

Anti-Semitism and Anti-Zionism as Challenges to American Jewry

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ABSTRACT

The status and security of Jews in America are under attack, and as a result, the alliance between American Jews and Israel is also besieged. Anti-Semitic hate crimes are on the rise, with some perpetrators belonging to the far-Right, while the Left has mainstreamed anti-Semitic tropes.

As a result, as their ancestors did in Europe, American Jews find themselves to be the ultimate “other” once again: to the Right, they are not sufficiently American; to the Left, they are not sufficiently a minority. Many American Jews feel discomfort with Zionist particularism, and identify instead with universalist progressives. They fear being ostracized for supporting Israel.

American Jews have trouble seeing criticism of Israel as anti-Semitic because of the way they perceive their own American nationalism and the separation of national identity from religious identity, though the anti-Israel barrage is fundamentally anti-Semitic in its denial of Israel’s existence.



Members of the Jewish community and their allies protest anti-Semitism and the National Students for Justice in Palestine conference at the UCLA campus in Los Angeles, California on November 6, 2018.

Photo: Ronen Tivony/Nur Photo

Let us begin with what is now undeniable – the status and cultural security of Jews in America are under attack, and as a result, the alliance between American Jews and Israel is also besieged. The causes and manifestations of these developments are far too complex to be addressed in a brief essay of this sort. But even in this space, we can describe some of the critical lenses through which today’s challenges – I would say crisis – ought to be viewed.

There have long been hints that Jews were going to become a legitimate target in America, much as they had been in Europe. During his campaign for the presidency, Donald Trump pretended not to know who David Duke was and thus avoided having to condemn him. That denial-with-a-wink did him no political damage. There were

campaign ads showing George Soros and other prominent Jews alongside images of dollars and money. That, too, bore no political cost. Much more alarming, though, were the Charlottesville protests, which led not only to the killing of an innocent woman but to the chant, by numerous protesters, of “Jews will not replace us.”

That chant spoke volumes. The “us,” of course, was “America;” and the clear implication of that chant was that Jews were no longer America. To put it differently, for some time, Jews had considered themselves “white,” part of the mainstream. “Jews will not replace us” made clear what had long been brewing – Jews were no longer “white;” like other minorities, they were meant to be consigned to the margins of American life. The killings in Pittsburgh at the Tree of Life Synagogue, while the work of one deranged man with a gun, illustrated the lethal power of a combination of hate, social media, and hundreds of millions of American guns.

Yet the game-changer – or the moment that made it clear that the game had changed – was the series of tweets by Congresswoman Ilhan Omar in early 2019 about Jews. Her tweets were not about Israel’s policy, but about classic anti-Jewish memes. It’s “all about the Benjamins,” she tweeted, once again linking Jews to money. Why has the United States been so supportive of Israel, she asked in an earlier tweet (which was subsequently deleted), because Israel has “hypnotized the world.” But a country, of course, cannot hypnotize anyone. Only people can. Israelis cannot effectively hypnotize America. The people who shape American foreign policy are Americans – the hypnotism accusation, therefore, was a dig not at Israel, but at American Jews, and their “control” over American foreign policy. Nor was that claim entirely new; it was just a variation on the theme put forth by Stephen Walt and John Mearsheimer when they published *The Israel Lobby* more than a decade ago.

If matters have been slowly changing for a long time, why call what is happening now a game changer? What is much more alarming than Ilhan Omar's tweets themselves is the fact that when the House of Representatives, reeling from the overt Jew-baiting of one of its new members, could not muster the votes to pass a resolution condemning anti-Semitism. Omar herself was not to be mentioned in the resolution, yet even so, too many Democratic members of the House were going to vote against the resolution for it to pass. Rather than expose that deep rift in the party as the 2020 presidential campaign was just getting underway, Democrats broadened the resolution to include many forms of hate, and it passed.

However, none of that should obfuscate what we learned in the House that week – in today's climate, the House could not pass a resolution condemning anti-Semitism.

Now, some people will suggest that matters are not all that dire. The resolution, they suggest, singled out Omar even though she was not mentioned. And to assail her when so many others have made anti-Semitic comments in the past would be a “pile-on” on a woman, a woman of color, a hijab-wearing Muslim, and an immigrant. To pass a resolution on anti-Semitism, when it clearly had her in mind, would have been tantamount to Islamophobia.

That, though, is precisely the problem. The orthodoxies of progressive life in America protect immigrants, women, Muslims, and many other minority groups, but they do not protect Jews. Jews, therefore, find themselves where they long found themselves in Europe – alone. To the Right, they are not sufficiently American; and to the Left, they are not sufficiently a minority. What the Right and Left share – as they did when McCarthy and Stalin both persecuted the Jews at the same time, one accusing the Jews of being Communists and the other accusing them of undermining Communism – is their targeting the Jew not because of what the Jews are or believe, but because the Jews, once again, are the convenient “other.”

THE JEWISH REACTION TO THE ASSAULT

If one dimension of this crisis is the assault – sometimes explicit and at times more camouflaged – on the place of Jews in American society, what is no less problematic is how American Jews have and have not responded. When it comes to outright anti-Semitism, many lay-leaders of national Jewish organizations have been hesitant to take on the Left because they worry about being perceived as supporting President Trump. While Jews' antipathy to Trump (despite some ostensibly pro-Israel actions) is understandable, American Jews' modeling to a younger generation their refusal to unabashedly work to protect the advances that they have made in America will prove historically foolhardy.

American Jews are particularly stymied when it comes to battling the anti-Semitism that presents itself as criticism of Israel, or even anti-Zionism. Criticism of any country is legitimate; in fact, American Jews would say that their critique of America, from the Right, Left or elsewhere, is proof of their love for their country. What many American Jews have trouble teasing out is how criticism of Israel is often different from their own critique of America, because it is fundamentally opposed to the existence of the State of Israel; since the State has been key to the Jewish people's revival, that anti-Israel barrage is fundamentally anti-Semitic.

For years, the Jewish Voice for Peace masqueraded as a pro-Jewish statement, simply opposed to Israel's policies. It has finally come clean and acknowledged that it opposes Israel's existence. But BDS and If Not Now, among others, continue the charade, and the response of American Judaism has been muddied. The same with Ilhan Omar – she says that it's about the Benjamins, and is defended by those who say she has a right to critique Israel. Yet too few people have pointed out that she was not criticizing Israel,



but attacking Jews. The inability of many to make that distinction has paralyzed much of Jewish America, though that may be slowly beginning to change.

A deeper root of American Judaism's paralysis in the face of these attacks has to do with a longstanding American Jewish discomfort with Zionism. When Woodrow Wilson told recently naturalized citizens in 1915 that they could be American only if they were completely American, that they could not retain other national attachments, he was not engaging in Trumpian xenophobia,



Prime Minister Benjamin Netanyahu (right) and his wife Sara together with U.S. President Donald Trump (left) and First Lady Melania Trump at the Prime Minister's Residence in Jerusalem.

Photo: Avi Ohayon, IGPO

but rather, was welcoming immigrants wholeheartedly. Yet that demand that Americans be *only* Americans would become problematic for Jews once Zionism began to gain traction. Two years after Wilson's admonition, the British issued the Balfour Declaration. Given Wilson, how should American Jews have responded to Zionism? Could they embrace the movement without endangering their place in America?

The challenge of dual loyalty is thus older even than Israel itself. Louis Brandeis, appointed by Wilson to serve on the Supreme

Court, sought to fashion a form of American Zionism that could bridge that ideological divide, but it ultimately did not work. Chaim Weizmann called what Brandeis created a “Yankee Doodle Judaism” and ultimately wrested control of the Zionist movement from Brandeis. Shortly after Israel’s creation, Jacob Blaustein, then president of the American Jewish Committee, warned David Ben-Gurion not to overestimate Israel’s importance to American Jews; the AJC had supported the Partition Plan, he reminded the Prime Minister, because a Jewish state was the best solution to the problem of thousands of Jewish displaced persons in Europe. Ben-Gurion should not imagine that American Jews saw Jewish nationalism as the fulfillment of *their* dreams. A decade or so later, when Israel captured Adolph Eichmann and brought him to Israel for trial, many American Jews were incensed. Eichmann, after all, had not killed any Israelis – he killed Jews. So by virtue of what had Israel appointed itself the agent of Jews everywhere?

Fast forward half a century, and young American Jews, now committed to America’s progressive values with a religious intensity (for progressivism is, in fact, their religion), have inherited that discomfort with Israel and taken it further. The universalism of progressive America cannot easily accommodate a particularist project like Israel. For American Jews, to whom Judaism is a religion and not a nationality, a Jewish state seems strange, since peoples – not religions – have states. Desperate to be allied with African-Americans, gays and lesbians, immigrants and climate activists, young American Jews find themselves ostracized by progressives if they speak publicly about Israel attachments. It is easier, they have found, to abandon Israel as a cause, or at times, to join organizations that attack the Jewish state, to preserve their progressive credentials.

If it were only young American Jews who were confounded by this assault on Israel, and thus on American Jews who support Israel, matters would be serious enough. But the problem is not limited only to the young. Speak to successful Jewish professionals in their 40's and 50's in New York or Boston (the two American cities where I spent the most time) and you will hear people quietly say that they desperately want to be able to support Israel and fight the assault on the Jewish state, but they cannot afford to. Either socially or professionally, or both, the costs would be too high.

That is simply not the America in which many of us were raised. We had been taught that the singling out of the Jew was a European phenomenon that would not make its way to the shores of the United States. Yet that optimistic postulate has been largely upended of late. For many American Jews, the determination to fight back would require an ability to formulate some value proposition about Judaism, about why it matters, about why it merits surviving, about what its contribution to the world was, and might still be. But such a conversation requires infinitely more knowledge about Jewish civilization than the average American Jew can muster; as a result, the safest response to the assault on Israel and the Judaism of America is to shrink back, to try to stay under the radar.

That is precisely what the progressive assailants hope Jews will do; Jewish impotence will only hasten the assailants' victory. If the House of Representatives' failure to pass its resolution condemning anti-Semitism is any indication, it is not only Jews who are failing to fight back – it is also the very political party with which Jews have long been overwhelmingly associated. That is highly inauspicious, and one can only wonder how long and how dark will be the road we have now begun to travel.



Chabad Rabbi Yisroel Goldstein, injured in the deadly synagogue shooting in Poway, California, hugs his congregants after a press conference on April 28, 2019.

Photo: Sandy Huffaker/AFP