

ALVIN H. ROSENFELD

‘The Jews Are Guilty’: Reflections on Antisemitism Old and New



ANTISEMITIC incidents are higher in America than at any time in the recent past. The 22nd annual Antisemitism Worldwide Report from the Anti-Defamation League and Tel Aviv University showed that reported or identifiable antisemitic attacks rose steadily from 751 in 2013 to just shy of 3,700 in 2022 — an increase of almost 400 percent. This is the largest number of such reported incidents since the ADL started recording the data in 1979.

The ADL has also been asking a representative sample of Americans 11 questions about classic Jewish stereotypes — clannishness, dual loyalty, dishonesty, shrewdness, and so on — since 1964. The percentage of American adults who agreed with six or more of the 11 stereotypes remained relatively constant from 1998 to 2019, mostly

in a tight range between 12 and 15 percent. But this number took a sharp turn for the worse in the ADL's most recent survey, in 2022, with 20 percent of respondents agreeing with six or more of the 11 stereotypes. We are now in an era where antisemitism is not only growing, but antisemites also feel much more free to express themselves in both word and deed. But there is no indication that the sources of today's antisemitism are at all different from those that appear to operate perpetually.

Antisemitism must be vigorously faced down. So it behooves us to remember where it comes from.

There are two important sources of antisemitism. One, popularized in modern times by the malicious 1903 Russian hoax *The Protocols of the Elders of Zion*, is the figure of the conspiratorial Jew. The other is his figurative brother, the diabolical Jew. Bring the two together, and you have the delusional but abiding portrait of Jews as a community inherently hostile to non-Jews, intent on bringing endless suffering to mankind—a community that must be dealt with decisively before it is too late.

Hitler, history's most infamous antisemite, wrote in *Mein Kampf* of the Jews as “veritable devils” determined to carry out activities that, unless averted, “must ultimately result in the collapse of human civilization and the consequent devastation of the world.” Hitler's propaganda minister, Joseph Goebbels, set out his master's thinking in a famous article, “The Jews Are Guilty.”

“The historic responsibility of world Jewry for the outbreak and widening of this war has been proven so clearly that it does not need to be talked about any further,” Goebbels wrote. “All Jews by virtue of their birth and their race are part of an inter-

national conspiracy against National Socialist Germany. They want its defeat and annihilation and do all in their power to bring it about.” But if *all* Jews are guilty simply because they are Jewish, it does not take much analysis to see that the Jews are guilty not because they have done something wrong, but that they have done something wrong because they are guilty.

Here are the four most recent examples of lethal antisemitism in America:

- In Pittsburgh, white nationalist Robert Bowers killed 11 Jews and wounded six more, including several Holocaust survivors, in the deadliest-ever attack on the Jewish community in the United States. To judge from his social-media postings, he was enraged: “HIAS likes to bring invaders in that kill our people. I can’t sit by and watch my people get slaughtered. Screw your optics, I’m going in.” HIAS, formerly known as the Hebrew Immigrant Aid Society, helps settle refugees and immigrants of all backgrounds.
- In Poway, Calif., another white nationalist, 19-year-old John Timothy Earnest, killed one woman, Lori Gilbert-Kaye, and injured three others, at a Chabad synagogue. Earnest had published an open letter on 8chan, an internet message board, saying that Jews were preparing a “meticulously planned genocide of the European race.” It also condemned President Trump as a pro-Zionist traitor.
- In Jersey City, N.J., David Anderson and Francine Graham, a black American couple, shot and killed a detective before driving to a kosher grocery store, where they killed three people and wounded three more before they were themselves shot dead by police. Anderson had a history of posting antisemitic and anti-law enforcement messages on social media.

- In Monsey, N.Y., Grafton Thomas entered the home of a Hasidic rabbi during a Hanukkah party and began stabbing guests, one of whom died of his wounds. Thomas, a black American, had expressed antisemitic views in his journals, including the claim that “Hebrew Israelites” had taken from “ebinoid Israelites,” a reference to the Black Hebrew Israelite movement, segments of which are antisemitic.

What do these examples share? Nothing—except that the Jews are guilty. Once again, the hate precedes the rationale for action. This points to the core of antisemitism, the reason it never goes away, and its protean, self-contradictory nature.

The idea of the malevolent Jews, collectively bent on ruining the world or secretly plotting to control it (or perhaps doing the one in order to achieve the other), has a clear historical origin in the writings of the Church Fathers, who drew on the New Testament to link Jews to Satan and make them culpable for every kind of sin—including, of course, the death of Jesus. The third-century scholar Origen of Alexandria declared that “the blood of Jesus [falls] not only upon those who lived then but also upon all generations of the Jewish people... until the end of the world.” A century later, Jerome of Stridon (later Saint Jerome), Augustine’s teacher, referred to the synagogue as “the devil’s refuge” and “Satan’s fortress.” Another early Church father (and future saint), John Chrysostom, the archbishop of Constantinople, expounded passionately and repeatedly on the image of the synagogue as a “dwelling of demons,” “a brothel,” and a “place of idolatry.”

Denunciations such as these branded Jews as collectively and irredeemably wicked, a designation of infamy always available to explain any source of misfortune or explain away any inconvenient evidence. Has a plague struck the community? The Jews are guilty of poisoning the wells. Has a child’s body been found in the woods? The Jews are

guilty of murdering him to use his blood in their Passover matzohs. Although the blood libel appears to have lost favor among antisemites, at least for the time being, there are those who blame Jews for Covid, just as there are those who blamed the Jews for AIDS.

Today, a particularly virulent strain of antisemitism holds not just the Jews but the Jewish state guilty. Guilty of what? Of the cardinal sin according to many on the Left today: the imperialist oppression of non-whites. According to this view, the “settler-colonialist” Jews arrived from Europe and Russia in the 19th and 20th centuries and set about stripping the indigenous Palestinians of their national rights. Never mind that there had never been a sovereign Arab Palestine or that the Jews returned to Israel to create a state only because their Russian and European “hosts” had made their life unbearable or actively sought to end it. When an independent state was offered to the Arabs in 1947, they rejected it. Nevertheless, the Jews went on to establish a sovereign state of their own, which flourishes 75 years after its creation.

In short, Goebbels’s formulation is alive and well. Indeed, the four words of his essay’s title were prominently spray-painted on the wall of the Holocaust Museum in St. Petersburg, Fla., in May 2021, surrounded by crudely drawn swastikas. Similar graffiti has appeared on synagogues, Jewish schools, and other Holocaust monuments and memorials.

That key sources of antisemitism have remained constant over the centuries is not to downplay the seriousness of the situation today. As the examples above suggest, today’s antisemitism comes from the reactionary Right and the progressive Left, from whites and from blacks. To many, the antisemitism of white supremacists and others on the far Right is so well known that they are surprised to discover

that antisemitism runs higher among American blacks and Hispanics than among whites. While the demographic breakdown of the 2022 ADL survey has not yet been released, the 2016 survey found that 23 percent of African Americans, 19 percent of U.S.-born Hispanics, and 31 percent of foreign-born Hispanics hold antisemitic views, compared with 14 percent of the general U.S. population, and there are no indications that the overall distribution of the data will be fundamentally different today.

Many Americans also may not know that *The Protocols*, which first appeared in a newspaper owned by a racist, ultranationalist, Christian journalist, has been recycled into American discourse by Louis Farrakhan, the black Muslim head of the Nation of Islam. Farrakhan repeatedly refers in his speeches to “Satanic Jews who have infected the whole world with poison and deceit.” His words are loudly echoed by some of the more militant Black Hebrew Israelites, who scream from the street corners of Manhattan at passing Jews as “imposters,” worshippers at “the synagogue of Satan.”

In a polarized society, there will also be elements in the mainstream comfortable with taking anti-Jewish positions, as long as they can describe them as something else. Into this category we may put the anti-Zionist antisemitism discussed above, a particularly severe problem on many university campuses today, where the ideological imperatives of diversity, equity, and inclusion programs also hold powerful sway. The remarkable success won by Jews willing to harness their energies in systems that reward hard work and merit is being undercut by systems of preferred hiring, college admissions, and other “equitable” steps toward achievement. As has happened in the past in Germany, Hungary, Russia, and elsewhere, our very success now counts against us.

The challenge is how to defend against the threat.

First, defending against episodic anti-Jewish assaults requires what we might call more of the same: more security guards at the doors of

our synagogues, community centers, schools, and businesses. Should such attacks become chronic, these protections will not suffice. A more systematic cooperative effort, developed in cooperation with law-enforcement agencies, interfaith and interracial groups, and educational institutions will be needed.

American Jews must face the prospect that their physical safety and the security of their institutions are increasingly going to resemble those of Jews in France.

Second, Jewish organizations must invest much more energy on campus insisting that militant anti-Zionism is antisemitic and working to ensure that DEI programs do not have the effect of submerging Jewish identity in a “whiteness” that is then the subject of quasi-official demonization. But Jewish identity must also be a matter of celebrating Jewishness at least as much as it is a matter of resisting its denigration. Jewish students find themselves unwelcome in many places on campus.

Jewish organizations must make it their business to pour energy and money into Hillel, Chabad, Jewish cultural centers, and Jewish fraternities and sororities — places on campus where Jewish students can feel comfortable being Jewish.

Third, American Jews must recognize that they have a role to play in pushing back against the threat to Israel, home to almost half of all living Jews. No threat to the Jewish people today is more aggressively eliminationist than that posed by Iran. Iran’s Revolutionary Guards recently put on public display a battery of missiles with the slogan “Death to Israel” boldly written in large Hebrew letters. Whether Iran’s developing arsenal of nuclear weapons will be similarly inscribed is anybody’s guess, but their intended target is no mystery. In April of this year, Iran’s president, Ebrahim Raisi, promised that his country’s army will bring about “the destruction of Haifa and Tel Aviv.” Antisemitism becomes most virulent when it is state-sponsored.

Jews everywhere, but particularly in the United States, must take the threat from Iran personally, which means taking a much stronger position in opposing the return of the policy of nuclear appeasement with Tehran.

Fourth, American Jews need to take a much stronger stand against what I call “recreational antisemitism.” Kanye West, Kyrie Irving, Dave Chappelle, and various hip-hop singers, athletes, and other pop-culture figures have been entertaining millions of people with anti-Jewish lies, mockeries, and denunciations. Whoopi Goldberg passed off the Nazi persecution and murder of the Jews on broadcast television as “white-on-white crime.” Most recently, the egregious anti-Zionist antisemite Roger Waters appeared on the German stage garbed in a Nazi-style outfit, trivializing and exploiting the figure of Anne Frank to score points on behalf of the Palestinians. At other times, he has introduced stage gimmicks that juxtapose the Magen David with images of pigs. To different degrees, these outrages have been met with pushback. But Whoopi Goldberg is back on the air. Dave Chappelle was at risk not for his anti-Jewish but for his anti-trans remarks. Roger Waters is still touring. Not too long ago, this kind of anti-Jewish trash talk and imagery were taboo. Today, in too many circles, the formerly transgressive merely attracts a welcome notoriety to those giving voice to these slurs.

Jews need a comprehensive strategy to make recreational antisemitism as socially costly as possible for its practitioners.



Finally, American Jews must recognize that the well-being of the State of Israel is fundamental to their own thriving. Many Jews now appear to feel embarrassed by Israel, particularly as the country seems to be going through a populist moment similar to those we have seen all across the world’s advanced economies. The sooner this moment pass-

es, the better. On any terms, however, Israel's existence and its achievements remain sources of enormous admiration to a clear majority of Americans. We would do well to invest considerable resources in making an unapologetic case in our own communities and in non-Jewish communities for the proposition that Israel, for all its faults and all the difficulties in reaching a modus vivendi with the Palestinians, has fulfilled the long-held Jewish dream of national self-determination. No apology is needed for this extraordinary accomplishment. It's one to be proud of. *