

Anti-Semitism in America: Difficult Questions, Contested Answers

In his magnum opus, *A Lethal Obsession*, the late Robert Wistrich, one of Israel's finest scholars of the murderous pathways of Jew-hatred, elegantly summarized the character of anti-Semitism at the turn of this century.

"The old-new anti-Semitism can itself be as inventive as it is repetitive," Wistrich wrote. "It often appears to imply that Jews are never victims but *always victimizers*, which may sound original to some but is clearly false. It generally avoids positions that smack of deliberate political or economic exclusion of Jews qua Jews from the national community or that echo the discourse of a discredited biological racism. On the other hand, depicting Zionism and the Jewish lobby as a world power is not considered racist or defamatory. There is no law against suggesting that Zionists deliberately provoke wars and revolutions, even though this is a classic anti-Semitic fabrication that has been widely propagated by Nazis, Communists and Islamists."

From this short paragraph, we can deduce some general observations. Anti-Semitism adjusts itself to the sensibilities of the surrounding society. It develops themes that invariably portray Jews as a collectivity in the worst possible moral light. It is fixated with the distinct character of Jewish power—"this small people," in the words of the Greek composer Mikos Theodorakis, a communist, in 2004, or "the root of evil." And it is politically and theologically promiscuous, penetrating the salons of the nationalist right and the progressive left, creeping into Presbyterian churches, leading the thundering discourse of political Islam.

We can boil all that down even more simply, into two maxims. First, anti-Semitism isn't the exclusive property of any one political faction or religious formation. Second, because anti-Semitism is something of a shape-shifter that frequently denies that it is what it is, we have trouble identifying it even when we've encountered it a thousand times before.

With that in mind, on then to the widely discussed "surge" of anti-Semitism in the U.S. identified over the last few weeks and months, manifested in small-scale but ugly incidents, among them a cemetery desecration, more than 50 hoax bomb threats phoned into Jewish community centers, several physical assaults, and swastikas and other anti-Semitic invective sprayed on university campuses and other buildings. The AMCHA Initiative, an organization that promotes the civil rights of Jewish students, maintains an online "swastika tracker" which monitors the appearance of Neo-Nazi graffiti and flyers on university campuses. What stands out are the frequency of these incidents—at least every day—and the sometimes viciously personal nature of the Jew-baiting, as experienced by the University of Minnesota student who walked into his dorm to see the words "Nazi's (sic) Rule," a swastika and a drawing of a concentration camp scrawled on the whiteboard. Racial epithets like "filthy Jews" and "(inappropriate expression)" alongside slogans like "Heil Trump"—more on that in a moment—all abound in these reports of anti-Semitism and racism at their most delinquent.

To be sure, all this looks and sounds very much like the anti-Semitism we know from movies and the history books, where the perpetrators are white racist fanatics with limited education and violent temperaments. And that perhaps explains why so many left-leaning media outlets, from *The New York Times* to the BBC, are reporting this current wave of anti-Semitism with far less cynicism than they did with other, similar episodes in recent years—like the Holocaust denial conferences repeatedly hosted by the Islamist regime in Iran, or the

pervasive anti-Semitism in the British Labour Party. Whereas those examples are complicated by the presence of Israel in the frame, as well as the involvement of Muslims in promoting anti-Semitic discourse, when it comes to President Donald Trump's America, it's all beautifully simple and snow-white in color.

The sad truth is that the understanding of anti-Semitism has become hopelessly politicized, meaning that our judgments are compromised by non-related but more expedient imperatives. In addition, all too often the response to anti-Semitism fixates upon individual actions and statements, obscuring the more fundamental issues. Kenneth Marcus of the Louis D. Brandeis Center for Human Rights Under Law explained this well in a recent interview: "It often does more harm than good to simply ask the question, 'Who is and isn't an anti-Semite.' If you're just asking whether individuals are anti-Semites or not, you may never get an answer, you'll get people defensive and it'll lead to a coarsening of the discourse."

In the same interview, Marcus continued, "We need to ask what forms of speech, what kinds of activity are anti-Semitic, so that we can identify it." This is absolutely correct, and those who charge that Trump is an anti-Semite should examine whether there is a consistent pattern of evidence to support that claim. Citing his Jewish grandchildren and his Jewish advisers as evidence to the contrary—as the president has done, and as he has instructed his subordinates to do—may be irritating, and may suggest that the past seven decades of trying to educate the public about the nature of anti-Semitism and the centrality of the Holocaust has largely been in vain. But it manifestly does not demonstrate that the current White House is in the grip of an anti-Semitic fever.

In these times, it is dangerous to suggest thought experiments, but I will throw caution to the wind. I wonder if those who agree with Steven Goldstein of the Anne Frank Center for Mutual Respect, when he said that Trump's Feb. 21

condemnation of anti-Semitism was a “band-aid on the cancer of anti-Semitism that has infected his own administration,” would have similar qualms about Linda Sarsour, the Palestinian-American activist in the Boycott, Divestment and Sanctions campaign who is rapidly achieving iconic status in the protest movement that has coalesced around Trump’s election.

Sarsour and her Muslim activist colleagues raised more than \$100,000 for the repair of the desecrated Chesed Shel Emet cemetery in St. Louis, earning plaudits from nearly every mainstream media outlet and winning the endorsement of Harry Potter author J.K. Rowling. In publicity terms, it was an unbelievably smart move; by the time news of Sarsour’s initiative broke, her critics were immediately placed in the uncomfortable position of questioning her motives at just the time that she reached out to the Jewish community.

But if Kenneth Marcus is right that patterns of speech and action determine what constitutes anti-Semitism, then Sarsour’s past denunciations of Zionism, and her support for a solution to the Palestinian issue based on the elimination of Jewish sovereignty, at least warrant a critical examination of the politics behind her cemetery gesture. It is easy, after all, to be empathetic and kind to dead Jews and their memories, whether in Poland or Missouri—and far harder to deal with the ones who are still alive, and who regard Sarsour’s “one state of Palestine” fantasies as sinister code for a solution that would need to be imposed, in all likelihood through violent conquest, on the Jews of Israel.

Can the enemies of Israel be, at the same time, the friends of Jewish communities outside the Jewish state? Conversely, do friends of Israel get a pass when they play down or outright deny the presence of anti-Semites among their political allies? Why should Sarsour be acceptable to the Jewish community, but not Richard Spencer, the pudgy racist at the helm of the so-called National Policy Institute? Are we that easily taken in? I fear the answer is yes. {eo}

Ben Cohen is senior editor of *& The Tower Magazine*, and is the author of *Some of My Best Friends: A Journey Through Twenty-First Century Antisemitism*.

This article was originally published at . Used with permission.