

ANTISEMITISM MATTERS

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Anti-Semitism is prejudice about or discrimination against Jews. At heart, it is a form of human hatred no different than racism, sexism, homophobia, and other forms of bigotry. But it has a unique complexity, in part due to historical events, in part due to the dual aspects of Judaism: Judaism is a religion, but Jews are also a people (of many races and varying degrees of religious observance) who share a common culture, legacy, traditions, and values.

The term “anti-Semitism” was coined by Wilhelm Marr in Germany in 1873. A misnomer, it has nothing to do with a prejudice against “Semites”—“Semitic” being a term that applies to languages, not people. But Marr used it to mean hatred of Jews.

Of course, anti-Semitism was around for centuries before Marr. It has three distinct strains that sometimes overlap.

Religious-based Anti-Semitism

The oldest form is *religious-based* anti-Semitism. One can trace anti-Semitism back to biblical times. For example, there’s the Book of Esther, with the story of King Ahasuerus’s edict to wipe out all the Jews and Haman’s insinuation that Jews are “a people apart.”

Its modern form begins with the birth of Christianity, as Christianity and Judaism were competitive faiths in the late Roman Empire.

Jesus, of course, was a Jew, as were many of the early Christians. But many Jews refused to join the new faith, and their continued existence had to be explained in light of Christian belief that Christians had made a new covenant that superceded the Jewish covenant with God. Some concluded that God had permitted the Jews to live as a sign of what should happen if people rejected and denied Jesus. Jews were forced to the fringes of society, and church edicts segregated them into ghettos. Jews were blamed for the death of Jesus, and canards such as “Christ-killers” were leveled against them.

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As Christianity became dominant in Europe, Jews were discriminated against through special taxes, special clothing, limited avenues of employment, and periodic expulsions. During the years of the Black Death, Jews were accused of poisoning wells, and at other times they were charged with stealing Christian children to use their blood to make Passover matzah. During the Crusades, Jews were murdered, raped, forced to convert, or expelled from their homes. On the Iberian Peninsula, after the Christian victory over Islam, Jews who did not leave were subject to the tortures of the Inquisition, which sought

to determine whether they were true Christians.

Religious anti-Semitism defined the common denominator for how all forms of anti-Semitism work: Jews are seen as a group that conspires to harm non-Jews, and “blaming the Jews” provides a simple explanation for all that has gone wrong in life.

In modern times, while religious anti-Semitism remains a problem, it is less so in the Christian world since the reforms of the Second Vatican Council, which removed the charge of deicide and identified anti-Semitism as a sin.

In the Muslim world, however, the trend has lately been the other way. While Jews and Muslims lived together harmoniously at times in the past—certainly with more harmony than Jews lived in Christian Europe—Jews never enjoyed full equality. Islam defines Jews (and Christians) as *dhimmis* (“protected peoples”), meaning tolerated but second-class citizens. In recent years, largely due to the Arab-Israel conflict as well as to the untenable notion that non-Muslims should never have sovereignty over lands that were once linked with Islam, the Islamic form of religious-based anti-Semitism has been growing. There is also an increasing nexus between anti-Semitism and anti-Americanism, in large part due to Islamists’ disdain for democracy, since in their theocratic view of the world, democracies (such as Israel and the U.S.) are inherently sinful, as they put the will of people over the will of Allah.

Race-based Anti-Semitism

Race-based anti-Semitism is a more modern, and in some ways more pernicious, form of Jew-hatred. Following the advent of Charles Darwin's notion of evolution and the idea of race, this strain of anti-Semitism identified Jews as a distinct race, downplaying their identity as a religion. Whereas previously a persecuted Jew could convert to another religion to save himself or herself, under a race-based definition of Judaism, this was no longer an option. Nazi Germany represented the extreme application of this race-based type of anti-Semitism: Even one who didn't consider himself Jewish but had one Jewish grandparent could be sent to the death camps. On the other hand, this form of anti-Semitism worked just like the older religious-based hatred had: demonizing Jews, identifying them as "the problem," and suggesting that they exercise secret power.

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Race-based anti-Semitism has its own literature. A czarist forgery, *The Protocols of the Elders of Zion*, argues that Jews meet secretly to control the world. This document, translated into various languages, was used to propel many pogroms (violent attacks) against Jews in Europe in the late 1800s and early 1900s. It was popularized in the United States by

automaker Henry Ford in the 1920s. While it continues to be a staple of white supremacist groups today (who see a “Jewish plot” behind all the efforts to make every American equal), it is also promoted by groups such as the Nation of Islam. They have their own version, *The Secret Relationship between Blacks and Jews*, which distorts the history of slavery to paint it as a Jewish operation against black people.

Today’s main practitioners of race-based anti-Semitism are neo-Nazis, skinheads, Christian Identity adherents (who believe that people of color are subhuman and Jews the offspring of Satan), and various other white supremacists and white nationalists. While there are important ideological and theological differences between these groups, they all hate nonwhites and see Jews as responsible for opening the door to equal rights and opportunity for them, as part of a nefarious plot to destroy “white America” through immigration, affirmative action, control of the media, and other alleged schemes.

Political Anti-Semitism

Political anti-Semitism (or anti-Zionism*) is the most recent and least understood form of this prejudice. While all forms of anti-Semi-

* Zionism is the belief that Israel has the right to exist as a homeland for Jews. It says nothing about the policies or programs of the state, merely that it has a right to exist. There are left-wing Zionists and right-wing Zionists, and many in between. Some Zionists are harsh critics of Israeli policies; others are supportive. Anti-Zionists, on the other hand, treat Israel more harshly and by a different standard than they would treat any other state on the globe. They frequently demonize it and essentially believe that Israel has no right to exist as a Jewish state, regardless of its policies, its leaders, or how the society is run.

tism serve political purposes, the rebirth of the State of Israel after a 2,000-year exile of the Jewish people gave rise to this most modern form. As the quintessential Israeli diplomat, Abba Eban, noted, “Classical anti-Semitism denies the rights of Jews as citizens within society. Anti-Zionism denies the equal rights of the Jewish people to its lawful sovereignty within the community of nations.... All that has happened is that the discriminatory principle has been transferred from the realm of individual rights to the domain of collective identity.”

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Of course, one can and should criticize Israel when it errs, just as one would be critical of the United States, France, Egypt, or any other nation. There’s no anti-Semitism in disapproving of a party, a program, a policy, or a political leader. But when Israel is expected to live up to standards not applied to any other nation; or when its perceived deficiencies are used to attack its basic legitimacy, that’s a problem. In the current context, if one supports the right of the Palestinian people to self-determination in a land of their own, but would deny the Jews the same right in their historic homeland, that is anti-Semitism.

While the religious or racial-based anti-Semite would generally not want to associate with Jews (although there are many instances when such people point to a “good Jew” they know, just as some would point to the “good black” or “good Latino”), the political anti-Semite likely has no problem with an individual Jew. It is the collective identity of Jews—expressed in the existence of the modern State of Israel—which animates them. Not surprisingly, the canards that fuel the older types of anti-Semitism are recycled here: Jews are seen as secretly influencing or controlling U.S. policy or public attitudes. And sometimes even the same symbols are used—the Star of David equaling the swastika, for instance. Political anti-Semitism can be found on both the far right and the far left, with many of the same tropes. But whereas most racial and religious-based anti-Semites wouldn’t deny their prejudice (or if they did, their denials would be seen as transparent), political anti-Semites generally won’t admit their bigotry.

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In addition to distinguishing the three basic types of anti-Semitism, it is also important to define the context in which the prejudice is being expressed. One can look at anti-Semitism by venue: on campus, in Europe, in the

Arab and Muslim world, in the media, etc. Or one can examine the strain of ideas that propel it: denial of the Holocaust, for instance, or the claim that Jews were secretly responsible for 9/11. While these lines are never fixed (for example, Holocaust denial, the brainchild of the neo-Nazi crowd, has its largest recent growth in the Arab world), they are important to keep in mind.

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Finally, anti-Semitism of every type treats Jews, either individually or collectively, as an “other.” It ascribes pernicious motives to them and frequently recycles and updates old canards painting the Jew as plotting to harm non-Jews, often in order to provide an explanation for world events. The frustration for many Jews, however, is that while all forms of anti-Semitism are dangerous, sometimes our friends only see one type or the other as meaningful. At the World Conference against Racism in Durban, for example, political anti-Semitism was ratcheted up to a new level, as the language of antiracism was used to attack both Jews and the right of Israel to exist, alone among the nations on the globe. Groups that were in the forefront of speaking out when literature praising Hitler was distributed by neo-Nazis were conspicuously silent when the same

literature in Arabic was being passed out. Or at an anti-Iraq war demonstration in the U.K., groups that would have challenged Holocaust-denial banners held by teenage skinheads were silent when such a banner was displayed by Muslim youth.

**Anti-Semitism in any of its forms
matters—and not just to Jews.**

Anti-Semitism in any of its forms matters—and not just to Jews. History has repeatedly shown that anti-Semitism is the miner's canary for a society's health. It always starts with the Jews, but never ends there. And it is always dangerous to democracy, human rights, and freedom.

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