INSS Special Publication

American Antisemitism in its Historical and Social Background

Eli Lederhendler | August 1, 2021

Over the course of 370 years of Jewish life in America, antisemitism has fluctuated, punctuated at times by intermittent outbursts of violent acts against Jews or Jewish property. Sometimes non-Jews in America may harbor negative opinions about Jews, and it happens that they might verbalize or otherwise act upon those opinions. Those ideas, words, or deeds, however, have not assumed the form of publicly sanctioned and legalized discrimination or violence that other American groups, primarily Native Americans and African Americans, have suffered. Still, the history of Jewish life in America is replete with evidence that anti-Jewish sentiments and behavior are embraced by some of the non-Jewish population. Anti-Jewish attitudes and actions have ranged from extreme and relatively rare incidents, such as shootings or fire-bombings at synagogues to subtler but longer-lasting types of social discrimination (that were fairly common in the past), to incitement and hate-speech (Dinnerstein, 1994; Fattal, 2018).

Americans are not morally superior to other nations, and Jews in America are not immune from being disliked or hated. That is not surprising. The point, rather, from a historical perspective, is that the American *system of government and justice* has withstood periods of severe domestic crisis, social unrest, and wars without collapsing into either anarchy or fascism—and without Jew-hatred becoming a fulcrum for national politics. This contrasts notoriously, of course, with the history of Germany, Austria, Hungary, and Italy, for example, whose regimes and constitutions did, in fact, succumb to crisis and collapsed in the first half of the 20th century. What prevented this from happening in the United States and several other countries, such as Britain, was not that their citizens were "hate-free" or that Jews were universally loved; rather, it was because their

---

Eli Lederhendler is the Stephen S. Wise Professor of American Jewish History and Institutions at the Hebrew University of Jerusalem. He has served as chair of the Department of Jewish History and Contemporary Jewry since 2018. His major publications include *The Road to Modern Jewish Politics* (1989), *New York Jews and the Decline of Urban Ethnicity, 1950–1970* (2001), *Jewish Immigrants and American Capitalism* (2009), and *American Jewry: A New History* (2017). He is a co-editor of the annual journal *Studies in Contemporary Jewry*.

legal and political institutions, including their guarantees of constitutional liberties, were sufficiently robust and supported by a national consensus.

American Jews, therefore, may be sensitive to newly active strains of hostility toward them, but they live securely in the knowledge that civil society and its institutions are a reliable buffer that has proven itself since the founding of the Republic. That is the context within which vigilance against expressions of antisemitism is shaped and expressed. When Jews protest against incidents of antisemitism or demand that the authorities take a stand on the issue, they rely on US institutions and leaders to protect the nation's code of civil and legal equality. The first principle, then, in historically assessing antisemitism in America is the necessity to distinguish between "America" as a set of social actors and "America" as a state, and to recognize that even in strong democratic regimes some people do dislike or even hate other people.

Discrimination, Prejudice, and Civil Equality

Within that overall historical understanding, what can we make of the fact that American Jews—as members of a small religious minority—have experienced religious prejudice, social barriers, or other forms of discrimination in the past, especially until around the mid-20th century? And what, if anything, does this tell us about recurrent cycles of anti-Jewish discourse and Jewish response until today?

Religion: Christian preaching, as elsewhere around the world, historically contained elements that negated and denigrated Judaism; this was both perturbing and potentially damaging for the social acceptance of Jews, particularly before the watershed of internal Christian reform that took place after World War II. Notably, that reform was accomplished in an atmosphere of postwar interfaith coexistence and mutual acceptance—a phase in Jewish–Christian relations that Jews actively welcomed, and which Jewish leaders and organizations vigorously worked to reinforce. In addition, there has been a notable stream of Christian philosemitism in America; that is, positive attitudes toward the people of the Bible and their modern descendants—more so than in most other countries (Ariel, 2013).

Over the past half century, Muslim groups or spokespersons have contributed to religious preaching comprising anti-Jewish expressions. As in the case of Jewish relations with the Christian churches, the question of interreligious friction between Muslims and Jews has become part of the civil (not state) discourse—given the American separation between state and religions—and has been addressed by pro-active clergy in the two communities. In particular, they have

emphasized the common interest of Jewish and Muslim communities in combatting both Judeophobia and Islamophobia (American Jewish Committee, 2021).

Discrimination: Going back to the 19th century, non-Jews in positions of social prestige and power sometimes reinforced anti-Jewish social barriers and glass ceilings. Until the mid-20th century, Jews in America routinely faced obstacles in gaining acceptance to professional schools and to the prestigious private academic sector, just as Jews were also kept out of certain neighborhoods, social clubs, and vacation resorts.

However, Jews in America were never less than equal before the law, alongside most of their (white) neighbors. In that sense, the seeds of success of future generations of American Jews were nurtured by the fact that the social or economic discrimination that they faced was relatively easier to evade and overcome, compared to the more difficult experiences of racialized minorities. Indeed, Jews in America generally enjoyed better guarantees of civil equality than the most of the so-called "minorities of color." The same was true if we compare Jews with other disadvantaged groups: At various points in US history, Quakers, Mormons, Catholics, and homosexuals have been marginalized and delegitimized. Jews, it should be recalled, were permitted to immigrate freely into the US when immigration was restricted or denied to Africans, Chinese, Japanese, and other Asians. The reason was that the overwhelming majority of Jewish immigrants came from Central and Eastern Europe, and despite the anthropological and demographic discourse of the time that created "racial" divisions in accordance with Europe's heterogeneous population groups, Jews (classified after 1899 as "Hebrews") were legally incorporated into the American racial hierarchy as "whites" (Goldstein, 2006; Perlmann, 2018).

The second principle of dealing historically with American antisemitism, then, is that it did not ghettoize the Jews nor did anti-Jewish stigmas reduce them, in the long run, to the status of a subordinate group. The sting of American antisemitism stems from the fact that it calls out members of the Jewish community for their elite status.

The Conviction that "America is Different"

The positive overall balance of Jewish history in America enhances the Jews' underlying comfort level, despite the unease caused by the tenor and frequency of recent anti-Jewish incidents. Opinion polls regularly show that American Jews confidently identify themselves as Jews and overwhelmingly (as high as 94%) point to Jewishness as a positive source of personal pride (Pew, 2013). This

subjective self-confidence correlates to Americans' attitudes and opinions about Jews, compared to their attitudes toward other religious groups. In 2019 Americans rated Jews slightly more favorably than they did Catholics and mainline Protestants and quite a bit more favorably than Buddhists, evangelical Christians, Hindus, and Mormons, to say nothing of atheists and Muslims, who were rated negatively. Indeed, the report found that "in the U.S., no major religious group is viewed more warmly by the overall public than Jews" (Pew, 2019).

The positive regard, on average, in which many Americans hold Jewish Americans is also evident in the fact that so many non-Jews in America do not consider a Jewish life-partner to be a social liability. Moreover, adult Americans who grew up as children in mixed households also tend to acknowledge their Jewish background; some of them even affirm Judaism (either wholly or together with another faith) as their religious affiliation (Pew, 2021). It should also be recalled that American Jews have a very low rate of out-migration, which is indeed tiny when compared to out-migration rates among Jews from almost every other country.

Just as the ideal projection of a benevolent America raises Jews' expectations, it also endows them with a low threshold of tolerance for anti-Jewish manifestations. Abusive or violent incidents (even if not directly and personally witnessed) not only violate the expected civic norms of social comfort and safety, but they are also apt to be seen as early warnings which Jews feel they must publicize and protest. Thus, Jews' vigilance in the face of threats is the flip side of their extraordinary good fortune. Their sensitivity to prejudice has fueled the organized Jewish community with a constant effort over the past century to forge stronger links with other groups in American life.

Jews and Other Groups

Jews in the US have attained higher than average household incomes, high-ranking professional and occupational status, and high levels of education. Yet, in contrast to most Americans who enjoy a similar status or lifestyle, Jews who vote in American elections continue to support parties and candidates who show concern for the social welfare of the poor, the rights of immigrants and minorities, the equal rights of women (including reproductive freedom), and the basic freedoms of political dissenters (Wald, 2019).

Historians and social observers interpret this minority-sensitive politics of Jewish liberalism in two ways, both of which are correlated to the question of antisemitism. The first view argues that Jews continue to cultivate a minority

mentality—even if their parents and grandparents were born in the US. They do this by "identifying downward" along the social hierarchy, and this helps them to preserve their own separate identity as Jews; that is, even if they conform to social characteristics of the elite strata of American society, they continue to see themselves as children of the Jewish diaspora, with a collective memory of victimhood. Evidence of antisemitism in America—when it presents itself—tends to confirm their apprehensions of vulnerability, even when they continue to live rather comfortably and safely, compared to some members of disadvantaged groups (Alexander, 2001; Alexander, 2018).

The second interpretation of Jewish minority-consciousness and liberalism suggests that it is not so much that Jews feel an inner empathy for others as much as they see it as a necessary part of their arsenal of self-defense. Racism, intolerance, abuse, and prejudice against weaker sectors of society are, for many Jews, warning signals for themselves. In this canary-in-the-coal-mine scenario, any indicator of victimization against marginalized groups can and must be combatted and corrected. If American society can be made safer for the most marginalized social groups—those who are most often penalized for being different—then, so the reasoning goes, Jews, too, will be more secure. A just society will provide the Jews with a stronger "safety net" (Dollinger, 2000).

Moreover, Jews in America have had a qualitative advantage over other groups in terms of their disproportional participation in America's opinion-making classes: the media, popular culture and entertainment, and academia. This does not mean that Jews can exert control over Americans' images of Jews, or that this qualitative advantage will last forever; but it *does* mean that Jews have helped to create Americans' image of *America*, an America that includes—and does not exclude—Jews.

Israel and the Issue of Jewish Security

Since 1948, American Jews have enjoyed the benefit of living in a country where a pro-Israel position has been considered legitimate and even politically correct among fairly wide circles (Rynhold, 2015). Were it not for that history, Jews might have faced the question of the connection between anti-Zionism and negative images of Jews much sooner.

To be sure, the question of Jewish security in America cannot simply be reduced to a reflection of public opinion about Israel. On the extreme right fringes of American discourse, an embedded anti-Jewish pattern of bigotry and white-supremacist exclusionism exists regardless of contemporary Middle Eastern affairs. Furthermore, there can never be a simple overlap between criticism of

Israel (no matter how extreme) and anti-Jewish hostility, partly because the targeting of Jews qua Jews is not conceptually the same as political opposition to Israel or its policies. Moreover, some Jews (and some Israeli Jews, too) have played a part in such criticism.

Nevertheless, part of the hostility to Israel that has surfaced in numerous incidents in American political and social discourse, as has occurred in other countries, evidently spills over into a security problem for Jewish people and their institutions. To some extent, widespread Jewish support for Israel, voiced as a matter of strong Jewish identification and self-assertiveness, makes it plausible for some non-Jews who embrace positions against Israel or its policies to "blame" Jews generically or to hold them and their non-Jewish American supporters responsible for Israel's policies and actions. In that sense, the politics of the Israeli–Palestinian conflict have come to play a discursive role in the politics of Jewish–non-Jewish coexistence.

Israeli leaders sometimes also play a part in this process, when they remind Jews who feel threatened in their home environments that they might consider moving to Israel as a solution to their insecurity, thus reinforcing the idea that Jews as a group should be viewed as inherently connected to the Israeli nation. (Such rhetorical approaches by Israeli leaders have been used mostly in reference to Jews in Europe and are less relevant in the American context.)

Some American Jews experience a dissonance between the two issues that concern them most directly—their desire to assert themselves in Israel's favor and their desire to protect and secure their own position in society—and in this dissonance, they perceive risks. Thus, many are disturbed by leading Israeli politicians' positive embrace of right-wing, pro-Israel elements in America, including the evangelical Christian right. Jews, by and large, seek to dissociate themselves from both the secular and the Christian right, seeing these as posing a threat to the division between religion and state as well as to the Jews' position as a minority group. However, as noted, American Jews actually gain far more support from positive public opinion about the Israel–Palestinian conflict than do Jews in other countries.

Conclusion

In sum, historically the glass has been more than "half-full," when considering American Jews and their status as citizens and as members of society at large. The pessimistic perception that discordant notes of anti-Jewish hostility have been much greater as of late—and in some tragic cases, we are not dealing with discourse alone but with violent and fatal acts—does not, by itself, negate the

bulk of the evidence of past and contemporary history. The current phase does appear to be strongly linked to the course of events in Israel and in Europe, as well as to purely domestic issues in the US, which have polarized the nation at large. If Jews in America sense that their erstwhile position in society is eroding, this is not yet borne out by the majority of social indicators. That apparent paradox, however, is not a function of Jewish "hysteria," so to speak but rather reflects the lofty estimation and equally high expectations that American Jews have vis-à-vis their country—and an accompanying wariness lest those expectations be disappointed.

References

Alexander, M. (2001). *Jazz age Jews*. Princeton University Press.

Alexander, M. (2018). The exilic imperative of American Jewry. *Religions*, *9*(12), 412. https://doi.org/10.3390/rel9120412

American Jewish Committee. (2021). Muslim-Jewish Advisory Council launches digital initiative to counter hate and division. https://www.ajc.org/news/muslim-jewish-advisory-council-launches-digital-initiative-to-counter-hate-and-division

Ariel, Y.(2013). Jewish-Christian dialogue. In C. Cornille (Ed), *The Wiley-Blackwell companion to inter-religious dialogue* (chapter 13). John Wiley and Sons.

Dinnerstein, L. (1994). *Antisemitism in America*. Oxford University Press.

Dollinger, M. (2000). *Quest for inclusion*. Princeton University Press.

Fattal, I. (2018, October 28). A brief history of anti-semitic violence in America. *The Atlantic.* https://www.theatlantic.com/politics/archive/2018/10/brief-history-anti-semitic-violence-america/574228/

Goldstein, E. (2006). *The price of whiteness: Jews, race and American identity.* Princeton University Press.

Perlmann, J. (2018). *America classifies the immigrants, from Ellis Island to the 2020 census.* Harvard University Press.

Pew Research Center. (2013). A portrait of Jewish Americans. https://www.pewforum.org/2013/10/01/jewish-american-beliefs-attitudes-culture-survey/

Pew Research Center. (2019). What Americans know about religion. https://www.pewforum.org/2019/07/23/feelings-toward-religious-groups/

Pew Research Center. (2021). Jewish Americans in 2020. https://www.pewforum.org/2021/05/11/jewish-americans-in-2020/

Rynhold, J. (2015). *The Arab–Israeli conflict in American political culture.* Cambridge University Press.

Wald, K. D. (2019). *The foundations of American Jewish liberalism*. Cambridge University Press.