

Antisemites Are a Problem; Antisemitism Not So Much!

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When I tell my students that I don't believe in antisemitism as a timeless force in history, they get angry. When I tell them that antisemitism can no more be ascribed historical agency than can other abstract categories like democracy or patriarchy, they don't know what to make of something that sounds hostile to Jews, to America, and to women. When I explain that when we label something antisemitic in our course we will be describing a series of time-bound ideas, tropes, and memes that arose in the nineteenth century and are periodically weaponized for contingent reasons, they simply get confused.

It has never been easy to find a single coherent framework that could define and encompass all the varied aspects of social discrimination, religious opposition, legal and political restriction, and cruel persecution directed at Jews in different eras and places. Often, historians have tried to distinguish between anti-Judaism and antisemitism: the former was religious polemic and to be expected; the latter was unacceptable hate. That was the approach in 1901, when the editors of the *Jewish Encyclopedia* restricted their treatment largely to the modern political and racist antisemitism then beginning to make itself felt, while intentionally omitting medieval hostilities, since these were based "principally on religious grounds" (vol. 1, 643). Scores of writers have since cataloged and explored the theological and doctrinal abstractions of religious polemic, sometimes providing quite startling insights into Christian tolerance or the foundational role of anti-Judaism in the Western tradition as a whole. Other scholars have elucidated religious polemic on the Jewish side, for the most part emphasizing the rational and exegetical arguments through which Jews defended their tradition. (In recent years, Jewish religious polemic has been pictured as



less anodyne. We now know of Jews' mockery of their neighbors' sacred traditions, of halakhists' efforts to protect rigid social separation, and even of outright Jewish hostility towards the host society. No matter how controversial some of these latter treatments have been, they at least grant a measure of historical agency to the Jews themselves, making Jews more than a blank canvas painted on by the brush of Christian hatred.)

But religious polemic does not, by itself, explain antisemitism. Where does social causality lie? What factors lead from religious abstractions to mass riots, brutal slayings, expulsions and ghettoization, pogroms and the Holocaust? Scholars dealing with the medieval have suggested a range of explanations for the transition: the rise of psychological pathologies, political centralization, or the blending of accumulating doctrine with folk animosities, and on and on. In the end many find it easiest simply to ignore the cumbersome distinction between religious doctrine and brutal persecutions, blending everything into a single narrative of hate. By 1972 the *Encyclopaedia Judaica* article on "Antisemitism" is far longer and better illustrated than the treatment of 1901 mentioned above. Now "antisemitism" is given an independent reified existence no matter the specific place or time or religious context. The term is no longer spelled with a hyphen since it no longer requires a myth of origin in nineteenth-century pseudoscientific "Semitism." In popular and scholarly treatments alike,



Protesters clash over Labour Party antisemitism issues in Parliament Square, London, 2018. Photo by Alex Cavendish / Alamy Live News.

antisemitism has become “the longest hatred,” which merely changes its face to suit the times. Modern political realities require, too, that even Islamicate lands be brought into the discussion of this single “lethal obsession” that stretches “from antiquity to global jihad.”

Of course, omnipresent and essentialized hatred of Jews is actually useful for Jewish historians: the community of potential victims is large, and we can therefore legitimately treat more than the narrow “elite” of true believers and rabbinic scholars (*gelehrten-geschichte*). But such an historiographical approach abandons the century-long effort to shape a narrative that is more than *leidensgeschichte*—a history of suffering. It was the search for Jewish historical agency that led Salo Baron famously to portray the ghetto as the location of an autonomous community, paradoxically finding Jewish agency in places and times when Jews were ostensibly least able to control their own destiny. Anti-Judaism may be useful to understand Christians but, like Said’s *Orientalism*, it tells us far more about the observer than the observed, far more about the Christian/Muslim than about Jews—unless we mean Jews as a “field of discourse” for others.

While I have taught courses on antisemitism in the past, these days I prefer to design comparative courses that treat demagoguery, xenophobia, segregation, and prejudice in broader terms. With the students I look for the contexts in which such categories are activated, the

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logic they present, and the ways in which they are applied. If we still deal with anti-Jewish riots in Alexandria and Barcelona and Kishinev, we also deal with medieval bread riots and modern industrial riots, with politicized rhetorics about the Boston massacre and racialized rhetorics about the Tulsa massacre. Comparison does not trivialize the individual victim or forgive the specific perpetrator; rather it warns us that the particularist thinking that sees “us” as threatened by an essentialized Other is not an innocent celebration of difference but a dangerous form of politicized speech that has often been weaponized with drastic results—by Jews as against them. Victims of plague may accuse Jews of well-poisoning just as Japanese may accuse Korean workers of setting fires after an earthquake. Soccer fans may riot and hunt down innocent victims in Jerusalem just as they do in Europe. The historian may not paper over, much less celebrate, any specific rhetoric of identity when it leads to hate. Our task is to study past hatred to learn and teach the lessons of civil morality for the future.

I am not abandoning the study of the Jewish past. Quite to the contrary, I intend to shape courses that acknowledge the Jewish use of power and thus to explore the morality of Jewish choices. Victims cannot be moral because they have no agency. Only those with power have the opportunity and obligation to make moral choices. How Jews have acquired and used power both as individuals and as a collectivity is a proper focus of teaching Jewish history. After all, antisemitism may not exist as an independent metahistorical force, but antisemites abound. How Jews have chosen to respond is central to how they have defined and shaped their societies and how they have sought to frame their own group interest.

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