

The Anti-Semite's Pointed Finger

How Jews have been tricked into believing they can cure the hatred of them when the hatred has always existed because it is politically useful for the haters

By Ruth R. Wisse

WHY can't we set ourselves the goal of eradicating anti-Semitism? All across the civilized world, people track anti-Semitism, expose it, oppose it, decry it. And yet no one seriously considers the possibility of bringing about its end. Is this because of some lack of capacity or courage? Or do we face in anti-Semitism something, to use

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the phrase of the Yiddish writer L. Shapiro, as eternal as the eternal God?

Two other scourges of modern times have seen their power greatly diminished if not eliminated. Fascism was crushed in World War II, and Communism lost its political base in 1991. These movements still have their adherents, but their sustaining polities went down to defeat. Yet anti-Semitism, which figured prominently in both, has metastasized and, according to one of its foremost historians, Robert Wistrich, “will probably get worse.”

Many reasons—historical, religious, sociological, ideological, even epidemiological—have been adduced for the persistence of what Anthony Julius has termed the “sewer” of anti-Semitism. All have merit. But the one reason that remains but dimly understood, and even stubbornly resisted, is the political—and yet it is

the one, I believe, that accounts for the phenomenon's continuing success. Politically, anti-Semitism succeeds by working through misdirection, and its opponents no less than its adherents tend to be taken in by some of its deceptive strategies.

A good place to begin probing the resiliency of anti-Semitic deception is with the origin of Zionism. Zionism arose, in part, as a response to modern political anti-Semitism, but the movement's history reveals an early and profound misdiagnosis of the problem.

It was first and foremost a movement of national self-determination, a familiar force in the late 19th and early 20th centuries. But unlike other national movements, whose efforts to liberate subjugated peoples was opposed by existing polities—nations and empires—Jews confronted a transnational political force that would come to be known as “anti-Semitism.” Zionists believed that the way to address the problem was by normalizing the political condition of the Jews themselves. Jews had been for too long a dependent minority in other people's lands. Since anti-Semitism attacked Jews as usurping aliens, the provocation would presumably be removed once the Jews packed up and went home. It seemed to make independent sense, at a time of proliferating nation-states, for Jews to re-establish *their* homeland: once they did so, logic suggested, they would at last become a politically unexceptional people.

Zionism achieved its primary goal. I will not dwell here on the marvels of Israel, except to emphasize that Zionism succeeded in accomplishing whatever depended on Jewish effort, energy, and will alone. But what about the expectations of political normalization its founders and builders possessed so fervently? Those who settled the land and attained sovereignty were entitled to expect that they, like the populaces of other new nations, would be accorded “normal” treatment commensurate with international custom.

In this, Zionism proved mistaken.

Zionists believed that anti-Semitism could be calmed through actions taken *by Jews* to give their enemies what their enemies wanted: a place, a place elsewhere, to which Jews could and would go. It was as if Jews were acknowledging that their existence as a minority people was a problem, and therefore *remediable*.

What this hope of normalization ignored was the fact that the doctrine of anti-Semitism arose in the 19th century not to address the realities of the Jewish situation but to meet the political needs of *others* and

to satisfy the political ends of others. The error lay not in the confidence placed by Jews in their capacity to establish a homeland but in the expectation that doing so would mitigate or put an end to the hostility directed against them.

As it turned out, anti-Semitism was launched against a people without a homeland, but it would work just as well against Jews with a state of their own.

How so? In 1945, the Arab League was founded with the common goal of preventing the creation of Israel. So far, nothing out of the ordinary: many emerging nations initially meet with opposition. But what followed was altogether exceptional. Israel won its War of Independence, and the war was concluded with an armistice between Israel and the neighboring countries it had been forced to fight. But unlike

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Britain's response to the victory of the 13 American colonies, the leaders of Israel's neighbors, plus 17 other Arab nations, actually refused to acknowledge its existence. And the United Nations collaborated in this refusal. Instead of expelling the countries of the Arab League for failing to abide by the founding principle of the international body, the UN gave the action a pass. This monumental failure of world leadership rendered Israel, the only member state to be so treated, exceptional. The establishment of the State of Israel, undergirded by the 1947 UN vote to partition Palestine into two states, meant nothing when it came to the political normalization of the Jews.

More than the offense itself, the UN's condoning of that offense allowed anti-Semitism to become a viable international tool. At almost every step, the UN functioned to facilitate rather than to thwart the Arab war against a member state. The UN did not generate the politics of postwar anti-Semitism, but it legitimated its practice—the practice, that is, of organizing an entire politics as a means of defaming, delegitimizing, and if possible destroying another national polity.

There was nothing inevitable about this process. The Arab world might have developed differently in the wake of 1948. Had Arab leaders accepted the presence of a Jewish state alongside so many of their own

states—most of them not much older than Israel, and many of them much more artificial—the Middle East could have seen peoples living side by side in relative amity. The United Nations might also have acted differently, just as it had been free to go in another direction when it voted in 1947 for the partition plan. In such an alternative scenario, the United States might have exerted pressure on even the obdurate King Saud of Saudi Arabia to accept Israel.

But it was not to be. The Zionist misdiagnosis, however innocent, raised expectations that were not satisfied. And, in the next phase, Zionism itself would be held responsible for raising these false expectations in the first place. Having expended so much creative energy in the recovery of the Jewish homeland—on the assumption that it would reduce anti-Jewish assaults—Jews found themselves facing greater enmity than before. For some Jews, therefore, it was hard to feel grateful for the acquired capacity for self-defense when the goal, as they thought, had been to *need* no self-defense. Instead of reconsidering the original mistake, some compounded the error by attributing the perpetuation of anti-Semitism to the Jews of Israel or to the Jewish state itself. In short, the enemies of Israel had discovered in anti-Semitism an amazingly effective political tool—and one that, into the bargain, rewarded them with wonderfully useful side effects.

Anti-Semitism works through the strategy of the pointing finger. Through political prestidigitation, the accuser draws attention away from his own sins—in the case of Arab leaders, the systematic oppression and immiseration of their own people—by pointing to the Jews, whose demonically inflated image and luridly portrayed wickedness make them a plausible explanation for whatever ails his regime. The pointing finger keeps negative attention focused on the Jews—or Israelis—and the latter, as often as not, obligingly fall into the trap by accepting responsibility for a situation they cannot control. In politics as before the law, whoever points the finger is the plaintiff, and whoever stands in the dock is the defendant. Unless they were to file a countersuit, simply answering to the charge of which they stood accused placed the Jews under the constant obligation of defending their innocence.

THE ZIONIST misconception—namely, that actions on the part of the Jews would end anti-Semitism—found its apotheosis in the Oslo Accords of 1993. Prime Minister Yitzhak Rabin's decision to invite Yasir Arafat to head the Palestinian Authority was an absurd political decision—no threatened country has ever before armed its sworn enemy with the expectation of *gaining* security. But there it

was, and Israel acted as it acted. The deed was exacerbated, however, by being linked to the expectation that it would lead to peace. Once again, Jews pretended that anti-Semitism could be stopped by some remedial action of their own, ignoring that the option lay not with them but with their accusers.

Rabin might have said:

The State of Israel under my leadership has decided to make such and such concessions because we feel it is in our national interest to do so for the following reasons (a) (b) (c) and (d). But we are obliged to point out that the preposterous imbalance between the Arab belligerents and their target makes it impossible for us to end the conflict. Only Arab leaders can stop what they started. However much we may wish it, Israeli concessions can do nothing on their own to bring peace. We have no incentive for aggression, and the lopsidedness of the war against us means that only its initiators can halt their incitement against us. We call on them to help their Palestinian brethren govern and improve their society. We call on the international community to help us in enforcing penalties against any violation of the agreement we now sign.

But he did not. And since Israel walked open-eyed into the peace trap, it was increasingly blamed for the ensuing aggressions of its "partner." The Israeli actions were supposed to bring peace. So why didn't they? Why not try again with more concessions? The same trap continues to ensnare not only Jews and Israelis but all people of goodwill who genuinely wish for peace in the Middle East and who, with greater or lesser naiveté, look to Israel to bring it about. And who can blame them, if Israel itself has been at least partially responsible for raising false expectations?

In the short run, one can, of course, understand the well-intentioned advice of the pollster Frank Luntz: "The only way for Israel to create sympathy is to be the side working hardest for peace. The best case for Israel is to demonstrate that she is willing to go twice as far as her neighbors to establish peace." In proposing to end the wars against them, Jews appeal to a worldview that champions conflict resolution, believes in human progress, trusts mankind's rational self-interest, and seeks international harmony and peace. The catchword for this view is liberalism, which is thought to represent optimism, hope, and a generous view of human nature, and attributes the same disposition to all peoples everywhere. Indeed, Jews were a popular liberal cause in the

decades between the end of the Second World War and the Yom Kippur War—when it seemed, momentarily, as if Israel would be able to win the peace.

Today, by any reasonable standard, Israel remains a beacon of liberalism in an illiberal region. Moreover, on any genuine political compass, Jews and Israel *are* the true north of liberalism, not simply on account of the way they are constituted as a people, but also because of the anti-liberal forces ranged against them. Arab opponents of Israel themselves oppose liberal democracy and fear its freedoms. Anti-Semitism in all its forms—Christian and Muslim, secular and religious, totalitarian and authoritarian—is an anti-liberal movement, one that explicitly defines liberalism as a Jewish conspiracy. One would therefore expect the alignment of Israel with liberalism and anti-Zionism with anti-liberalism to win Israel the defense of all liberals. The standard-bearers of muscular liberalism, from the 19th-century novelist George Eliot to the late senator Henry “Scoop” Jackson, have done just that, using defense of Jewish rights as a touchstone of liberal principles.

Yet here is the paradox: the fiercer anti-Semitism grows, the more it forces a choice on liberals. The choice is between protecting the Jews and protecting the orthodox liberal belief in rational compromise, world peace, “getting to yes,” and all the rest. Protecting the Jews requires confronting hostility that is *not* subject to rational persuasion, does *not* obey the liberal version of the rule of law, does *not* abide by liberal ideas of fairness, and does *not* extend peace and goodwill to others. To side with Israel, therefore, leaves one exposed to the same hostility that assails the Jews—an uncomfortable position for individuals and governments alike. The dictates of self-interest persuade some to ignore aggression that presumably doesn’t concern them, and then to justify their callousness by holding Jews responsible for the aggression against them. Some Jews try to demonstrate their own innocence by dissociating themselves from those of their fellow Jews who are under attack.

The politics of anti-Semitism strikes again: blaming the Jews succeeds by persuading liberals that it is aimed only at the “culpable” Jews. By casting these Jews as aggressors, it invites liberals to join the attack on them, on behalf of the Jews’ alleged victims. It congratulates liberals for joining the anti-liberal side by persuading them that they stand with the weak against the strong.

I HAVE TRIED to show (a) that anti-Semitism cannot be arrested by any remedial action of the Jews; (b) that there are harmful consequences for pretending that concessions from Jews can stop the aggression against them; and (c) that anti-Semitism forces a choice between protection of the Jews and, under the guise of liberalism, complicity with their enemies. And though anti-Semitism is often compared to cancer, there is no comparable effort to finding a cure. The reason seems plain: where the carriers of an illness are also its casualties, they and their well-wishers have incentives to tackle the problem. But the carriers of anti-Semitism do not experience themselves as its apparent victims. At-risk Jews cannot halt the malignancy, because they are not its

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carriers. And its carriers, the anti-Semites, will not seek a cure, because they don’t recognize its harm to them. Not until enlightened Arabs recognize that they, not the Jews, are its ultimate casualties will this political threat be contained.

What then? Some might argue that, even granting my thesis of a Zionist misdiagnosis, the scourge of anti-Semitism is so protean and so venerable that it can never be entirely expunged. They may have a point about the “entirely,” but I beg to differ about the realities of the present situation. A longstanding political attack has repeatedly called forth a defensive reaction of negotiation, accommodation, and no small amount of self-blame. This response has been shown to fail, and will go on failing with ever mounting consequences.

To say that anti-Semitism persists and succeeds does not mean that anti-Semitism is politically invulnerable. Tactics in fighting anti-Semitism may and should vary. But what is required strategically, from Jews as from all decent human beings, is no more than what justice and truth and genuine liberalism demand: namely, to reject vigorously the role of defendant at the bar of world opinion and to instigate political, diplomatic, moral, and intellectual countersuits on every front. 🏹