raping and murdering thirteen-year Mary Phagan a white employee. Frank was in a precarious situation from the beginning. In the first place he was a transplanted northerner. In addition, he was a Jew in the south and thus viewed as a cultural and religious Other, an unassimilable outsider. Frank was also the victim of false testimony and mob hysteria. Georgia Governor John M. Slaton believed Frank was innocent and commuted his sentence to life imprisonment. However, this action served only to enflame the crowd. The governor was forced to flee Atlanta. The black janitor who bore false witness, was subsequently believed to be the actual murderer. The lynch mob broke into the jail housing Frank, dragged him out and lynched him. The murderers shortly thereafter helped establish the modern Ku Klux Klan.

Hatred of Jews by the right and left

Professor Lipstadt advances a contemporary typology of anti-Semites suggesting “clueless,” “polite,” “enabler,” and “extremist” categories. She defines the first as “an otherwise nice and wellmeaning person completely unaware of internalizing anti-Semitic stereotypes, as in the statement “I know you will appreciate a bargain when you see one” (76) “Polite antisemitism “is easily camouflaged; it is subtle and allusive” (73). The “apology” of the polite anti-Semite is disingenuous, revealing a deepseated feeling that anything wrong had been said/done in the first place. Momentarily skipping over the “enabler,” we note that the “extremist anti-Semite is one who actively pursues or endorses a vicious and murderous policy of Jew-hatred. Hitler is of course the

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extreme example here. But so too was the entire top echelon of the Nazi party. In the American cultural setting relevant names and groups include David Duke, Father Charles Coughlin, the so-called radio priest who spewed forth his anti-Semitic bilge every Sunday reaching a vast audience, (20 to 30 million people), White Nationalists and White Supremacists. Finally, there is the "enabler." Here one finds the politically inept and loutish Donald Trump and Jeremy Corbin. Enablers are "directly responsible for legitimizing explicit hostility toward Jews" (46). We note that in the 2016 presidential race Trump tweeted an image of Hilary Clinton replete with a Star of David and a dollar sign. Moreover, in addressing members of the Republican Jewish Coalition, the president doubled down on his venality saying, "you are not going to vote for me because I do not want your money. You want to control your own politicians." Trump may or may not be an anti-Semite. But there is no doubt that he is a superb dog-whistler whose speeches to his base slide seamlessly into encouraging hatred and antisemitism. Once the toothpaste is out of the tube, one does not put it back. Furthermore, when notorious antisemites, racists, and white nationalists such as David Duke, and Richard Spencer celebrate your statements as advancing their cause you know that a real problem exists.

Similarly, Jeremy Corbin, leader of Britain's Labor Party, has consistently provided support and comfort to those who would destroy the State of Israel. He attends funerals of the so-called "martyrs," who in actuality are Palestinian suicide murderers and accuses the Jews of not fitting in with British culture. I suppose he thinks that he does. But not everyone in his party concurs. Several Jewish members have recently resigned citing the climate of hostility and Jew hatred Corbin is fostering.

Right wing antisemitism is not a new phenomenon. Strongly nativistic and hostile to the Other, the right-wing extremists view everyone different from them, i.e., non-whites and Jews with contempt. In the past half century many factors have coalesced to form a background empowering right wing extremism. There is first of all the Patriot Movement whose white nationalism reminds me of the Polish nativistic movement after the second world war. "Poland for the Poles" they screamed. In other words, Poland for those who are white Catholics. Jews are not wanted. America, unfortunately has had more than its share of fellow travelers: As the historian Michael Dobkowski notes, the two decades between the 1920s and the 1940s witnessed large scale antisemitic attitudes in America. Moreover, antisemitic legislation breezed through congress. In addition, high-profile antisemites have had undue influence on American culture; the politician Patrick Buchanan, the aviator Charles "Lucky Lindy" Lindbergh, and the auto manufacturer Henry Ford whose newspaper *The Dearborn Independent* ran daily excerpts from the *Protocols*. Ford finally realized that Jews also purchased automobiles. This lessened, somewhat, his reliance on antisemitic tropes.

Also, since the end of World War II, several factors emerged as contributors to public cynicism and disillusionment; the assassination of an American president, the unprecedented resignation of another, and the impeachment of a third. These events fanned popular conspiracy theories. The extreme incompetence and corruption of public figures such as Spiro Agnew, a noted anti-Semite, and Sarah Palin led to the growth of distrust and the rise of fear of immigrants, as did the emergence of the Tea Party. Many trained Viet Nam era soldiers were convinced that the United States government had betrayed them in the military struggle. They formed a paramilitary right wing ready to challenge and confront the more traditional American conservative movement. Furthermore, the demographics of the country are changing. It is predicted that by 2040 the city of Houston will no longer be majority Caucasian. This leads to further xenophobic attitudes. In the 2016 presidential race, most of the country's evangelicals appeared to have forsaken their religious and moral positions in favor of a political charlatan who promised to appoint conservatives to the Supreme, and other, courts. White national movements grew and made increasingly bold assertions of their power utilizing, typically in anonymous tweets, the free and widespread access provided by social media. This so-called Alt-Right is convinced that traditional conservatives have sold out the "real" right wing values. Furthermore, the Alt- Right refers to the Federal government

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as the Z.O G. (Zionist Occupied Government).

Alt-Right, attests Professor George Hawley, "is fundamentally concerned with race." It is a "white-nationalist movement."[2] Moreover, this movement "uniformly rejects traditional Republican views on foreign policy"[3] favorably evaluating dictators such as Russia's Vladimir Putin and Syria's Bashar al Assad.[4] Making light of, or dismissing the Holocaust is a commonplace among a certain segment of the Alt-Right. The 2016 election of Donald trump gave an enormous boost to this movement and to claims of "fake news."

Words, like elections, have consequences. "In the beginning was the word, attests the Gospel of John, "and the word became flesh." The words of the Alt-Right and its deliberate distortion of the truth spread via social media. Fake news, disinformation and outright lies have become "flesh" in a manner of speaking. For example, President Trump's use of racism and antisemitic tropes have resulted in an increase in violence and murder; othering the Other has left the American president with blood on his hands. Playing to fear rather than hope, The murderers at Pittsburgh's Tree of Life Synagogue and Poway's HaBaD temple echoed Trumpian language and sentiment as justification for their cowardly deeds.

A note about left-wing antisemitism. Antisemitic statements and acts also emanate from the left. Here it is crucial to distinguish between legitimate criticism and antisemitism. Israel has become the target of the BDS (boycott, divest, sanctions) movement. The founder of this movement is Omar Barghouti who sees no possibility for the existence of a Jewish State. This begs the question of whether the BDS movement is an appeal for justice or a cynical and thinly veiled attempt to eliminate Israel. Natan Sharansky has offered a "3D test" of antisemitism to distinguish legitimate criticism of Israel from outright Jew-hatred. The three Ds are Delegitimating of Israel, Demonization, and Double Standard. This test has been adopted by the American Department of State.

As noted earlier, the persistence of antisemitic tropes is truly mind-boggling. The international edition of the New York Times (27-28 April, 2019) illustrates this contention in a thoroughly distasteful manner. A blind Donald Trump is being led by a dog with the face of Benjamin Netanyahu, replete with a Star of David hanging from his collar. There is no appreciable difference between this drawing and those that appeared in Nazi Germany. The editors of the Times subsequently apologized for their poor judgement.

Conclusion: Is America different?

Addressing the issue of whether or not America is a different kind of diaspora experience for the Jewish people, Professor Michael Dobkowski writes: "America is different, but maybe not different enough."[5] Holocaust survivor and scholar, Nehama Tec observes that lacking a clear signal from the top, individual Christians were left to their own conscience whether they would save or help exterminate European Jews during the Holocaust.

In the American context the signal from the top encourages hatred and antisemitism. The Tree of Life and HaBaD murders – separated by six months – affirms the position of Yossi Klein Halevi that Jewish life in America is under radical assault by the Alt-Right. Moreover, President Trump who so emboldens the American Alt-Right does the same for the European branch of the movement. There were definitely *not* "Good people on both sides" in Charlottesville. The World Wide Web is the primary site of Alt-Right activity. The web is completely amoral. It can be used as an important research tool for peace-building, mutual recognition and deeper understanding of the Other. It can, however, also be a purveyor of hate, inciter of violence and recruiter of terrorists. Thus far, no meaningful response to monitoring the web has emerged. Questions remain; can the World Wide Web be contained? What about the issue of free speech? What of censorship concerns?

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History confirms the persistence of antisemitism which crosses borders, spans time, and changes shape. We need to be more creative in fighting for the dignity of the individual than antisemitism is in advocating for hatred. This means not allowing antisemitism and hatred to become normalized. Moreover, this requires recognizing that Jews remain the proverbial canary in the coal mine. The distinguished international attorney and Holocaust survivor Samuel Pisar rightly observed that persecution always begins with the Jews but never ends with them. Martin Niemoller's plaintive cry "When they came for me there was no one left to speak up," has found much – but far from complete - societal resonance. Finally, the aphorist Elias Canetti reminds readers that once human life is no longer the standard, there are no standards.

Is America different – a final look. Yes: there is a free press, there is separation of church and state, there is an independent judiciary and a strong interfaith movement which devotes itself to common concerns including the cause of peace and justice. No: Democracy is a fragile plant. There is a strong and on-going nativist impulse in American culture. There is as well much corruption. In addition, there is a subversive and ill-informed President who imperils the value of a democratic society. Consequently, the jury is still out regarding the question: Is American different? However, if you are ever offered a position involving ridding the world of antisemitism, take it. The work is steady.

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