INSS Special Publication

How Are American Jews Faring in an Era of Rising Antisemitism?

Alvin H. Rosenfeld | December 23, 2021

Antisemitism has been on the rise globally over the last two decades, but until recently, most American Jews have felt relatively immune to it. That is no longer the case. Social tensions in America have heightened to the point of openly expressed hatreds directed against various minority groups—Blacks, Asians, Latinos, LGBTQ people—and, as part of this angry mood, Jew-hatred has revived energetically in both word and deed. The threats to personal and communal well-being are evident at the street level and are also given prominent voice within segments of the country's political and cultural life. In the first instance, anti-Jewish hostility takes the form of physical assaults against Jews and vandalism, damage, and destruction of Jewish schools, synagogues, community centers, cemeteries, memorials, and other Jewish institutions. Politically and ideologically, such hatred is expressed in impassioned verbal attacks on Israel and its supporters and widely disseminated conspiratorial notions of Jewish "power," "influence," and "control." Anti-Jewish animus of both kinds has become strident in recent years and shows no signs of diminishing. It is no wonder, then, that a new sense of unease is palpable in Jewish communities throughout the country

American history has never been free of social biases against Jews and episodes of antisemitic violence, but compared to the situation of Jews in European, North African, and Middle Eastern countries, Jews in the US have lived a relatively safe and normal life, especially in recent decades (Dinnerstein, 1994). Most American Jews of the post-WWII generations are fully integrated in American life, regard America as their home, and have prospered here. Within the long history of the Jewish diaspora, in fact, America stands out as a country that, for the most part, has been open and encouraging to its Jewish citizens. Due to a resurgence of

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antisemitism that has moved from the fringes to mainstream areas of American life, however, Jews are confronting challenges that most have never faced before. Like European Jews, they feel far more vulnerable than they have in the past and can no longer take their safety for granted.

Anti-Jewish Hostility at the Street Level

Occurrences of anti-Jewish hostility obey no strict calendar, but certain dates and incidents stand out as especially notable. One is August 19–21, 1991, which saw three days of rioting against Hasidic Jews in Crown Heights, New York. Given the aggressive nature of the attacks, marked by the murder of a Lubavitcher Hasid, beatings of numerous others, looting and destruction, eyewitnesses likened the brutal mayhem to a European-style pogrom (Kosner, 2021; Goldman, 2011).

Nine months earlier, in November 1990, Rabbi Meir Kahane, a controversial leader of the Jewish Defense League, was assassinated in a New York hotel by El-Sayyid Nosair, two of whose accomplices subsequently participated in the 1993 attempt to bomb the World Trade Center. These incidents received public attention at the time but were not seen as symptomatic of worse things still to come. Then, unexpectedly, on September 11, 2001, al-Qaeda conducted its massively destructive terrorist attack on the World Trade Center and the Pentagon. It took the lives of almost 3,000 people, including many Jews, and rattled feelings of safety and security among all Americans. But it was not an isolated incident (Barsky, 2016), and what followed has been unnerving. For instance, one year after his jihadists flew hijacked planes into their targets in New York City and Washington, DC, Osama bin Laden published his "Letter to the American Public," in which he singled out Jews as the source of America's evil nature: "Your law is the law of the rich and wealthy people . . . Behind them stand the Jews, who control your policies, media, and economy." He decried America's support for Israel as especially intolerable, attributing it to undue Jewish influence, and warned that if America continues to back Israel, "do not await anything from us but Jihad" (Reporter, 2002).

These extreme notions of Jewish connivance, power, and wickedness are not limited to jihadists but are a common feature of today's anti-Jewish hostility. Another shocking version of it took place on August 12, 2017, at the infamous "Unite the Right" rally of white supremacists, neo-Nazis, and the Ku Klux Klan in Charlottesville, Virginia. The slogans that accompanied this march—"End Jewish influence in America," "Jews will not replace us," "Jews are the children of Satan"—dismayed onlookers, who were unaccustomed to seeing such raw antisemitism displayed on the streets of American cities.

Even worse, the mass shooting of 17 Jews at prayer in a Pittsburgh synagogue, on October 27, 2018, followed six months later by a lethal attack on a Chabad synagogue in Poway, California, added to feelings of Jewish vulnerability.[1] The fear of being marked as an easy target by malevolent forces deepened following fatal attacks against a kosher supermarket in Jersey City (December 10, 2019) and knife assaults against Jews at a Hanukkah celebration in a rabbi's home in Monsey, New York (December 28, 2019). Numerous other brutal incidents have followed, including the murder of a Jewish attorney in El Paso, Texas and the shooting of her husband (November 14, 2020) by a gunman who claimed Jews were "Satan worshippers"; the beating and robbery of a New Haven rabbi in front of the city's Chabad House (April 1, 2020); multiple stabbings of another Chabad rabbi outside a Jewish day school in Boston (July 1, 2021); and the murder of an Orthodox student outside his yeshiva in Denver (August 19, 2021).

Add to these incidents vicious attacks against Jews in Los Angeles, New York, and other cities in May 2021 during Israel's war with Hamas, ongoing assaults on religious Jews on the streets of Brooklyn and other cities; synagogues and Jewish schools repeatedly besmirched with swastikas and anti-Israel graffiti and sometimes set on fire; cemeteries desecrated; Holocaust memorials defaced, and one can readily understand why many American Jews no longer feel as safe as they once did.

Author Bret Stephens points to some of the sources of American Jewish anxiety: "It wasn't just that Jews were being hunted and assaulted in Times Square or West Hollywood…The horror lay in the fact that so few of America's institutional leaders . . . could bring themselves to condemn this rampaging anti-Jewish violence, and even then, only in the most cautious of terms. If antisemitism was once . . . 'the hate that dare not speak its name,' *anti*-antisemitism is the decency that dare not speak its name" (Stephens, 2021). When repeated acts of anti-Jewish violence elicit relatively little forceful public response, Jews instinctively know their lives are changing and not for the better. As an indication of such change, **82% of American Jews believe antisemitism has increased over the past five years,** and, as a consequence, 4 out of 10 have taken steps to conceal their Jewishness or curtail

[1] For other incidents in recent years, see Time of antisemitism in the 20th century," https://en.wikipedia.org/wiki/Timeline_of_antisemitism_in_the_20th_century#1980; "List of attacks on Jewish institutions in the United States," https://en.wikipedia.org/wiki/List_of_attacks_on_Jewish_institutions_in_the_United_States; "List of antisemitic incidents in the United States," https://en.wikipedia.org/wiki/List_of_antisemitic_incidents_in_the_United_States

their activities as a result (The State of Antisemitism in America 2021 , 2021). That is not the way most Jews have lived in America in recent decades.

Cultural and Political Sources of Anti-Jewish Hostility

Josef Joffe opens an illuminating article, "American Jews: A Threat Report," by posing a question that previously would have been unthinkable: "Is the Jewish-American love affair over?" (J. Joffe, 2021). The question is unsettling, and yet Joffe is right to ask it, for the nerves of American Jews are on edge these days, in large part owing to the street-level violence described above but also because of radical changes taking place within American society that have important implications for how others regard Jews and how Jews see themselves. To quote Bret Stephens again: "Jewish security in the West has always rested on a set of social values and assumptions that are now being systematically undermined—on the right, through increasing hostility to the ideal of an open society, on the left through increasing hostility to the ideal of an open mind . . . Whenever illiberalism overtakes politics, including democratic politics, the results never augur well for Jews" (Stephens, 2021; see also Economist, 2021).

America is right now in an overwrought phase of misalignment with some of its core traditions—openness, tolerance, civility, pluralism, freedom, legal equality and protection for all, and other values of liberal democracy. Whatever the inequalities in such a society, including serious social and economic disparities and a long and shameful history of racial injustice, America at its best has encouraged and rewarded talented, energetic, and enterprising people, Jews among them. Especially in the post-WWII period, Jews have benefited from the opportunities opened to them and, in turn, have greatly enriched the country's educational, professional, cultural, and economic life.

Owing to extreme pressures from both the populist, nativist right and an ideologically driven, politically orthodox left, the ground is shifting, however, and not in favor of how Jews have lived, worked, and prospered in America. In some quarters, in fact, Jewish success is held against them, as if it were somehow unfairly gained. When harsh criticism is levelled against the country's high-earning one percenters, for instance. Jews worry that they are being singled out as unduly "privileged."

Much of what is happening in today's America is scrutinized and judged, promoted and demoted, along the lines of intensely polarized, partisan politics, including identity politics. On the right, a concerted effort to gain political ascendancy is being made on the basis of exclusivist, white supremacist claims to power. At the same time, the hard-core left organizes its own strenuous bid for power on the

basis of racial, ethnic, gender, and class affiliation, with special appeals to entitlement based on claims of past group oppression. Caught between these ideological extremes, Jews are demoted, their distinctive identity as Jews erased or reduced to the accusatory categories of "foreignness," "whiteness," and undeserved "privilege." To quote author Thane Rosenbaum, "In an era of identity politics, Jewish identity means almost nothing" (Rosenbaum, 2021). Fliers posted on bulletin boards at various universities carry this mean-spirited slogan: "Ending white privilege starts with ending Jewish privilege." Another expression of such ill will trivializes the Holocaust as "white on white crime" (Times of Israel, 2017).

To compound this set of problems, Jews are increasingly linked to the alleged sins of the Jewish state, now routinely vilified as sinister and denounced as a racist, colonialist, apartheid, supremacist, uniquely criminal state. The charges are absurd, originating largely in a dangerous combination of gross ignorance plus self-proclaimed moral virtue, but they have become popular. Most shockingly, on more than one occasion, and without penalty, members of the US Congress such as Rashida Tlaib and Ilhan Omar have referred to Israel as a "racist" and "apartheid" state, accused it of "ethnic cleansing," charged American Jews with being more loyal to Israel than to the US, spoken of Jewish representatives in Congress as not being "partners in justice," and made allegations about Jews using money and other "behind the curtain" sources of influence in Washington in support of Jewish interests and so forth (C. Rosen, 2021; A. Joffe, 2021).

One would be hard put to find such hostile sentiments being repeatedly voiced by elected officials in Washington, DC, but such hateful rhetoric is now part of a widely-disseminated litany of anti-Jewish invective that has been developing in prominent segments of American cultural and political life. As it spreads, Israel's supporters, including the great majority of American Jews, are routinely charged with dual loyalty, denounced as "Zionists" (now a slur term), or "Zio-Nazis," and sometimes targeted for abuse.

In short, the culture wars raging in America are making many Jews feel set upon and vulnerable as never before. In addition to protecting themselves against physical harm, they need to figure out their place in a rapidly changing, highly charged, and suddenly threatening social and political landscape. How to navigate their way in a heretofore unknown and menacing terrain is a major challenge.

How Are Jews Faring?

The strong passions driving the culture clash described above have been the catalyst for two major oppositional movements vying for power in today's America. Neither has yet been definitively named, but analysts of the hardcore

right sometimes refer to that movement as a New American Confederacy or American neo-fascism (Lappin, 2021). The hardcore left is leading a movement sometimes called Woke, or the New Puritanism, or Progressive Cancel Culture (Weiss, 2021) (Abrams & Wertheimer, 2021). Add to these movements aggressive assertions of Black nationalism and Black supremacy on the part of some activist American Blacks and demonstrations of militant anti-Israel and antisemitic activism among some American Muslims, and the turmoil right now besetting America becomes still more troubling.

Anti-Jewish hostility in one form or another accompanies all of these movements and makes itself felt in numerous colleges and universities, some labor unions, churches, and mosques, mainstream and social media, parts of the entertainment, publishing, and sports worlds, local and national politics, and elsewhere.

The negative impact on American Jews is extensive. The latest Pew Report on Jews in America 2020 indicates that 53%, or over half of Jews interviewed, say they feel less safe than they did five years ago. In addition, 51% report a personal encounter with antisemitism of one kind or another (Pew Research Center, 2021). In line with these findings, the most recent FBI report on hate crimes confirms that Jews are right to be concerned. Although they comprise at most a mere 2% of the American population, almost 60% of religion-bias hate crimes in America in 2020 targeted Jews (Samuels, 2021). Furthermore, well-informed observers believe that many street-level assaults against Jews go unreported or are underreported.

The same is true with respect to harassment on American campuses, a number of which have become hostile venues for Jewish students. As reported by the Louis D. Brandeis Center for Human Rights under Law, more than 65% of Jewish students on American campuses declare they feel unsafe. According to Kenneth L. Marcus, who leads the Brandeis Center (no relation to Brandeis University), to avoid harassment, social bullying, and other antisemitic acts, many Jewish students now “view their religion as something to hide, not celebrate.” Furthermore, “the longer students stay on campus, the less safe they feel and the more they feel the need to hide their identity” (N. Rosen, 2021). A recent poll reported by the Anti-Defamation League shows that “74 percent of Jewish college students who personally experienced an act of antisemitism did not report it, and that only three percent had reported it to local or campus police” (Carrasco, 2021). Particularly on campuses where anti-Zionist activity has become prevalent, Jewish students are “driven more and more to hide their support for Israel.” These findings, Marcus concludes, “ring some pretty consequential alarms, more closely

resembling previous dark periods in our history, not the 21st century in the U.S" (N. Rosen, 2021).

Unfortunately, the opening decades of this century are precisely marked by the growing hostility that Jewish students and American Jews at large are experiencing. Most still go about their daily lives in more or less normal fashion, even as they are aware that their country is no longer the safe and hospitable place they have known it to be. As in Europe, virtually every American synagogue, Jewish school, community center, and other Jewish agency is now protected by special security arrangements as well as by the police. The New York-based Community Security Service has trained over 4,000 private guards to protect Jewish synagogues and other Jewish organizations and is now proposing to do the same for college campuses (Sales, 2020). Even more tellingly, the Jewish Federations of North America announced in early October 2021, a $54 million campaign to add still further security to Jewish institutions across the country (Wrobel, 2021). None of these extra measures would be necessary if today's America were the safe haven most Jews have known it to be.

So, "is the Jewish-American love affair over?" Josef Joffe, who poses the question, continues to believe that the foundational pillars of American exceptionalism will remain in place, even as he acknowledges that "the darker passages are multiplying" (J. Joffe, 2021). Others, placing a greater emphasis on the darker and more ominous trends, are more dubious. The question remains open.

Jew-hatred waxes and wanes over time, but once it catches on, it has tenacity and it can be perilous. To the degree that the antisemitic currents presently observable become normalized within the American mainstream, the situation for American Jews will become far more troubled than it has been in recent decades. To the degree that present-day hostility to Jews can be restrained, there may be grounds for a more optimistic projection of future Jewish prospects in this country. For the latter to happen, however, it is imperative that the majority of Americans, and especially those in leadership positions, not remain passive or indifferent in the face of a rising hatred directed against Jews.

As for Jews themselves, most no doubt would prefer to carry on their daily lives oblivious to the threats against them, but in today's increasingly hostile climate, that is no longer a realistic option. Antisemitism's surge is part of the fraying of America's experiment in social, ethnic, and religious coexistence and an escalation of violence in general. Jews can and should find allies among other minority groups who are themselves vulnerable to the country's growing tensions. Asians would be natural allies, especially in view of their own demonization for being

"successful." Blacks and Jews have found common ground in the past, and despite some sharp differences today within segments of the Black community, alliances with mainstream Blacks exist and can be further strengthened. The same may hold true in connecting positively with parts of America's growing Muslim population.

Israel will remain a battleground for relations between American Jews and some of these other minority groups, as it will within the American Jewish community itself, where differences over Israel have deepened in recent years, as they have within America's two major political parties. Ongoing, serious, and constructive engagement with the Jewish state is vital not only for restraining the hatreds unleashed by the angry passions that fuel anti-Zionist antisemitism but also for maintaining healthy ties between the US and Israel.

None of this will be easy, and nothing positive will be accomplished without knowledgeable, committed people devoting lots of time, fresh thinking, and a new kind of creative energy to addressing the problems before us. They are serious and will not fade away on their own.

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