An interview with

AMBASSADOR DEBORAH LIPSTADT

‘Beyond the Welfare of the Jews’

HISTORIAN Deborah Lipstadt became the U.S. special envoy to monitor and combat antisemitism, a position in the Department of State with the rank of ambassador, in May 2022. This interview with SAPIR Associate Editor Felicia Herman was conducted before the White House released its U.S. National Strategy to Counter Antisemitism in May 2023.

Felicia Herman: The attacks on Jews in Pittsburgh and Poway caused a lot of shock in American Jewish communities and in America more broadly. I was surprised, though, to see that some historians of American Jewry were also quite shocked. Their view, apparently, was that

American antisemitism was "over." As a historian, were you shocked? And did these attacks, and the ones that have come after them, cause you to rethink your historical paradigm for understanding antisemitism in America?

Deborah Lipstadt: I was shocked, but I wasn't surprised. There had been a series of events, trends. Themes like "the Jews will not replace us" had emerged long before Charlottesville. The blatant nature of the behavior was new, but we had seen signs before this: in the [2016] presidential campaign, or attacks on George Soros, or through the use of the term "globalists" to mean a private group lurking behind the scenes. And all of it only increased during Covid. So it hasn't reshaped my paradigm, but it did convince me that we were in a different era. Maybe not a new era, but a different era than we had been in, in the '80s, '90s, the first decades of the Aughts.

Herman: Another thing that those attacks reanimated was the question of whether antisemitism is worse on the Left or the Right. White nationalists marching through Charlottesville certainly is a rare, public expression of antisemitism from the Right. What's your thinking on this question of "which is worse"?

Lipstadt: First of all, I've moved away from talking about a Left–Right dichotomy. I don't find it useful, and it traps you in whataboutism. What I said in my testimony in Charlottesville was that antisemitism is ubiquitous. It's free-flowing. It comes from everywhere on the political spectrum, including centrists. It comes from Christians, Muslims, atheists — even sometimes from Jews.

What is striking to me is that it's the same, irrespective of where it's coming from. The stereotypes, the templates are the same — two people may be in diametrically opposed positions, politically or cul-

turally, but the template they're using about Jews is the same: Jews are all-powerful, all-wealthy, conniving, and tricky; they work behind the scenes; they have dual loyalty.

Second, I've perhaps been more attuned to antisemitism from the Left than other historians because of my time living in England when I was on trial there. I read the British press, and I was very familiar with Jeremy Corbyn's Labour Party. That was clear-cut antisemitism.

But ultimately, I think it's a bit of a fool's errand to get into the "which is worse" game. If I were Sholem Aleichem, I would say, "Would you rather have dysentery in Kyiv or cholera in Czernowitz?" They're both bad.

And too often, it's just a foil for one side trying to justify what's happening on the other side. I know many people who can very accurately identify antisemitism on the other side of the political spectrum from where they are. Their analysis is spot-on! But what they don't see is the antisemitism from the people sitting next to them, on their side. So then I stop and ask myself, "Am I seeing a real fight against antisemitism, or am I seeing the political weaponization of antisemitism?" And I hate that.

I really see myself as an equal-opportunity fighter against antisemitism. I'll give you a few examples.

Within a couple of days of [my] entering office, we had the Lufthansa affair. There were a lot of Hasidic Jews on a flight to visit the grave of a rebbe on his yahrzeit. They didn't buy tickets together, they didn't come together, they didn't have an organized leader. They just were people who happened to be on a flight together. But Lufthansa treated them as a group. Some of the Hasidic Jews on the plane were not observing the mask mandate, but all of them were punished. We spoke out very strongly; so much so that within a couple of days, the CEO of Lufthansa was in my office. And we supported the airline's team as they worked out a plan for how to avoid this kind of thing in

the future — what to do, how to acknowledge it. No one on their staff of 105,000 people was saying, "Let's figure out a way of kicking these Jews off the plane." It was what we today in the United States might call unconscious bias: treating a whole group in one way because of the actions of a few. That was mid-May [2022].

A few weeks later, I was in Israel, and a group of American families were celebrating their children's *b'nei mitzvah* at the egalitarian prayer space at the Western Wall in Jerusalem. And a group of young Haredi men — I don't want to call them hooligans, because that would make light of what they did — came in, tore up the prayer books. And the police did nothing. I tweeted about it, saying that had this happened in any other country, we would have no problem identifying it as antisemitism.

A final example: In October, there were efforts under way in Finland to require the stunning of animals prior to their being slaughtered, which would have affected both halal and kashrut. My counterpart in the European Union, Katharina von Schnurbein, was very concerned about this. There is no *shechita* [kosher slaughter] in Finland — there are too few Jews — but she was afraid of the snowball effect if the law passed in Finland. So with our very strong support, she convened a one-day conference on religious slaughter. It brought together all the EU member states, rabbis, imams, etc., to talk about this. And one of the rabbis present pointed out that he has been asked to come to the EU to talk about religious slaughter, but always in opposition to some bill or regulation that's being considered. This was the first time that he'd ever been asked to come to talk affirmatively.

So I look at those three things as markers: attacks on Hasidic Jews, on nontraditional Jews, the issue of kashrut. If it's something that smacks of antisemitism or ignorance of Jewish observance or Jewish cultural traditions — and sometimes people just don't

understand what they're doing or saying — then we're going to speak up about it.

Herman: One often hears people say that antisemitism is "the canary in the coal mine."

Lipstadt: I'm one of them. The canary in the coal mine of democracy.

Herman: Right. But as thinkers such as Ruth Wisse and Dara Horn have pointed out, why should we need to extrapolate to a threat to others to convince people to care about a threat to the Jews? Isn't it bad enough that people hate Jews — shouldn't that alone be a reason to fight it?

Lipstadt: Of course Ruth and Dara are right. In the best of all possible worlds, the fight against antisemitism should be enough. There's a population in your midst that could be vulnerable, and it's the job of the government to protect it. Militarily, politically, whatever it might be.

But we don't live in the best of all possible worlds. When I say it's the canary in the coal mine of democracy, I don't do that in order to convince the non-Jewish world to take a stake in this fight; they should have a stake in it simply because it's wrong. But I want to show them that antisemitism is a conspiracy theory that extends well beyond the welfare of the Jews. I don't do it to try to find a way to make them care — I say it because it's true. Think of Weimar Germany. I'm not saying that the antisemitism that Weimar tolerated and allowed to flourish was the cause of its downfall, but it certainly didn't help.

Herman: Can we talk about antisemitism on the internet and social

media, and how to square calls for regulation with our principles of free expression?

Lipstadt: Speaking as a representative of the United States government, I'll tell you how we think about it. I use social media all day long — tweeting, checking the internet, seeing what's doing. It's the *misuse* of social media that we find so disturbing. What we really want is for social-media platforms to live up to the standards that they themselves set. If they did so, all might not be perfect, but it would be much better. We're not looking to eliminate free speech; these are private platforms.

Many years ago, when I was beginning to research Holocaust denial, there were college newspapers running Holocaust-denial op-eds and ads. They said, "It's the freedom of the press, we can publish them." And I said, "Have you ever read the First Amendment? The *government* can't restrict speech, but you're a private entity. Do you publish ads, say, for pornography? No. It's the same here — why publish this?" I think sometimes people try to keep their minds so open that their brains fall out.

Herman: Ha. I want to bring up something else that Ruth Wisse often says, which I think about a lot: Antisemitism isn't a Jewish problem — we're not the ones who are infected by it, so we shouldn't be the ones fighting to cure the body politic of it. How do you think about this, as a Jewish person in your role today? Why is this *your* job to do?

Lipstadt: Once again I agree with Ruth. It's not a Jewish problem. In the best of all possible worlds, the Holocaust should be taught in European history classes, because it was something that affected, that infected, Europeans broadly. In Jewish studies you could have courses on Jewish responses, Jewish literature, Jewish resistance, Jew-

ish life during the Holocaust. But the Holocaust itself should be taught in European history, which has not happened at most universities. Would it be better to stand on principle and say, "This should be taught there, and not here, so we don't do it"? No.

But I have many colleagues, probably over 20 of them in different countries who have a portfolio that is parallel to mine — and a good number of them are not Jews. Italy, England, Germany, the EU. And their passion for this work is unparalleled.

On the other hand, should we as Jews be sitting back and saying, "This is your problem, we're not going to do anything about it"? When your kid is bullied, do you say, "It's the bully's parents who need to deal with the problem, I'm not going to get involved"? No. Defend yourself!

Herman: Your work is to fight antisemitism around the world. What are you seeing in your travels that worries you the most?

Lipstadt: Certainly grassroots antisemitism, and the ways that the internet nurtures, encourages, fertilizes it. I'm also worried about the normalization of antisemitism, even in America. My remit is overseas, but of course I hear from people. I was talking to a New Yorker the other day whose kids and nieces and nephews go to Jewish day schools. They wear baseball caps on the subway to cover up their yarmulkes. On the Upper West Side of Manhattan! Their parents aren't worried that they're going to get beat up, but they will get hassled. And you see that abroad, too. That normalization — that it's okay to say these things, to do these things — is very worrisome to me.

I'm also worried about the confluence, the intersection between these views and the willingness to use violence. That's very disturbing.

On the other hand, when I speak in different places, people often ask me, "Is this the 1930s again?" I say no. In the '30s, the dan-

ger was coming from government — from Germany, Austria, Poland, Italy — across the European continent. Today, those same governments have envoys to monitor and combat antisemitism. That's a big deal. I wouldn't write that off and say it's meaningless. It's not. And most of them take it quite seriously. My predecessors in this office used to have to go to France or Italy or Germany when something bad happened, to ask, "What are you doing about this?" But now there's someone on the ground in those places. Sometimes we'll join them, to be there, to urge particular actions.

But that's what's called in Israel a *hetzi nechama* — "half a consolation" — because it's terrific that this work is happening, but also antisemitism is getting worse. Sadly, I work in a growth industry.

Herman: How would you articulate the role of government and the diplomatic corps in this work, relative to the work of NGOs?

Lipstadt: There are several terrific NGOs working on these issues, combating antisemitism, fighting prejudice of all kinds. But when I walk into a room — and I've made 17 country visits thus far — I represent the United States government. It's qualitatively different, and it's a pretty awesome thing, especially for a child of two immigrants. And it's a pretty heavy responsibility. That's why the creation of this office that I hold, and its elevation by the Congress to the ambassadorial level, is so important. When I walk into an office abroad with this title, it's a signal that the U.S. government has elevated this issue to the highest level. The ambassador is the representative of the head of the government.

One of the most fascinating parts of my role is my travel to the Persian Gulf, and to some of the Muslim-majority countries. I just came back from Tunisia and Morocco. I was in Tunisia 24 hours before the shooting on the island of Djerba. I would have been upset

about what happened there regardless, but it felt worse because we were on a real high from that visit. Just before the shooting, I gave an interview, saying it was quite a moment in Tunisia — this indigenous Jewish community, far smaller than it used to be, having this celebration that was centuries old. Being part of it was really uplifting. I told the interviewer what I had told the Tunisian officials just before, that I'd go back and tweet, write, and talk about the festival to tell everyone about it — and that would boost tourism, which is a big deal for a country that's not as economically vibrant as it might be. The feeling of the State Department is that while increased tourism won't solve all sorts of problems, it does help. When you have people visiting, it's in the best interest of the country to ensure stability, to ensure that their Jewish community lives in peace and security.

Herman: We set up SAPIR because we want it to do something — to offer policy prescriptions, not just analysis. What's your advice to Jewish leaders and philanthropists about how to combat antisemitism?

Lipstadt: It's a great question, and I wish I had an easy answer. I am also well aware that no matter what I do in this job and as long as I stay in it, I'm not going to solve this problem. I can only try to contain it, to get people to take it seriously.

I was just reading an article in *Forbes* about "becoming a 'head's-up Jew'," by an observant woman who works in a big corporation. When she took off for Jewish holidays, she would just say, "I'm out." When she would decline to eat something at a work meeting, she wouldn't explain why or push back. She decided — enough of the *sha, shtil* thing.

It will sound weak, but it's crucial: People need to speak out. The time of *sha, shtil* is far behind us. Many people still feel it — "I don't want to make a fuss." But we cannot afford that.

The other thing I would say is that wherever you are on the politi-

cal spectrum, you need to speak out about the antisemitism you see on your own side, from those around you. You have more street cred with them. Don't hesitate. Be proud.

The point is: Speak up, speak out. Sometimes it's ignorance that you're speaking against, so figure out a smart way of responding to ignorant comments. Call it out, educate. I think that's crucial.

Herman: I've been in Jewish philanthropy for 20 years, and just in that short time, we've gone from arguing that we should *stop* talking about antisemitism so much, and even the Holocaust, and focus on strengthening Jewish life and living. "Joy vs. oy," as you put it in your book. And now in Jewish communal organizations, we're back to talking about antisemitism all the time. In a dark way, it offers an opportunity: It awakens people to their Jewish identity.

Lipstadt: I'm glad you raised that point. Even as we speak up and speak out, we should be very careful of not transmitting the message, particularly to young Jews, that that's the raison d'être for being Jewish. Once you do that, you've ceded control of your identity to your oppressor.

A friend once said to me that in his first marriage, he was too busy building his career to really pay attention to his kids' Jewish education. His child from his second marriage, on the other hand, goes to a Jewish day school. And he said, "My older kids don't observe, they don't know that much, but whenever there's antisemitism, they're at the barricades." He was very proud of this, and I just smiled. But inside, my heart was breaking. When do they feel Jewish — only when someone hates the Jews?

Taking off both my diplomatic and my historian hats, and putting on my who-I-am hat: We are the inheritors, the bearers of a multifaceted, vibrant tradition. It has given so much to the world and to

ourselves. Sometimes I go to the National Archives just to check on the Constitution and the Declaration of Independence, just to make sure they're still there and that they're okay. You can't — you shouldn't — read those documents without being aware of where those ideas came from. There are no footnotes, but you know it: These ideas are rooted in the Hebrew Bible.

Herman: So — if you had a billion dollars to give Jewishly, how much of it would you put into fighting antisemitism versus building up Jewish life?

Lipstadt: I've never imagined that question! I think I'd split it equally. Or because so many people are now taking on fighting antisemitism, maybe I'd act as a corrective and put more into Jewish life. It's not enough to build the barricades — you have to nurture what's inside as well. I'm the product of 12 years of day-school education, of Jewish summer camps, of studying in Israel for two years. One of the reasons I can do what I do is that I know who I am. I have a really strong grounding. I have nothing in my tradition that I apologize for. Sure, there are things I don't like, but I'm deeply proud of who I am. So maybe it wouldn't be 50-50. Drop the maybe — it wouldn't be 50-50.

Herman: I'm very grateful for your time, and sincerely grateful for your work.

Lipstadt: Thank you; that means a lot. Sometimes people come up to me and say, "We're counting on you," and that's a bit daunting. But just before I was sworn in, I was at the White House for a screening of a movie about the Holocaust. It was a small group, and the president came out to greet us. It was before I had been sworn in, and as I started to introduce myself to him, he stopped me and said, "I know

exactly who you are, and you have a very big job. We're counting on you." Every time I see him, he says, "Keep up the good fight." I think we have a president who really cares about this — from the gut, from the *kishkes*. I knew I would find support for my work in the State Department, but I've been pushing against an open door. I don't even have to push.

Together, we're pushing the notion of the interconnectedness of hatred. That, as we were saying before, "what starts with the Jews never ends with the Jews." People shouldn't think they're so secure over there, just because they're not Jewish — and if you're going to fight one type of hate, you have to fight them all. But we don't just say, "Hate is bad," and then sit together in a kumbaya kind of way. All hatreds aren't the same. We have to call out antisemitism by its name, specify and explain what it is, and then show how it's part of a larger fabric. ✳