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# For America's Jews, Past Is Prologue

*The message of our history is fight, not flight*



THE *Atlantic* proclaims “The Golden Age of American Jews Is Ending.” Campus walls are graffitied with calls for “Death to Zionists.” A synagogue gets an email with the message, “Praise Allah! Praise Hamas! Death to Israel! Burn the Jews!” When a Jewish reporter, writing for Columbia University’s *Daily Spectator*, covered an assault on an Israeli student, the student journalist was so harassed that she left campus. Colleagues tell me: “Unquestionably, antisemitism is abominable” — then call for the destruction of Israel in the next breath. No wonder we are worried that our halcyon days are ending. We are reeling from a spike in antisemitism that most of us never imagined we would see in our lifetimes.

Does this spike portend a dark future for America’s Jews? Or does our history suggest that, despite these outbursts of venom, we will not only survive but thrive?

Before trying to guess our collective future, an admission: I am a historian. Historians know a great deal about the past, a modicum about the present, and nothing about the future. We are so bad at looking ahead that, as recently as 2016, Leonard Dinnerstein, author of *Antisemitism in America*, wrote of “the plague of antisemitism: *most American Jews don’t see it, feel it, or fear it. . . . Antisemitism is too minor an issue to disturb the daily lives of American Jews.*”



Mindful of that caveat, I still have faith that America’s Jews will continue to flourish. Lessons from our past can guide us. But that first requires us to understand a past that we have either so idealized, or else know so little about, that we misread the present wave of antisemitism as a rupture rather than a continuity.

America, the *goldene medina*, has hosted one of the most remarkable Diaspora communities in all of Jewish history. Even so, in every era, our predecessors faced Jew-hatred. When 23 Jews landed in New Amsterdam in September 1654, the colonial governor, Peter Stuyvesant, tried to expel “this deceitful race” of unscrupulous usurers, who were “enemies and blasphemers . . . of Christ.”

More than 200 years later, in December 1862, General Ulysses S. Grant — enraged at what he saw as Jewish speculation in the cotton trade — issued General Orders No. 11, expelling Jews “as a class” from his military district in western Tennessee and surrounding areas.

Following the Civil War, Bavarian-born banker and businessman Joseph Seligman, who had started out in the United States as a peddler, declined President Grant’s invitation to become secretary of the Treasury. But neither Seligman’s wealth nor political connections prevented the Grand Union Hotel in Saratoga Springs from refusing his family rooms in the summer of 1877 under their

new “No Israelite” policy. Two Jewish women took up their pens to expose this prejudice to a wide audience. One of them was Nina Morais, author of “Jewish Ostracism in America,” an exposé published in the *North American Review*, then a leading journal of contemporary affairs. The other was the poet Emma Lazarus, who in 1883 (the same year she wrote “The New Colossus”) gave readers of the popular *Century* magazine a lesson in the history of this persecution in “The Jewish Problem.”

“Since the establishment of the American Union, Jews have here enjoyed absolute civil and political freedom and equality,” she wrote.

And yet here, too, the everlasting prejudice is cropping out in various shapes. Within recent years, Jews have been “boycotted” at not a few places of public resort; in our schools and colleges, even in our scientific universities, Jewish scholars are frequently subjected to annoyance on account of their race. The word “Jew” is in constant use, even among so-called refined Christians, as a term of opprobrium, and is employed as a verb, to denote the meanest tricks.

Things remained much the same, if not worse, throughout the 20th century’s early decades. Leo Frank was lynched by a Georgia mob in 1915. Restrictive quotas on Jewish applicants to Harvard and other elite universities were instituted in the 1920s. So were de facto quotas and other restrictions on Jewish immigration, culminating in the tragic 1939 voyage of the ocean liner *St. Louis*. Indeed, prejudice against Jews after World War I became so pervasive — restricting where Jewish Americans could live, vacation, work, and be educated — that these years have been called “the high tide” of antisemitism in the United States.

When antisemitism surged again after World War II, the writer Laura Z. Hobson published a novel about a journalist who pretends

to be a Jew to expose the discrimination Jews faced in jobs, hotels, and apartments. Informal quotas on Jewish applicants endured at the Ivies until the early 1960s. Even in the 1990s, if not later, certain Palm Beach country clubs effectively forbade Jews from membership. And powerful strains of antisemitism persisted on the political fringes of American life, finding their ugliest manifestations in the neo-Nazi efforts to march through Skokie in 1978 and the Crown Heights riots of 1991.

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Against this grim history there is, of course, a counter-story.

Governor Stuyvesant may have been a vehement antisemite. But a company in the mother country, the Netherlands, set colonial policy. So Amsterdam Jews, some of them its stockholders, went to bat for colonial Jews, and Stuyvesant was ordered to let them live in peace. He made additional attempts to make Jewish life untenable, but each one failed.

Then New Amsterdam became New York. Although colonial Jewish communities were tiny, many prospered, as suggested by the life of Joseph Bueno de Mesquita. Arriving in New York from the Caribbean in 1680, he started out as a debtor. Thirty years later, when he died, this merchant-shipper, an importer of fabrics and cocoa and an exporter of furs, was one of the richest men in the city and hobnobbed with its political elites. He left behind such luxuries as Delftware dishes, a Torah scroll with its silver ornaments, and, it must also be noted, five slaves.

After Grant issued his infamous orders, Cesar Kaskel, a Prussian-born Jewish haberdasher from Paducah, Kentucky, was so outraged that he sent a telegram to the White House decrying this violation of the Constitution. Just two weeks later, as the Jewish organization

B'nai B'rith and rabbis began protesting the orders, Kaskel boarded a steamer bound for Washington. There, this Jewish immigrant met with President Lincoln. The orders were countermanded, and a penitent Grant later came to consider them among the greatest blots on his record—leading to his subsequent efforts to appoint Jews to senior positions in his administration.

In 1866, less than four years after Grant's order, Cincinnati's magnificent Isaac M. Wise Temple arose on Plum Street, its exotic minarets soaring above the skyline. It sent a powerful message: Jews were at home in America. By the time World War I engulfed Europe, about 2 million Jewish immigrants, mostly from Eastern Europe, had settled in every corner of America. In 1887, Californians elected a Jew, Washington Bartlett, as governor. In 1906, Teddy Roosevelt appointed Oscar Straus as secretary of labor and commerce, making him the first Jew in the cabinet. Ten years later, the Senate confirmed Woodrow Wilson's nomination of Louis Brandeis to the Supreme Court. In 1947, when *Gentleman's Agreement* landed on the silver screen and went on to win the Academy Award for best picture, it helped make antisemitism unfashionable in American life. Today, the secretaries of state, Treasury, and homeland security are Jewish, as are the director of national intelligence and the chief of staff to President Biden, as are the majority leader in the Senate and eight of his colleagues—each of them powerful reminders of Jewish acceptance and thriving in today's America.



With the past as prologue, what lessons does it hold for confronting antisemitism today?

First, it shows persecuted Jews enlisting powerful allies: Gentile government officials, Jews in positions of influence, and those we might

today call influencers—publishers, editors, filmmakers, even cartoonists. We continue to have powerful allies today. In May 2023, well before the horrors of October 7, the White House, recognizing that antisemitism was tearing at the fabric of American society, announced a plan to combat it. Informed by conversations with more than 1,000 people, the first U.S. National Strategy to Counter Antisemitism rests on the premise that antisemitism is not just a Jewish problem; it is an American problem. The Strategy’s 60 pages are filled with recommendations for steps government and civil society can take to counter antisemitism. They need to be put into action.

Second, history shows that Jews succeed when they can capture the sympathy and imagination of our Gentile neighbors. Leon Uris’s *Exodus* sold millions of copies after it was published in 1958; its 1960 film adaptation, with Paul Newman and Eva Marie Saint, brought the story of Israel’s founding home to tens of millions more. Israel’s Prime Minister David Ben-Gurion said of the book: “As a literary work it isn’t much. But as a piece of propaganda, it’s the best thing ever written about Israel.” Yet by the time the Palestinian-American scholar Edward Said published his influential *Orientalism* in 1978, the radical Left had already begun recasting Israel as the epitome of evil. Embracing the anti-Zionism of the Soviets, they viewed Israel as a white, settler-colonial, apartheid state that had to be dismantled like other colonial projects in Africa and Asia. It took decades for that view to gain traction, and it may take decades to reverse the trend.

Still, it isn’t mission impossible. Jews have a compelling story to tell. Israel remains the only democratic state in its region, an American ally, a nation of immigrants, more than half of them descendants of 700,000 Jews expelled from North Africa and the Middle East after Israel’s founding who would in any other narrative be labeled people of color. Ameliorating attitudes toward Israel is utterly essential to fighting antisemitism in America. As American Jews, we need to

think deeply and strategically with our partners here and in Israel about long-range plans to advance understanding of the country in all its complexity, to affirm its centrality to the Jewish people, and to recognize its right to exist among the nations.

Finally, the past shows that antisemitism has come from very different directions, from southern Klansmen to northern WASP elites to groups such as the Nation of Islam. Today, American Jews are deeply alarmed by what they see on campus, where young anti-Zionists, joined by not-so-young faculty, have used their opposition to the war in Gaza to traffic in antisemitic tropes and blood libels. But it was only a few years ago that we saw an eruption of antisemitism at the Unite the Right rally in Charlottesville. As Tufts University political scientist Eitan Hersh and Harvard doctoral candidate Laura Royden noted, “The epicenter of antisemitic attitudes is young adults on the far right.”

Any campaign aimed at combating antisemitism will need to address both groups, albeit in different ways. We sued the white nationalists who had marched across the University of Virginia campus chanting “Jews will not replace us” and whose threats had forced the local synagogue to remove their Torah scrolls and its members to sneak out of Shabbat services by the back door. We are responding to the massacre at Pittsburgh’s Tree of Life synagogue with a new building, designed by the architect Daniel Libeskind, to house the synagogue, remember those we lost, and tell the story of American antisemitism. Our response to campus antisemitism will also have to be smartly tailored to their circumstances, especially as we try to win over progressive-minded students who, should we fail to reach them, might be lured into thinking that the destruction of Israel is a form of social justice.



Again, none of this is new. At some point in the early 2000s, I learned that, every morning, bomb-sniffing dogs went through the Jewish

day school my children attended before students, faculty, and staff arrived. Even in that purported golden age of American Jewry, we were vigilant, aware that bigots could try to harm us at any moment.

Antisemitism has been, is now, and always will be part of what it means to be a Jew in America. But history tells us that, grim as the story has sometimes been, it has also, and more often, been good and even glorious. Knowing my history gives me an abiding faith that it will continue to be so. \*