

How Antisemitism Differs from Other Forms of Bigotry: Evidence from History and Social Psychology

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Sometimes, it is not so easy to specify what we are talking about when we talk about antisemitism. The Jews, according to novelist-turned-antisemitism-scholar Dara Horn, are “a ridiculously small minority that nonetheless play[s] ... a behemoth role in other people’s imaginations” (Horn, 2021, pp. xxii–xxiii). Even those who are not Jew haters very often greatly overestimate the number of Jews in the world, the size of Israel, and—ominously—Jewish representation in just about every locus of power on earth (Harber, 2022; Herda, 2013; Nadeau et al., 1993). Moreover, antisemites have routinely directed their wrath against people who neither follow the Jewish religion, have Jewish ancestors, nor bear any indicators of what might be considered Jewish identity. When reality-testing is sufficient to deter such bizarre mental machinations, the antisemite may denounce all manner of foes as acting under the influence of the Jews or in service to them (Kressel, 2017).

Anyone, then, who reads widely in the contemporary and historical literature on Jew hatred is likely to conclude that it is an immensely complicated phenomenon, indeed one so complex that it may be difficult to comprehend and measure fully using the straightforward empirical survey methods currently favored by many prejudice researchers.

This chapter argues that while contemporary antisemitism shares many characteristics with other forms of prejudice, one cannot shed much light on it without grasping the ways this particular form of hatred is *sui generis*. Social scientists, as we shall see, often start from the belief that bigotry against Jews can be largely understood by extrapolating from

theories and approaches originally developed for the study of other forms of prejudice. But this approach has serious limitations. Some social psychological features of Jew hatred are shared with other forms of bigotry, to be sure, and all prejudices are, strictly speaking, unique. The argument here, however, is that antisemitism diverges in critical (and understudied) ways from the dominant models typically used by social scientists for defining, identifying, studying, comprehending, and combating bigotry.

Understanding the essence of Jew hatred and how it differs from other forms of prejudice has become a matter of some urgency. The first reason for this is that we currently face a massive eruption of antisemitism around the world and—in contrast to past decades—the United States has not been spared. The second reason, we shall argue, is that psychologists and other social scientists—including (and perhaps especially) those who concentrate on the study of racism, discrimination, stereotyping, and prejudice—have neglected, downplayed, or mishandled the topic in recent decades. While this neglect has many roots—professorial bigotry, the ideological makeup of universities, the reward structure of the social sciences, and the methodological difficulties in conducting research in areas where Jew hatred is most virulent—some portion of the failure to attend to the pressing problem of antisemitism stems from intellectual errors concerning its nature (Kressel, 2004). It is those errors—committed by well-intentioned scholars—that I intend to explore.

DOCUMENTING THE HATE

For some readers, it might seem unnecessary to start by documenting the scale, scope, and intensity of contemporary antisemitism. After all, soon after the Hamas attacks on Israel in October 2023, then FBI director Christopher Wray asserted that antisemitism was reaching “historic” levels and that “the Jewish community is targeted by terrorists ... across the spectrum” (quoted in Rabinowitz, 2023). Around the same time, President Biden noted his deep concern about the rise in Jew hatred on campuses and elsewhere in the United States (Klein, 2023). Roughly a year later, a report of a House of Representatives committee—spearheaded by Republicans—stated that antisemitism had engulfed college campuses and that administrators had prioritized “terrorist sympathizers” over the Jewish community.

On the other hand, *Inside Higher Ed* held that many academics expressed skepticism about the House report, portraying it as part of a politicized attempt to delegitimize higher education (Blake, 2024). Other efforts to raise consciousness have encountered resistance from various audiences with differing objections. Frequently, people on the left acknowledge antisemitism on the right, and people on the right acknowledge antisemitism on the left. Precious few observers acknowledge both. Moreover, some works with a declared focus on antisemitism have intentionally downplayed the extent of the phenomenon and even accused Jews of deliberately making things up (Burley & Lorber, 2024; Cook, 2024; Jewish Voice for Peace, 2017).

Thus, we cannot skip a review of empirical evidence. In theory, documentation of antisemitism might draw on population surveys, hate crime data, and media content analyses. Beyond this, researchers might review legal practices, probe political ideologies, investigate religious

utterances, study educational curricula, and conduct social psychological experiments. One would need to gather evidence on a country-by-country basis. As it happens, unfortunately, there are major gaps in our knowledge, and much of what we do know has not passed through the traditional peer-review process (Kressel, 2025).

Still, several reviews credibly outline a disturbing tale (Jaspal, 2023; Kaufman et al., 2020; Kressel, 2016, 2025; Smith & Schapiro, 2019). One clear conclusion that emerges is that however bad antisemitism is in the United States, it is far more virulent and widespread beyond American borders—in many parts of Europe, Asia, and elsewhere. Moreover, deep hostility toward Jews currently exists in many parts of the Muslim world (Kressel, 2012, 2022). In Europe and the United States, antisemitism—by various measures—has grown substantially during the past decade. There is also little doubt that Jew hatred increased following the October 7 Hamas attacks.

As with other prejudices, discussions of antisemitism—its extent, causes, and even justifiability—can get bogged down in intense debates concerning definition and measurement (Judaken, 2008; Klug, 2003; Kressel, 2025; Marcus, 2015). Possibly the simplest definition speaks of antisemitism as prejudice or discrimination directed against Jews individually or collectively because of their religion, ethnicity, ancestry, or group membership (Kaufman et al., 2020). Although intuitively sensible, this definition is inadequate for many purposes because it does not tell us how to classify many controversial incidents of our day. The devil, as always, is in the details.

The biggest disagreements at present surround the extent to which hostility toward Jews that is associated with anti-Israel sentiment should be included under the definitional umbrella of antisemitism. Responsible parties rarely suggest that *all* criticism of Israel and its policies should be classified as antisemitism, but clearly some attacks on the Jewish state should count. The debate about where to draw the line continues. I accept philosopher Bernard Harrison's argument that the International Holocaust Remembrance Alliance (IHRA) definition—though flawed in some regards—is best on this issue and superior to the alternative Jerusalem Declaration definition (Harrison, 2022). According to the IHRA definition—at present the most used by academics and Western governmental agencies—antisemitism may be aimed at Jewish or non-Jewish individuals and/or their property. Antisemites may also target Jewish-community institutions and religious facilities.

The most important and controversial parts of the IHRA definition involve Israel-related manifestations of antisemitism. The IHRA definition always requires observers to take into account “the overall context” and holds that “criticism of Israel similar to that leveled against any other country cannot be regarded as anti-Semitic.” However, it is antisemitism when people use demonization, double standards, or delegitimization to target Israel—“a Jewish collectivity.” Although widely used, some academics reject the IHRA definition; to some extent, this opposition may derive from a failure to grasp the ways in which antisemitism differs from other forms of prejudice. It should also be emphasized that anti-Israeli hostility and anti-Zionism might be defined as separate categories of bigotry, though—here too—there are definitional complexities.

Most psychometrically sophisticated measures used to quantify antisemitism are now dated (Kaufman et al., 2020; Kressel, 2025). Fortunately, one very new scale makes an effort to

coordinate with the IHRA definition (Allington et al., 2022, 2023). At this stage, however, much survey evidence relies on older scales and single-item measures. Beyond this, surveys yield self-report data dependent on respondent willingness to confess to behaviors and attitudes that—at least sometimes—are unacceptable in their societies. It is likely, therefore, that surveys understate the severity of the problem.

It is useful to review some data. Respondents in several nations around the world were asked in 2008 whether they had a very favorable, somewhat favorable, somewhat unfavorable, or very unfavorable opinion of the Jews (Pew Global Attitudes Project, 2008). Only 2% of United States respondents reported “very unfavorable” opinions, and only 5% had “somewhat unfavorable” opinions. People in a few other Western nations also generally expressed relatively little disliking of the Jews. The situation, however, was markedly different in (studied) countries with large Muslim populations. Sixty-eight percent of respondents in Turkey told pollsters that they had “very unfavorable” views of the Jews, as did 92% in Egypt, 94% in Jordan, 65% in Pakistan, 36% in Indonesia, 22% in Nigeria, and 21% in India. Negative opinions about Jews also showed up in quite a few countries with very small Muslim or Arab populations. For example, 44% of Japanese respondents said they had either “very unfavorable” or “somewhat unfavorable” views concerning Jews. The comparable number was 41% for South Korea, 50% for Brazil, 46% for Mexico, 55% for China, 46% for Spain, 34% for Russia, and 25% for Germany.

A few years later, in 2014, the Anti-Defamation League (ADL) used a multi-item scale to measure antisemitism in various countries around the world (ADL, 2023b). The original study (which has since been updated) involved more than 50,000 interviews conducted in about 100 countries. Overall, ADL concluded that there were well over 1 billion antisemites worldwide—with some Middle Eastern and Muslim-majority countries reporting the most agreement with antisemitic stereotypes. For example, 92% of Iraqis and 69% of Turks scored above ADL’s cut-off for antisemitism. As with the 2008 Pew study, antisemitism was also common in quite a few countries without a large Muslim population: Greece (69%), South Korea (53%), Poland (45%), Peru (38%), France (38%), Russia (30%), Germany (27%), and China (20%). In the United States, the United Kingdom, the Netherlands, and several other countries, on the other hand, fewer than 1 person in 10 could be classified as an antisemite in 2014, using the ADL criteria.

By 2024, perceptions of the Jews had changed for the worse in the United States, although many Americans continued to rate Jews favorably (Kressel, 2025). According to an ADL study of 4,143 Americans, the percentage who could be classified as antisemites based on endorsement of antisemitic tropes had risen to 24%—more than double what it was on a similar measure in 2014 (9%). More concerning—and unlike in past decades—younger Americans were now far more likely to endorse the anti-Jewish beliefs. So, too, were those who thought the world’s problems “come down to the oppressor versus the oppressed.” Moreover, people uncomfortable with buying Israeli goods were much more likely to be antisemites (ADL, 2024).

Another measure of antisemitism is the willingness to support Hamas, an organization whose founding charter overflows with overt antisemitism and explicit calls for killing Jews (Ahmed, 2024; Patterson, 2022). In recent years, more than half of Gen Z respondents expressed

comfort with being friends with a Hamas supporter (ADL, 2024). It is unknown how this number might compare with feelings about being friends with a Ku Klux Klan supporter. According to one poll, 43% of registered voters aged 18–24 in the United States support Hamas more than Israel (Levine, 2023).

Jews, especially students, feel the impact of all this. Seventy-three percent of Jewish college students and 44% of non-Jewish students have experienced or witnessed antisemitism since the start of the 2023–2024 academic year. Prior to the Hamas attacks in 2023, 67% of Jewish students said they felt physically safe on their campuses; afterward, that number had dropped to 46% (ADL, 2023a). Another poll, conducted in fall 2024, found that 27% of Jewish students said they had observed antisemitic activity by faculty; two-thirds of Jewish students (and 60% of non-Jewish students) lacked confidence in their university’s ability to prevent antisemitic incidents (ADL, 2025). One study—conducted prior to the Hamas attacks—found in 2022 that 43% of Jewish respondents felt that antisemitism had increased “a lot” during the past five years, and an additional 39% said it has increased “somewhat”. Clearly, something started happening well before October 2023, but the terrorist attacks accelerated the preexisting trend.

In Europe in 2018, research found that 41% of young Jewish Europeans (aged 16–34 years) were considering emigrating because they no longer felt safe. Forty-four percent personally experienced antisemitic harassment, and 45% chose not to wear, carry, or display distinguishable Jewish items in public because of safety concerns (FRA—European Union Agency for Fundamental Rights, 2019).

Official hate crime and incident data in the United States and around the world confirm the narrative of growing antisemitic hatred (Kressel, 2025; Neifakh, 2024; Smith & Schapiro, 2019). Jews consistently show up as the religious group most targeted by hate crimes. Indeed, five times as many Jews are targeted as Muslims—the next most persecuted group.

There are other convincing ways to document the severity of contemporary antisemitism, but some do not typically emerge in the sorts of empirical studies usually conducted by social psychologists and prejudice experts. Anti-Jewish terrorist attacks—a murderous strike on a synagogue in Pittsburgh, a machine gunning of a kosher supermarket in Paris, a preplanned pogrom following a sporting event in Amsterdam, and many more—lend credibility to arguments that Jews across the globe are at risk as they go about their daily business. Also, the far left and the far right have, for some time, tolerated or even encouraged antisemitism in their midst; recently, however, normalization of Jew hatred has been creeping closer to the mainstream. Consider, for example, the willingness of many fans to retain their enthusiasm for Ye (Kanye West) after his overt and virulent anti-Jewish rants. Donald Trump, despite his declared friendship for Israel and willingness to take on campus antisemitism, has included in his circle some with questionable views about things Jewish. Consider, too, why organizations committed to women’s rights have so often refused to address the sex crimes committed by Hamas against Israeli women on October 7. One might ask why many student organizations at, say, the law school of the University of California, Berkeley have refused admission to the overwhelming majority of Jews just because they refused to distance themselves from Zionism or from their friends and family in Israel (Bandler, 2022;

Chemerinsky, 2022). One might, in light of this evidence, expect armies of antiracist social scientists to be hard at work probing this threat to Western democratic civilization. And yet such is hardly the case.

A FIELD IN DENIAL

Psychology, as a discipline (or, at least, many psychologists), once showed tremendous passion for unearthing the roots of antisemitism (Tumin, 1961). Interest in Jew hatred at least partly inspired numerous classics in the social sciences including work on obedience (Milgram), authoritarianism (Adorno and colleagues), totalitarianism (Arendt), prejudice (Allport), evil (Staub, Lifton, Fromm), and other topics. In recent decades, however, mainstream psychologists and—more generally—social scientists have rarely focused on antisemitism. What we observe is not merely a lack of research. In many cases, we see antisemitism minimization and denial.

Psychology's inattentiveness to antisemitism shows up in the selection of matters for research, coverage of topics in prejudice textbooks, and choice of issues to address in university courses on prejudice and related matters. For example, a 2003 study of the PSYCHINFO database showed that not a single study had focused on Jew hatred in Muslim or Arab contexts or countries (Kressel, 2003). This omission is particularly troubling because existing evidence suggests that antisemitism has been most intense in these regions (ADL, 2019; Bostom, 2008; Gilbert, 2010; Kressel, 2012). More recently, an analysis of several social science databases (including PSYCHINFO) over decades concluded that while psychological aspects of the Holocaust had been studied in some detail, minimal research addressed contemporary antisemitism, especially outside of the United States (Kressel & Kressel, 2016). Approximately two to five out of every thousand entries on prejudice and discrimination dealt with antisemitism. Throughout the decades, psychologists and other social scientists showed almost no interest in Muslim or Arab antisemitism (Kressel, 2012, 2022). Most frequently studied was the United States, where—at least until recently—Jews were tolerated and, indeed, often admired by overwhelming percentages of non-Jews (Kressel, 2016). While the Holocaust did receive attention, such studies often did not attend to its antisemitic aspects (Bromley & Russell, 2015). When the Holocaust is represented as an instance of “man’s inhumanity to man,” the specific antisemitic factors behind it may be missed by readers unfamiliar with the historical context.

Course syllabi have not been studied systematically, but a preliminary investigation suggests that classes dealing with the psychology of prejudice and related matters almost never cover contemporary Jew hatred in any detail (Kressel, 2017). Similarly, another pilot study indicated that a (small) sample of typical textbooks on racism and prejudice seemed to give antisemitism short shrift. This study concluded that students “would be ill-equipped to discuss contemporary antisemitism anywhere in the world, let alone to understand its sources and potential remedies” (Kressel, 2017, p. 52).

Hodge and Bodie, more recently, analyzed full-length, peer-reviewed articles appearing in discourse-shaping periodicals in social work from 2008 to 2017. They found no articles

addressing contemporary antisemitism and none featuring the voice of American Jews. They concluded that American Jews as such are, for the most part, invisible in social work discourse, and they questioned the profession's capacity to comply with its own ethical standards (Hodge & Boddie, 2022). A few other critics have raised similar concerns (Abrams & Armeni, 2023; Ambrosius, 2020).

One explanation for the inattentiveness is that—despite so much evidence to the contrary—many social scientists still see antisemitism as a spent force. In their eyes, other forms of prejudice pose far more serious contemporary threats and, by contrast, antisemitism remains a vestigial problem which is unlikely to rear its ugly head. Behind such thinking, we find a failure to perceive the core destructiveness of the antisemitic germ and a failure to grasp the significant ways in which antisemitism differs from other forms of prejudice.

SIMILARITIES AND DIFFERENCES

We should start by conceding that antisemitism is not entirely a horse of a different color. In some ways, many traditional social psychological perspectives on prejudice and stereotyping remain useful and relevant. Antisemitism, for one thing, produces much of the same emotional and psychosocial distress that is commonly associated with other forms of bigotry. The targets of antisemitism—like the targets of other prejudices—can suffer significant psychopathological sequelae even on occasions when offenses may seem slight to onlookers (Rosen et al., 2018; Schmitt et al., 2014; Shani et al., 2023).

Beyond this, when we try to explain the foundations of antisemitism, we can plausibly draw on several approaches used to probe other forms of prejudice (Nelson, 2024). One might, therefore, discuss the roots of Jew hatred in underlying cognitive processes, social learning, personality, terror management, social identity, and various sorts of realistic and perceived conflict (Kressel, 2025). For many years, even the writings of historians invoked psychological notions, including scapegoating, cognitive dissonance, and identification with the aggressor (Jaspal, 2023; Kressel, 1999, 2002). These ways of thinking about prejudice and its consequences have sometimes proved productive, and they are likely—if studied more intensively with an eye toward understanding Jew hatred—to continue to yield important insights.

What some mainstream psychosocial theories of prejudice and discrimination do not offer is a sufficient sense of the historical, political, sociological, and theological contexts of antisemitism. And this is a serious omission—especially when one aims to understand the dynamics and changing course of Jew hatred. Psychological analyses of antisemitism are often of limited value if they are not understood in a sociohistorical context. The remainder of this chapter aims to provide some of that context. In particular, we examine seven ways that antisemitism differs profoundly from most other forms of contemporary prejudice. Antisemitism has (a) unique and deep theological roots, (b) an exceptionally long and varied historical pedigree, (c) a frequent locus among the oppressed, (d) a complex relationship with Holocaust studies, (e) a dangerous grounding in conspiratorial thinking, (f) a real but complicated linkage to anti-Zionism, and (g) a changing relationship with education. We shall argue that all of these factors contribute to psychology's weaknesses in addressing contemporary antisemitism.

Deep and Sacred Roots

Antisemitism has its roots in the sacred foundational theology of Christianity and Islam, and it continues to draw intense power from these religious associations. As a general matter, contemporary psychologists regularly underestimate the importance of religious belief and affiliation as determinants of how the vast majority of Americans and others around the globe live their lives (Kressel, 2024). The religious roots of antisemitic behaviors, feelings, and thoughts may be hidden, unconscious, or otherwise difficult for researchers to discern. What is not difficult to uncover is the deep and pervasive anti-Jewish preoccupations of some religious traditions, namely, most mainstream strands of Christianity and Islam (Fatah, 2011; Flannery, 1985; Perry & Schweitzer, 2002; Ruether, 1974; Trachtenberg, 1983; Wistrich, 2010).

Psychologists might ask why distant history needs to be considered if our goal is to understand *contemporary* Jew hatred. It is true, after all, that history mostly matters when it becomes part of *current* thinking, feeling, and acting. A mechanism is required for events from distant centuries to become psychologically significant. But, in religious matters, that mechanism readily exists in the form of sacred books, traditions, theologies, and supporting culture. For many believers—regardless of their stated positions and beliefs—the past is not dead. For some—a smaller number—religious antisemitism remains every bit as vibrant a force as it was in medieval times.

The complete rejection of antisemitism for some believers may involve questioning central components of faith and identity. Former Republican Congressman Matthew Gaetz, for example, recently identified his opposition to the IHRA definition of antisemitism as religious, opining that it was not at all antisemitic to say that the Jews killed Christ. Gaetz explained: “The Gospel itself would meet the definition of antisemitism under the terms of this bill ... The Bible is clear. There is no myth or controversy on this” (quoted in Walker, 2024). Other Christians, of course, would disagree with this interpretation (Engelmayer, 2024). However, there can be little doubt that at least until the twentieth century most mainstream Christian leaders advocated theologies and textual interpretations that were dangerous for Jews.

It is hard to imagine a charge more likely to fuel hostility than the accusation of deicide. As St. Augustine explained, Judaism was a corruption and the Jews, after Christ, were a people modeled on Judas. Their ancestors killed Christ and they collectively bore responsibility for the crime. Jews were to survive, according to Augustine, but only in a debased state and as a message to Christians about what happens when you abandon the one holy path (Flannery, 1985; Fredriksen, 2014). Although nowadays it is usually only a small minority in Christianity who propagate such overt antisemitism, anti-Jewish doctrines are reinforced by many centuries of mainstream theology from still-respected figures. Catholics distanced themselves from the most egregious antisemitic doctrines in the 1960s during Vatican Council II, and many theologians in Catholicism and other branches of Christianity have been sincere in acknowledging and renouncing anti-Jewish religious traditions. Still, these efforts have been uneven and incomplete. One problem is that some revered historical figures—for example, Martin Luther—were vicious Jew-haters (Perry & Schweitzer, 2002).

Pope Pius XII and the Vatican have been criticized for questionable responses to Nazism (Goldhagen, 2002). When recent Popes issue anti-Israel statements, it is hard to know

whether such statements should be taken at face value or understood as a continuation of a hostility to Jews that has lasted for most of two millennia (Loader, 2023).

For Muslims, the history is both better and worse. The great historian Bernard Lewis—now dismissed unfairly by some on the far left as a mere Orientalist—has noted that for Islam, hostility to Jews was never an obsession in the way that it was in the Christian world (Lewis, 1987). Still, there are many ways in which the Islamic tradition fed Jew hatred (Kressel, 2012, 2022). The classic religious literature of Islam—the Quran, the Sira, and the Hadiths—all recount tales of Muhammad’s conflicts with the Jews. As with the Gospels, there are no surviving records telling of these encounters from a Jewish perspective. However, in the Muslim religious literature, Jews are portrayed as deceivers, treaty violators, and falsifiers of sacred books. Jews are blamed for rejecting Jesus and—in one story—for poisoning Muhammad’s food. Some of these references are limited to particular Jews or groups of Jews; few are aimed at the Jewish people as a whole. However, in some (but certainly not all) later Islamic theology, Jews can appear as Muhammad’s great enemies, although—arguably—this version is not present in the earliest sources (Fatah, 2011). In one tale, Muhammad presides over the massacre of large numbers of unarmed men from the Jewish Banu Qurayza tribe—though some scholars say he may never have done this (Fatah, 2011). The long tradition of Muslim theology and the political practice of treating the Jews as *dhimmi*s—protected, but lower-class people—should be sufficient to end the myth that Jews were well-treated under Muslim rule.

To be sure, the story of how the Jews were treated in the Muslim world is a complex one. However, there can be little doubt that Islam—like Christianity—provides ample source material for contemporary Jew-haters who wish to argue that their attitudes emerge from honored places in the history of the faith (Gilbert, 2010; Kressel, 2012, 2022; Lewis, 1987).

Around the world, some Muslim theologians and many Christian ones have found methods to reinterpret religious texts and history to foster a spirit of tolerance. Still, numerous Muslim and Christian theologians do not offer such visions. Indeed, within both the Christian and Muslim worlds, theologians and clerics sometimes number among the most ardent Jew-haters. Muslims and Christians who wish to fight antisemitism often find themselves in apparent opposition to past and present religion and theology. And beliefs rooted in religion and theology do not yield easily; they are, after all, part of how huge numbers of people in the world manage their existential conflicts (Kressel, 2024).

A Protean Bigotry—Seemingly Confirmed by History

The antisemitic disease manifests differently across eras and locations, and each subsequent outbreak draws strength from the previous ones. While it is a fool’s game—or perhaps a scoundrel’s—to compare bigotries on scales of virulence or destructiveness, it is fair to say that Jew hatred exceeds all other prejudices in its adaptability. Like the cockroach, it has shown an amazing ability to thrive in diverse and challenging environments. Historians disagree about whether antagonism to Jews in pre-Christian times should be understood as the first stage of anti-Jewish bigotry. In any case, it was the early Christian era that started theology-based religious Jew hatred. Such animosity, in turn, brought anti-Jewish laws and practices that pushed Jews into various occupations (e.g., moneylending, international trade). Soon economic motives—and

populist anti-Jewish folklore—joined theology to fire up hostility against the Jews that was no longer entirely religious.

The Enlightenment brought an end to some of this, yet that movement produced new strains of antisemitism (Hertzberg, 1990). By the mid-nineteenth century, socialists and Marxists had carved out powerful leftist justifications for hating Jews (Wistrich, 2010). Around the same time, anticommunists started to despise the Jews for their perceived support of radical revolutionaries. While this was going on, early anthropologists crafted novel racial theories that—joined by nationalist impulses—turned into the political antisemitism of the late nineteenth century that would, ultimately, grow genocidal in the twentieth century (Rose, 2013).

Before and after the Holocaust, communist governments created new reasons for attacking Jews, Judaism, and Israel. Some of this directly and indirectly inspired later antiracist and anticolonialist hostility to Jews and Israel, although this latest manifestation of Jew hatred has complex roots and interpretations (Bernstein, 2022; Landes, 2022; Lipstadt, 2019; Tabarovsky, 2019; Weiss, 2019). What we certainly see in some minds, most recently, is the compatibility of antiracist and pro-human rights thinking on the one hand and support for overtly antisemitic organizations, such as Hamas and Hezbollah, on the other.

Bari Weiss—who left the *New York Times*, in part, because she experienced a bullying, illiberal environment that was particularly pronounced when she wrote about Jews—notes that antisemitism “is not a solid idea or a singular theory. It is a shape-shifting worldview that slithers away just as you think you have pinned it down” (Weiss, 2019, p. 28). At various times, the Jew-hater may attack an individual, a people, a culture, or a state. The antisemite, Weiss argues, “turns Jews into the symbol of whatever a given civilization defines as ... most sinister ... Under communism, the Jews were the capitalists ... under Nazism, the Jews were the race contaminators. And today, when the greatest sins are racism and colonialism, Israel, the Jew among the nations, is being demonized as the last bastion of white, racist colonialism—a unique source of evil not just in the region but in the world” (Weiss, 2019, p. 32).

Psychologically, the long history becomes relevant because each new movement of antisemitism is able to portray past millennia of Jew hatred as confirmatory. The bigots bolster calls for new hostility by pointing out old hostility. How, they ask, with psychological plausibility, can so many people from so many times and places have been wrong? So much smoke suggests fire. And there is also the problem of secondary antisemitism. The more that Jews point out and complain about past antisemitism, the more some people grow angry—perhaps out of guilt (Imhoff & Banse, 2009).

There is one more lesson here. We should not expect to find a single, unified psychology of antisemitism. Different manifestations of antisemitism show family resemblances, but they may originate in vastly different psychologies and social circumstances.

A Popular Prejudice for Victims

Empirically, antisemitism in recent years has sometimes been most intense in people who have themselves been victims of discrimination. A fair amount of data suggests that Jew-haters in some recent contexts have come disproportionately from the ranks of people who have themselves been the targets of bigotry or injustice. The reasons for this disproportionate hostility are

complex and deserve careful analysis and discussion. While such a task lies beyond the scope of this book, it remains important to highlight some empirical findings.

Many studies have found that the percentage of people in the African American community who are antisemitic exceeds the percentage in the general public (Dashefsky, 2021; Kaufman et al., 2020; Kirchick, 2021; Kressel, 2016, 2025; Locke, 1994; Smith & Schapiro, 2019). This finding generally persists even after one controls for education, age, and religion. Research also shows that some African Americans have positive feelings toward Jews, and many—often a majority—show no signs of prejudice against Jews. Similarly, the Latinx population in the United States often shows disproportionate antisemitism, although this finding is substantially stronger among recent immigrants. Muslim populations in the United States and elsewhere have also shown up as consistently more hostile toward Jews than have others in the areas where they live (ADL, 2019; Cohen, 2022; Jaspal, 2014, 2023; Jikeli, 2016). One consequence of these empirical findings is that sincere antiracists cannot advance the proposition that all the haters are on one side of a line and all of the victims are on the other side. A person can be both a bigot and a target of bigotry.

Antisemitism Is More—and Less—Than the Holocaust

Antisemitism is not readily understandable by reference to the Holocaust alone, and Holocaust education programs frequently do not prepare people to understand contemporary antisemitism. Few topics deserve more intensive study than the Holocaust, and many scholars have pursued this endeavor from a wide variety of academic perspectives (Dawidowicz, 1983; Kressel, 2002; Michman, 2003, 2016; Newman & Erber, 2002). Similarly, the attempt to provide public school students in the United States and elsewhere with a clear understanding of Nazism and its consequences has been inspired by important and honorable objectives. Unfortunately, Holocaust education in the schools has not been as effective as intended with regard to its main objective—that is, spreading awareness about what happened. More than a few students even emerge from the public schools believing that the Jews themselves caused the Holocaust (Claims Conference, 2020). Only a handful develop a clear understanding of what happened to the Jews in mid-twentieth-century Europe.

Beyond this, some programs often move far from the original mandate and impart questionable interpretations of Nazism (Kressel, 2002). Frequently, in the search for relevance, Holocaust education de-emphasizes the facts of what happened and dilutes the history into simplistic social and moral lessons with little consistency. Even when the history is taught well, Nazism provides a partially distorted lens through which to understand the emergence of antisemitism in other times and places. Hitler's rise to power and its devastating consequences for Jews and others was—in many ways—unique and unlikely to yield clear insights about identifying antisemitic threats in the twenty-first-century world.

Powered by Conspiratorial Thinking

The antisemite—unlike most other bigots—is driven by pervasive and psychologically gripping conspiracy theories. Bari Weiss calls antisemitism “an ever-morphing conspiracy theory in which Jews play the starring role in spreading evil around the world” (Weiss, 2019, p. 31).

Indeed, it seems that everyone who has ever fallen prey to the lure of conspiratorial thinking has eventually conjured up a link to the Jews (Pipes, 1997). Antisemites in various times and places have portrayed “the Jews” as the power behind communism, capitalism, United States, Obama, both Clintons, George W. Bush, banks, ISIS, the California fires, the Black Lives Matter movement, “decadent” music and dance in the 1920s, Europe’s immigration problems, pornography, COVID-19, the anti-Trump protests, and much more (Ben-Itto, 2005; Kressel, 2017; Sarna, 2022).

Interestingly, some ostensibly evil outcomes attributed to Jews are things that many people think of as desirable (e.g., democracy, human rights, higher education). Regardless, the exaggerated sense of Jewish power is always potentially dangerous. In the nineteenth century, the French journalist Edouard Drumont retraced French history in his book *La France Juive*, showing how everything that went wrong for France over centuries was the fault of the Jews. Many other countries have their Drumonts who authored similar books ascribing to Jews responsibility for bad fortune in their own nations and regions.

Much of the belief in a Jewish conspiracy to control the world was crystallized in the *Protocols of the Elders of Zion*—a supposed transcript of a meeting of plotting Jewish leaders. The document—in many translations—has been taken as evidence of powerful Jewish conspiracies ever since, and across the globe (e.g., by Hitler, Henry Ford, Muslim antisemitism, the Ku Klux Klan). This is true despite the fact that we can prove, beyond all doubt, that the *Protocols* was a forgery that came from known sources. The falseness of the *Protocols* has even been proved in court several times, but to no avail (Ben-Itto, 2005).

We see its influence in, for example, the antisemitism of the former Malaysian Prime Minister Mahathir Mohamad—often described in the West as a moderate—who in 2003 declared: “the Jews rule the world by proxy. They get others to fight and die for them ... They invented socialism, communism, human rights and democracy so that persecuting them would appear to be wrong so they may enjoy equal rights with others. With these they have now gained control of the most powerful countries” (quoted in Kressel, 2012, p. 40). We also see the influence of the *Protocols* in the original Hamas charter, which says, “With their money, they took control of the world media, news agencies, the press, publishing houses, broadcasting stations ... They were behind the French revolution, the Communist revolution and most of the revolutions we heard and hear about, here and there. With their money they formed secret societies, such as the Freemasons, Rotary clubs, the Lions clubs, and others in different parts of the world for the purpose of sabotaging societies and achieving Zionist interests” (quoted in Kressel, 2012, pp. 37–38). When university students express support for Hamas, one wonders whether they share—or are even aware of—the conspiratorial mentality that has motivated the group since its inception.

To understand the origins, meaning, and implications of antisemitic conspiracy theories and their underlying psychology is the task of a lifetime. For our purposes, we should point out that this conspiratorial core is clearly something that differentiates antisemitism from other forms of prejudice. Moreover, conspiracy-minded antisemites do not typically look down on Jews the way many bigots look down on their targets. They often view Jews as superpowerful and hypercompetent. Thus, economic well-being and visual signs of success

in the Jewish community are not necessarily predictive of safety; these qualities—true or untrue—may in fact reinforce the prejudiced and conspiratorial mentality (Schraub, 2019).

Complex Connection to Anti-Zionism and Anti-Israel Attitudes

Hostility toward Israel frequently morphs into antisemitism, and Jew hatred has always fertilized hostility toward Zionism and the Jewish state. Critiques of Israel—whether valid or not—can be entirely independent of antisemitism. Still, considering the matters discussed earlier, it would be a naïve social analyst who concluded that the attitudes of billions across the globe toward the Jewish state were entirely unrelated to attitudes toward Jews as individuals and, especially, “the Jews” as a collectivity.

More than a half-century ago, Emile Alghori, a high-level Jordanian government official, gave voice to a common sentiment: “It is our firm belief that there is no difference at all between Jews and Zionists. All Jews are Zionists and all Zionists are Jews, and anyone who thinks otherwise is not thinking logically. We consider world Jewry our adversary and enemy” (quoted in Taguieff, 2004, p. 6). This perspective has been expressed many times before and since (Kressel, 2012). When we hear calls on campus to “globalize the *intifada*,” the idea is to bring violent attacks from Israel to Jews around the world.

The connection between antisemitism and anti-Zionism is extraordinarily complex and without parallel in other forms of bigotry. Indeed, to fully understand Zionism, itself, one must consider its emergence from the context of past Jew hatred in the Christian and Muslim worlds. Moreover, as the British social psychologist Rusi Jaspal and others have argued, it is precisely the Jewish character of Israel that renders it unacceptable to many anti-Zionists (Jaspal, 2023). Elsewhere, I have invoked cognitive dissonance theory to help explain how many Muslims have reacted psychologically to the realization of repeated defeats in wars with Israel after having grown up with religion-based stereotypes of “the Jews” as an inferior, weak, and defeated people. To some extent, the inconsistency and dissonance in their belief systems were reduced by holding that the Jews were, as religious sources taught, an evil and tricky group and, as the *Protocols* taught, a cabal of plotters who controlled many powerful nations (Kressel, 2012).

No Longer Cured by Education

The old answer to antisemitism was education; at best, this answer is dated. In the 1960s and 1970s, social scientists produced an excellent series of studies on antisemitism (Quinley & Glock, 1979). The clear, confident, optimistic, and empirically supported conclusions of researchers at the time were that (a) education trumped antisemitism and—partly as a consequence of this—(b) antisemitism had dropped precipitously during the postwar years. Education, these researchers argued, reduced bigotry against Jews by offering the knowledge and cognitive skills needed to recognize prejudice and understand its negative ramifications. Education also lessened Jew hatred by teaching norms of tolerance and associated values. Even today, quite a few antisemitism scholars tout the ultimate virtues of education but many lack confidence in how current educational systems and practices function with regard to Jew hatred.

As we have seen, mainstream antiracist educational projects in recent years have failed with regard to teaching about antisemitism. What is more, history and current events both show that high levels of education can coexist with many types of prejudice and hatred (Kressel, 2002). If a PhD is not protective against antisemitism, can we be confident that lower levels of educational attainment confer the requisite mental skills for tolerance? The success of Boycott, Divestment, and Sanctions (BDS) initiatives among academics in several humanities and social science disciplinary associations surely shows the susceptibility of the highly educated to anti-Zionist and anti-Israel sentiments. In the eyes of many Jews, these BDS programs are deeply intertwined with antisemitism; at the very least, they are discriminatory against Israelis.

Scholarly programs in Middle East studies are dominated by anti-Israel scholars and extremely unlikely to hire faculty with contrary viewpoints (Kramer, 2001). For example, Juan Cole, former Middle East Studies Association president and a professor responsible for educating students at one of the best universities in the country, recently called Israelis genocidal psychopaths and whitewashed Hamas (Harrod, 2023). It is hard to see how students exposed to such propagandistic indoctrination will emerge with nuanced views about Israel and Jews.

According to quite a few recent critics, the highest prestige universities—Stanford, Harvard, the University of Pennsylvania, Columbia—in the United States have been willing to tolerate antisemitism (Finley, 2023). Some research suggests that Jews are more likely to be the target of hate crimes on campuses than anywhere else (except places of worship). Moreover, reported antisemitic incidents increase when campuses sponsor Israel Apartheid Week activities (Feinberg, 2021).

The campus situation for Jewish students can improve and some retain faith in fighting Jew hatred through education. It remains an open question whether this can work. Deborah Lipstadt argues that education will work sometimes, but not for the committed antisemite. She explains: “Their contempt for the Jew is not the result of a ‘cognitive error’ ... It’s not that we simply need to rationally show them that Jews do not in fact control the banks or the media, or shape the foreign policy of whichever country they live in. Their view of Jews is, unfortunately, refracted through a preestablished prism of hatred. That’s why these irrational and absurd charges make sense to them” (Lipstadt, 2019, pp. 83–84). Social psychologists can, I think, discern many empirical questions here. Which sorts of interventions are likely to be effective in reaching various types of antisemites? There may be research designs that can produce practical results. But we can no longer rely on the rule that education necessarily defuses antisemitism. Nowadays, as often as not, it may augment it.

CONCLUSION

If psychologists are serious about combating antisemitism, there is a lot of work to do. Ideology and bigotry have worked their way deep into the academy. Moreover, studying intense bigotry has never been an easy task methodologically. But, for well-intentioned psychologists concerned about the growth of Jew hatred, the most important first step is to grasp the nature of the phenomenon we are addressing. This task requires understanding

that while antisemitism resembles other prejudices in some important ways, it is at its core *sui generis*, a hatred that is the product of the twenty centuries that produced it. The theological roots of antisemitism mean that it will remain a light sleeper, which can be readily reawakened by religious leaders armed with sacred sources. The long and varied historical pedigree of antisemitism enables haters to perennially invoke supporting precedents from many contexts. Holocaust education, for a variety of reasons, has not proved itself a powerful bulwark against the reemergence of Jew hatred in the contemporary world. More generally, it seems that an earlier generation of antisemitism scholars was far too sanguine about the eternally protective effects of education. Certainly, we should not jettison our faith in learning, but neither should we be simplistic about education leading to tolerance, especially regarding Jews.

Controversially, those who truly care about resisting the upsurge in Jew hatred must discard the notion that hostility toward Israel and hostility toward Jews are entirely different matters. There is certainly no one-to-one correspondence between the two, but there is considerable overlap. Equally controversial, but essential to the fight against antisemitic bigotry, is the realization that some of the worst haters come from communities that have themselves been the victims of prejudice. Why this happens is a matter that deserves careful study, but we cannot start by sweeping the empirical relationship under a rug.

With regard to research, we need psychologists to do much more than they have been doing and to incorporate historical insights into research designs. Moreover, psychologists and social scientists who focus on racism and discrimination have not been doing an adequate job of educating students and the public about the dangers of contemporary Jew hatred. Finally, clinicians—required by professional guidelines to consider the predicaments of various minority groups—have not been adequately attentive to the needs of Jewish clients, especially post-October 7.

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