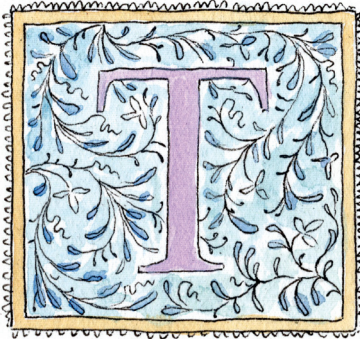


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How the Jewish Coalition Against Antisemitism Fractured



THE VIDEO that caused a split between an emerging coalition against antisemitism and one of the largest Jewish communal organizations in the United States gave off so faint a signal across the vastness of the internet that the Wayback Machine didn't preserve the clip's original web page at any point during its roughly two-week lifespan. That's not so shocking: Jewish existence has been awash in disproportion ever since a botched reconnaissance mission earned us an extra 40 years wandering in the wilderness, and the obscure relationship between small things and much bigger ones has revealed itself in a multitude of tragic and surprising ways across three mil-

lennia. The “woke antisemitism” video controversy is a minor but striking instance of deep anxieties and fundamental fault lines erupting through a series of normal-sized mistakes.

As often happens, some of the most urgent questions in Jewish life converged around a farce.



The Combat Antisemitism Movement’s three-and-a-half-minute video, published in early June and un-published on June 18, claimed that “wokeism” is “fann[ing] the flames of antisemitism” by creating an “oppressor vs. oppressed binary” that blames “successful groups,” including the Jews, for most of the world’s problems. The video treated “wokeness” as if this fraught term had a single accepted definition and featured several still images of right-wing extremists, a mistake that could give the impression that there exist no “woke antisemites” for CAM to showcase.

A journalist from the *Forward* tweeted about the video after CAM shared it in a weekly newsletter. “Really strident stuff coming from a coalition representing @jfederations, @AJCGlobal and most of the Jewish mainstream,” wrote reporter Arno Rosenfeld. In 2021, Rosenfeld authored a 5,000-word report on CAM, implying that the two-year-old group, whose advisory board chairman is Natan Sharansky, functioned as a “dark money” front group for the conservative Kansas oil billionaire Adam Beren.

The Jewish Federations of North America CEO Eric Fingerhut, a moderate Democrat during his 16 years in electoral politics, said his organization learned about the video only after having been tagged in Rosenfeld’s June 16 tweet. JFNA is the umbrella group for nearly 400 local federations, the organizational structures that often serve as the main channel of public and charitable

funds into communal institutions. “Federations are very active in government relations at the state and local level,” Fingerhut told me.

Meanwhile, the Jewish Council for Public Affairs “first learned of the video just before Shabbat on June 16 from Jewish Community Relations Councils (JCRCs) who reached out to us with concerns, including concerns with the implication that JCPA and others were seemingly endorsing the video, since our logo was on the website,” according to a spokesperson for the organization. JCPA helps coordinate the advocacy work of scores of local and national Jewish communal institutions. Amy Spitalnick, a progressive activist and former press secretary of J Street, became the group’s new CEO in May. Most recently, as executive director of Integrity First for America, she successfully sued the organizers of the far-Right Charlottesville rally.

Fingerhut told me that CAM declined to remove the video after JFNA raised concerns with the group on June 16 but reversed the decision and spiked the clip two days later. He explained that JFNA would likely be working with CAM in the future and would probably be involved in the group’s annual summit of mayors, but would still leave its logo off CAM’s website for the time being.

“Fighting antisemitism is not easy. It hasn’t been easy, and it will not be easy,” said CAM chief executive Sacha Roytman Dratwa in early July. “We’ve really tried to fight antisemitism in a nonpartisan way.... Being judged on one video was a big surprise.”



On the face of it, opposing antisemitism is one of the least divisive objectives Jews could possibly have. Jews have a disputatious communal life, but not to the point of there being a constituency in favor of being hated. “By and large the goal of fighting antisemitism is a unifying effort,” Fingerhut said.

In reality, the fight against antisemitism is highly divisive, and there is growing discord over the parameters and basic nature of the problem. Part of the challenge comes from how differently antisemitism manifests in a range of contexts, many of which the average, well-intentioned American Jew will never even see. A pro-Israel college student probably doesn't have to worry about being randomly attacked in the street the way a Satmar Hasid in Brooklyn does, just as the Brooklyn Satmar faces far less of a threat from Palestinian jihadists than does a secular Israeli Jew living in Sderot. It is possible that the majority of American Jews wouldn't see any real commonalities between the slaughter of 11 non-Orthodox worshippers in a Pittsburgh synagogue and the organized effort to keep Haredi Jews out of certain towns in New York's Rockland and Orange Counties.

What should be the higher priority for American Jews: the anonymous young white men who unfurled Nazi flags in front of synagogues in Georgia and Florida, or a nationally prominent progressive U.S. congresswoman who a few days later accused Israel of a fictive "massacre" in Jenin? There is increasingly bitter disagreement over this kind of question, and the "woke antisemitism" video was an inartful attempt at pointing out a real phenomenon. Antisemitism is so adaptive and appealing that even ostensibly tolerant ideologies can produce their own version of it. Interpreted generously, the video urges Jews to be aware that noble-seeming ideas held among their political allies are being turned against them.

If "woke antisemitism" actually exists, one could conclude that its standard-bearers should be confronted with as little hesitation or sympathy as any other group of bigots. David Bernstein, author of the 2022 book *Woke Antisemitism* and a senior adviser to CAM — and, in a possible indication of the leftward drift of Jewish institutional life, Amy Spitalnick's immediate predeces-

sor as head of JCPA—told me that in his view, working together with progressives to combat antisemitism had proved to be a dead end. The conciliatory approach “really wasn’t a viable community strategy by 2017–18,” he said, a time when it was rapidly becoming much more common for American social justice movements to accuse the State of Israel and its supporters of being agents of white supremacy, police brutality, and a host of other evils.

“And what was worse and more concerning to me,” he added, “was that some Jewish advocacy organizations were sort of paying the price of admission to be in the progressive coalition. They were willing to say that America is a white supremacist state. That’s language no Jewish group would have entertained in years prior but are now embracing so they can maintain their progressive alliances.” (Bernstein told me that he viewed an early version of the script for the “woke antisemitism” video but had no other involvement in it.)

Bernstein’s thesis is vulnerable to a single unavoidable fact, which is that most American Jews are liberals. Perhaps they are deluded about the beliefs and intentions of their supposed allies and have a miscalibrated sense of their own self-interest—such mindsets have a long and awful precedent in Jewish history. But it is also possible the liberal majority is correct, and that the same values animating the woke extremists have also, in their softer and more common forms, created the openness and social harmony that have allowed American minority groups to thrive in safety, Jews above all. American Jewish success is the great vindication of the liberalism that Jews still overwhelmingly support. As a salvo in a debate that asks Jews to recognize the potential dangers of a cherished worldview, the “woke antisemitism” video was puzzling at best.

But the shortcomings of the video didn’t obligate JFNA or JCPA to publicly break with CAM. Both groups could have registered their criticism in a less public form and in a way that didn’t result in the

video's being taken offline. Such a response could have prompted a needed conversation about a complex topic. No such thing has happened: Days after the video was removed, both JFNA and JCPA told the Jewish Telegraphic Agency that they had no immediate plans to rejoin CAM's coalition.



The video and the responses it evoked were a heavy-handed intervention in a sharpening debate over how Jews should deal with threats from the Left. To some, the video fracas came as further evidence that mainline Jewish organizations such as JFNA have become the enablers of progressive Jew-hatred. On June 29, a group called the Jewish Leadership Project (JLP) sent a digital billboard truck to drive past Eric Fingerhut's office in lower Manhattan. "Profiles in Cowardice," the truck read, over a headshot of Fingerhut. "Why do you censor leftist Jew hatred?" (When asked about the truck, Fingerhut replied, "My reaction is that it's completely unworthy of response or attention.")

Avi Goldwasser, a tech executive and co-founder of JLP, sparked a video controversy of his own nearly 20 years ago, one that shows how much has remained constant in the debate about left-wing antisemitism. In 2004, he and the Boston-based activist Charles Jacobs made a short film about alleged hostility toward Jewish students from anti-Israel professors in the Department of Middle Eastern and Asian Languages and Cultures at Columbia University. Produced in the heated atmosphere of the second intifada and the invasion of Iraq, *Columbia Unbecoming* actually did force Jewish organizations to address the possible negative impact of left-wing academia on broader American Jewish life. But this additional attention to an emerging problem didn't mean it was on its way

to being solved, or even addressed effectively. The controversy feels both prescient and somewhat quaint after two decades of BDS resolutions, speech disruptions, Israel Apartheid Weeks, and apparent declines in Jewish enrollment in elite institutions—almost every major university now looks like Columbia did in the early 2000s.

“We met with Jewish trustees of Columbia,” Goldwasser recalled. “It was amazing. They watched the film, and they didn’t want to do anything. They didn’t want to waste their capital. They didn’t think it was important. Life is too good! I want to sleep at night, don’t bother me, please.” That kind of complacency could also be found in Europe 80 years ago, he continued. “It’s not the 1930s,” he said. “I don’t want to be dramatic about it. But it’s human nature. We’d rather not deal with uncomfortable truths.”

Here was another case of things big and small blurring together, an example of the surreal places that a justified and painfully earned sense of vigilance will lead: Goldwasser and I had started our conversation by talking about a short video from an obscure organization that hardly anyone will ever see. Some 20 minutes later, we were in Poland on the eve of the Nazi invasion. “My father heard Jabotinsky in Lodz in 1938,” Goldwasser said. “He couldn’t convince any of his siblings to leave.”



In the era of synagogue shootings, Donald Trump, Ihan Omar, BLM, BDS, and rampant attacks on the streets of New York, Jews have confronted antisemitism the way any group of Americans now confronts any massive and endlessly mutable problem: by establishing a series of activist nonprofit organizations. There’s Robert Kraft’s Foundation to Combat Antisemitism, which has funded the #Stand-UpToJewishHate campaign to the tune of \$25 million. There’s Ron

Lauder's \$25 million Anti-Semitism Accountability Project. There's JewBelong, responsible for hot-pink billboards and subway advertisements calling out antisemitism. And there are numerous smaller players. CAM came along in 2019 as a project pushed by Beren, who also funds much of the Jewish community in Wichita, Kan. Beren has pledged to dedicate at least half of his charitable giving to Jewish causes. As the *Forward* notes, "Beren maintains a low profile and does not appear to have granted interviews about his philanthropy, his politics or his Judaism."

The newspaper's excavation of CAM tried to present it as a stealth right-wing operation, but a quick search of Google News paints a different picture. CAM issued reports on the use of Holocaust imagery in anti-lockdown rhetoric during the pandemic, and on the alleged rise in antisemitism on Twitter after Elon Musk's purchase of the platform. Other staid and establishment-friendly projects include CAM's annual mayors' conference and its promotion of the International Holocaust Remembrance Alliance's definition of antisemitism.

CAM is not a subversively partisan band of rebels, boldly disrupting an establishment center-Left monopoly on the antisemitism debate. It is something much more mundane: the umpteenth group of comfortably funded consensus-seekers and coalition-builders working on a predictable set of problems using the usual set of tools. "I don't know what CAM does or who's involved, except that Sharansky has something to do with it," said the head of an organization whose logo still appears on the CAM website. "I can't reflect on the work that they do because I don't know what it is, and I don't care that much."

Perhaps CAM's strategy is working: Their website boasts of the "1,100 entities worldwide adopting or endorsing" the IHRA's antisemitism definition. "The movement is based on IHRA," Dratwa

told me. For instance, he said, “we’ve been standing behind the Albanian adoption of IHRA.” One could reasonably ask why it matters if various governments back a specific—and, per Dratwa, “nonbinding”—definition of antisemitism. From one perspective, excessive focus on IHRA risks setting off a distracting meta-debate, as was obvious from the mystifying amounts of attention the Jewish institutional world recently paid to the non-endorsement of both the IHRA definition and the competing Nexus definition in the White House’s national antisemitism strategy. Maybe, after a while, defining a problem becomes a comfortable replacement for solving it. It will probably fall to some group other than CAM to raise this possibility, however, since CAM’s boldest deviation from palatable consensus-building activism was quashed so swiftly.

Could consensus itself be an obstacle? An honest and inevitably more effective response to antisemitism might mean eschewing easy wins, confronting close allies, and putting both institutional reputations and communal peace at risk. That would all be very unpleasant for the CAMs, JFNAs and JCPAs of the world—or at least it would be less pleasant than a few days’ worth of angry emails and a pointed article in the *Forward* have proved to be. The “woke antisemitism” video and the various reactions to it are a light comic parody of a much more serious reckoning that becomes more likely the more the organized Jewish world scrambles to avoid it. *