

Transcript: The Dangerous Impact of Antisemitism and its Weaponization

Speakers: Emily Tamkin & Jay Michaelson

Emily Tamkin: Hi everyone. I'm Emily Tamkin. I'm a journalist and author and fellow at the Nexus Project where I work with and support the work of the Nexus Task Force. And I'm here today with Jay Michaelson. He is an author, a rabbi, my fellow Forward columnist, a field scholar at the Emory Center for Psychedelics and Spirituality, and visiting researcher at Harvard Law School. And on top of all of that, Jay has recently written a few pieces that really strike at the core of what Nexus does, which is to both fight against antisemitism and its weaponization — its instrumentalization — and realizing that these are actually part of the same fight. So, Jay, thank you so much for joining me today.

Jay Michaelson: It's great to be here. Thanks, Emily.

Emily Tamkin: To start out — I think for many of us this is a really disorienting and isolating moment for many American Jews, both because antisemitic violence and rhetoric is getting worse, and because, as you wrote, America's antisemitism watchdogs are committing institutional malpractice. Before we really get into that, I think we should start with a foundational question — and I should say here that Nexus does watchdog work — what do you consider to be the purpose of a watchdog organization? What need is it supposed to fill?

Jay Michaelson: Sure. And I just realized I unintentionally insulted Nexus when I said "watchdog."

Emily Tamkin: Not at all. Not all watchdogs are created equal.

Jay Michaelson: Yeah. I didn't want to single out the ADL too much, or one or two organizations. Obviously they're the self-appointed largest watchdog around antisemitism.

And I think until relatively recently — maybe 50 to 75 years of their history — I think the ADL did a fairly good job. You could argue with one or two positions they took over the years, but they understood that antisemitism is primarily integrated with forms of racism and nationalism and other kinds of retrograde right-wing phenomena. And that has only shifted, I think, in the last couple of decades.

One of the articles I wrote recently is to acknowledge that there is actual antisemitism present on the left, regardless of what one's view is on anti-Zionism. There are also many times in which critiques of Israel do cross over into antisemitism. And I think that's the heart of what the Nexus Project's work is so important for. But to both-sides this issue is to radically misconstrue the crisis — the order of magnitude between antisemitism on the left, where it does exist, and antisemitism on the right, where it exists in the halls of power throughout the Trump administration, and also pervasively online, where in the last year or so it has been really woven into the online manosphere-adjacent aesthetic of the internet. To both-sides and equate those two is to really misconstrue the nature of the problem. And that's where I think there's been this kind of malpractice for a variety of reasons on the part of traditional legacy antisemitism organizations.

Emily Tamkin: So here is my question — because I agree with you. It's not only about the pervasiveness on the right. For example, a Manhattan Institute poll found that 54% of conservative men under the age of 50 believe that the Holocaust was greatly exaggerated or didn't happen as historians describe. And a Yale youth poll found that 64% of young conservatives carry some antisemitic belief, which I think gets way less attention than anti-Zionists on campus.

And it's also that if you look at who has power in this country, we are talking about people on the right and the far right who are in some cases in office themselves, in other cases emboldening and empowering people spewing really antisemitic views. My own theory on this — which I've written about for the Forward — is that perhaps some at these institutions are less likely to run into those people in life. Perhaps they're more likely to encounter an anti-Zionist, or somebody who says something on Israel that they don't like. And so that gets a lot of attention, but it completely leaves power — and who has it — out of the analysis. You're talking about your personal convenience and your personal comfort, and not doing an analysis of power, which is what a watchdog organization, in my opinion, should be doing.

But I'm not interviewing myself here. So my question to you is: what do you think is driving our institutions' focus on left over right?

Jay Michaelson: So, as with every complex phenomenon, there are multiple causes. I think the elephant in the room is kind of true in this case — the predominant cause is simply the fact that many in the donor base of these legacy organizations, in particular the ADL, have very strong right-wing, pro-Israel views. They perceive the threat to Israel as being either more important or, as you said, more acute than the threat against Jews in America from right-wing antisemitic violence, antisemitism online, and antisemitism in the administration.

And you know, I work also in the fields of spirituality and religion, and I am sympathetic to the perception of hatred among anti-Zionists on the hard left. The rhetoric is very pitched, it's extreme. The word "genocide" is now used not as a legal term, but as a kind of virtue-signaling loyalty test. People are being asked to raise their hand if they think Israel committed genocide. That's not — genocide is a serious charge that probably should be adjudicated in an international court. It's not a yes-or-no vote among political candidates or activists.

And as I was going through and researching the article I wrote on left-wing antisemitism, it was a little painful. Sometimes the anti-Zionist rhetoric was just so fever-pitched. And I kind of identify — I don't know what the word "Zionist" means anymore. I'm not a Zionist according to right-wing Zionists, but according to what used to be left-wing Zionism, I still am. So I could understand it feeling aimed at me. But that doesn't make it antisemitic.

So I think it's a combination of the pro-Israel bent within the ADL and other legacy Jewish organizations — both intellectually, but also emotionally. It can feel as though people are being attacked. And for people who do understand their Zionism as part of their Jewish identity — and we could talk about where that might not be so coherent — when people are attacking the state of Israel, they feel attacked because of their Jewish identity. So I think the fierce support of Israel and the Netanyahu regime and defending it is the primary motivator.

But I agree with what you said as well. A lot of these folks are just a bit more conservative in American politics, or centrist, and they may have kids who are anti-Zionist. They may have children who were at Columbia, like my nephew was, with the encampments there. So I agree that it's also very personal. And those huge numbers you just went over in those two

studies — that is really shocking. And I'm not focused on that just as a political matter. I do happen to be a progressive, but I'm not focused on it just to call out the Republican party. As an American Jew and as a rabbi, those are terrifying numbers. And these are the people making policy and shaping public opinion.

Not one of my favorite people, but Bill Maher actually just had a great segment about this, talking with Sam Harris, about how it's just openly acceptable to say radically antisemitic things about Jewish power or Jewish finance — that it's all about Epstein, that the Iran war is dictated by Israel. Not just that Israel wanted this war — which I think is true — but that Israel controlled the American government and pushed us into war. Which is clearly an antisemitic conspiracy theory. Things that were really not socially acceptable to say just a year or two ago are now commonplace on the right.

So for me, when I look at that power analysis — I see it the way I see it. But I think there are just some who are making decisions in these organizations who themselves are more center or center-right, and are loath to call it out when they see it.

Emily Tamkin: Well, it's not just about not calling out — it's also... to take one example from what you just described and use it as an illustration: you yourself wrote for the Forward that originally you were not comfortable with the label of genocide. Now you think that it applies. You've said it should be adjudicated — this is a legal matter.

And if I'm hearing you correctly, you're saying that even with all of that, using the term as a kind of litmus test for Jews — because they are Jewish — is something you're not comfortable with. You can understand why being asked "do you think this is genocide, yes or no?" is an uncomfortable question to put to Jewish people.

And simultaneously, when Jewish watchdog groups or Jewish institutions say that just using the word is committing blood libel — that's not true. And it takes away from the label of antisemitism and the charge of blood libel, because that's not what it is. And it's an attempt — this is my own editorializing — to shut down discourse in a way that makes the discourse itself more extreme. And so I guess the question is: did I just illustrate the phenomenon you're talking about? Am I correctly understanding what you're saying? And how do the people in power in these organizations not understand that they're feeding the very dynamic that they're then decrying?

Jay Michaelson: Sure. Let me get to the first part first. Yes, I agree with exactly what you've just said. I don't want to speak hyperbolically, but I do think that the weaponization of antisemitism has been the best thing to happen to antisemites in a hundred years. Part of classical antisemitism is the idea that you're not supposed to talk about it — there's secret Jewish control, and if you talk about antisemitism or criticize something Jewish people do, you're going to get shut down. And that has actually happened in the last three years since October 7th.

I remember early on, when Elise Stefanik hauled the presidents of universities up in front of a congressional hearing and kind of tricked them with perjury traps into answering difficult questions in embarrassing ways — suggesting that they were tolerating antisemitism on college campuses when that wasn't the case. I saw it happening, and I've seen it happening for years: legitimate criticism of Israel gets labeled as antisemitic. That feeds antisemitism. Not only is it inaccurate, and not only is it vilifying the left in a way that I think is fundamentally unjust — just looking at it exclusively through the lens of what's good for the Jews or what's dangerous for the Jews — this is extremely dangerous for Jewish people to shut down legitimate criticism, whether it's of Israel or anything else, and say that that's antisemitic. That is itself part of the antisemitic conspiracy theory.

One word that antisemites use online a lot is "noticing" — that they notice how many people in Hollywood, for example, are Jewish, which I wrote about many years ago. That's factually true, and there are interesting historical reasons for it. But if we shut down people noticing what is actually true, then "noticing" itself becomes a kind of code word or dog whistle for antisemites online, as it has now become. And so it is an extremely destructive cycle.

As to your second question — if you and I are right, how come very highly paid people at the federation system and the ADL are missing it somehow? There was a time where I thought the weaponization of antisemitism was purely a cynical play — purely to shield Israel from criticism of its misbehavior, which I've also lodged a lot of criticisms of.

I now see it a little differently. Close friends of mine are sincerely afraid that antisemitic violence is going to break out on the streets of New York City under Mayor Zohran Mamdani. They are not telling me this around our Shabbat table or seder table as a way to weaponize something or defend Israel. It may be unconscious bias on their part, it may be a kind of unconscious Islamophobia, but it's not a cynical calculated move.

Sometimes it is — I have no doubt that plenty of people in StandWithUs and other pro-Israel organizations are doing it cynically. But many others are not. And I think it goes back

to that joining of Zionism and Jewish identity that many Jews do experience. Rightly or wrongly, that's how they understand their Jewish identity, and they do feel sincerely attacked.

I'd also make one other point, which is what's sometimes called Judeo-pessimism — which comes from the notion of Afro-pessimism — the idea that antisemitism is just part of Christian society. As a sidebar, a lot of perceived antisemitism is also coming from Muslims, but that's a contradiction for them to work out, not me. The idea is that this is just a timeless hatred, it's always going to be with us, it can use the pretext of anti-Zionism but it's really Jew-hatred, and there's really not much we can do about it. We just have to fight it all the time and make Jews proud to be Jewish as a way of combating it.

That view is kind of interesting as an academic matter, but what it leads to in policy is a complete blank check to do anything without regard for how it may inflame or fight antisemitism. If antisemitism is just always going to be there, then sure, we can go ahead and do all of these things even though they might lead to more antisemitism. The Iran war, I think, is one very recent example of that. It is clear that this war and Israel's pushing for it has made Jews less safe around the world. But if you have this idea that antisemitism is a timeless hatred that's always there, it doesn't really matter what Israel does or doesn't do — and so there's no point in factoring it into our calculations.

Emily Tamkin: I have so many more questions for you, but a few for now. You've written several pieces on the subject. One for the Unpopulist was on antisemitism on the left and why it is — or isn't — taken more seriously there. Unfortunately — and this is not to give those perpetuating antisemitism on the left an excuse — I personally do think that all of the conditions we just described have contributed to it. I think there's a kind of fatigue on the left. If you call things that are legitimate criticism of a state or of US foreign policy "antisemitism" over and over and over, you discourage people from taking the word or the label seriously.

But I wanted to give you an opportunity to speak more about this plea to progressives that you wrote for the Unpopulist.

Jay Michaelson: Yeah. The mainstream antisemitism watchdogs have been crying wolf about antisemitism for years. So it's now not surprising that the targets of that just blow it

off. And I think it is also the case that some of Israel's most appalling war crimes are just not even mentioned in this conversation.

I'll say it by name: one of my former editors, Alana Newhouse, who's been at Tablet for many years, just wrote this appalling defense of Zionism that never mentions the Palestinians at all. It's as if all that Zionism is about is Jewish self-determination and all the other good things she perceives about Zionism. There's a complete erasure in a lot of discourse of anything that's happened in Gaza over the last three years — just as, sometimes on the left, there's an erasure of October 7th.

So it's natural, I think, for progressives to just say, "You're using this word antisemitism to shut us down. You're a partisan for Israel, you feel strongly about Israel for whatever reason, and we're just not going to pay attention to it." I understand that.

At the same time, there are a lot of harder cases of left-wing antisemitism. I'll give one example from that article: protesting outside a synagogue when the synagogue is hosting what's arguably a political event. There are these real estate fairs that happen at synagogues all the time — you can buy an apartment in Tel Aviv, but you could also buy an apartment in a West Bank settlement. That's not quite a religious observance, it's maybe political. If you think Israel is imposing an apartheid or something like that in the West Bank, it feels like a pretty valid place to protest.

And then it gets into the details: how many feet are they from the synagogue? What are they shouting? Are they just protesting Israel, or are they yelling at Jews and making Jewish people feel unsafe? And that's different from, God forbid, someone shooting up a synagogue, where you don't have to look very far to determine whether something has crossed the line into antisemitism.

I do think it is the case that a lot on any political side just don't want to call out misbehavior on their own side. The New York Times just did an exposé of Cesar Chavez's horrible rape and abuse of women within his own organization. There were some on the left who said this is a fake story, who defended Cesar Chavez — just as there were some on the left who defended Noam Chomsky. So it's not always about antisemitism. There is always going to be some constituency that wants to sweep away the bad stuff in the name of the struggle, whatever that struggle is.

Emily Tamkin: I also wonder — you spoke earlier about feelings, which are real — something I sometimes think about is that the effort to have not just the feeling recognized,

but to turn it into policy, ends up creating resentment toward the feeling. Because the feeling itself is important, and it also gets weaponized.

You know, it's definitely wrong for somebody to shout at or spit on a Jewish student wearing a kippah at Columbia University — that is wrong. But then when that person reports that as an antisemitic incident, and that leads to a crackdown on political dissent, and that leads to new policies about what you can and can't say even within a classroom setting at a university — that's the weaponization of the feeling.

And it's interesting too, right? Some folks in the Jewish community have tried to frame this within a kind of pseudo-anti-racist language, based on the last five years. It's like: "Well, I should feel safe. We wouldn't tell a person of color that they're not experiencing racism when they report something that's racist. How can you police my feelings when I, as a Jewish person, am reporting antisemitism?"

And there, we get into some pretty complicated details. From the more progressive or anti-Zionist side, what you're seeing is: somebody has a feeling that then leads to restrictions on your expression of political speech — not just inappropriate speech. And I can sympathize with the feeling of being shut down on the left, because it's not just a feeling — it is reality.

Emily Tamkin: A piece that we've sort of touched on but haven't gotten into — I work with the Nexus Task Force, and my tie to Nexus is through conversations with academics, professors, and people who write and think about Jewish history and antisemitism. Most, if not all of them, would say: to reach for punishment as a hard and fast rule is wrong, and it takes us away from one of our best and most important resources against antisemitism, which is education.

You are also an educator, so I want to ask you: what do you think we are missing in how we educate about antisemitism?

Jay Michaelson: I haven't been asked that.

(pause)

I think when it comes to educating about antisemitism, we're missing two main elements. One is that — like racism, like sexism, like homophobia, like transphobia — antisemitism is

both an emotion, a hatred, and also a kind of ideology. It's a set of ideas as well as a hatred.

I remember, as an LGBTQ activist for ten years of my career, you have to traffic in slogans. I wore a pin that said "No Hate" — this was during the Prop 8 campaign in California. And sure, we describe it as hate. But it was also ideology — a certain weaponization of a traditional Christian idea of family, about sexual orientation either not existing or being sinful, and about the role of the church and the state. There were intellectual pieces around that. And I think the same is true of antisemitism.

And this actually leads to the second area where I think we're falling short: because the more we understand some of the themes of antisemitism — the conspiratorial theme, for example — the more we can teach how to recognize it when it comes up.

I used a kind of controversial image to illustrate one of the articles I just published — an image of an Israeli flag as a puppet master, with Trump as the marionette. I chose that image because it's right on the border. I think it's really fair to complain about the influence of the Israel lobby and pro-Israel voices within the Trump administration — which includes Trump's own family, with Jared Kushner and others who have long-standing ties not just to Israel but to the settlement project. That's really fair. On the other hand, when you see an image of a puppet master with a Star of David — it was part of the Israeli flag, not just a standalone Jewish star — controlling world affairs, that has a lineage. And I think, rather than calling someone out who doesn't know that lineage exists, wouldn't it be better if part of our education around antisemitism is unveiling that history?

I think about — and it's always fraught to make parallels to other forms of hatred and racism, but — when people were doing blackface 30 years ago and said, "Well, I had no idea, I didn't realize that was racist, I was just wearing a Halloween costume," that speaks to a certain level of ignorance of the history of racism in American history and culture. What if we had something similar, or analogous, in our understanding of antisemitism?

That leads to what I think is the second area we're missing: training all people — not just young people — to be attuned to when the switch has been flipped. There was another image I used of some protest theater outside the White House — this was AI, so it wasn't real — depicting Jeffrey Epstein and Bibi Netanyahu eating and drinking the blood of a baby. On one level, I get that that's a political critique of both Epstein and Netanyahu. On the other hand, that draws on 800 years of antisemitic history. That is blood libel — right at the heart of it. We're coming up on Passover as we record this — Jews were accused of

using Christian blood to bake matzah. It's possible that whoever created that AI image didn't know that. But they should know that.

And if I could do a contrast: there was a Super Bowl ad from Robert Kraft's Blue Square campaign against antisemitism that depicted antisemitism as just bullying the Jewish kid. Fine — that's antisemitic, that's true. But that's such a basic and unsophisticated understanding of how antisemitism actually shows up, including probably in high school. I would suspect, given what's happened in online culture over the last few years, there's probably been an increase of antisemitism in high schools, but it's drawing from a much more specific set of ideas being promoted by Joe Rogan, manosphere influencers, and others online. It's not just like slapping a post-it on some kid's back. There's a whole ideology behind it that I think is missed when we take an "any time a Jewish person is being targeted for any reason, that's antisemitism" approach.

Emily Tamkin: What I love about your answer is that it requires us to be in conversation with one another, both within and beyond Jewish communities. I might have a certain reaction to seeing the puppeteer image you described, and I can explain why that's my reaction. And somebody else can explain: "Here's what I meant" or "Here's how it lands for me." Maybe we don't at the end of the day agree that it's antisemitic, but we've exchanged feelings, views, and insight — and that is part of being in a pluralistic society.

However, that requires us to have education, to have spaces where we can have that exchange, to sit with discomfort, to sit with disagreement, to understand that American Jews are not the only people who have reactions to news events, political events, to slogans.

That's hard. And it requires — to bring us back to where we started — a very different approach than we're seeing from some of our watchdog organizations, which are reaching first and foremost for punishment and for silence as a way to make conversation they don't like go away. And if nothing else, I think we can agree that that has not worked. It is not working.

So I encourage those listening to consider Jay Michaelson's different approach. I'll give you the last word.

Jay Michaelson: Thank you. I just want to amplify what you just said. I'm fine with disagreement as to whether the marionette image is or isn't antisemitic. I think it's also not a binary issue. There are ways to say things about any marginalized group that get a little close. It doesn't have to be binary — if I switch hatreds for a minute — when someone says that Haitian immigrants are eating dogs and cats, I don't have to spend a lot of time wondering if that's racist. That's clearly bigotry. But then there are other things that are said where maybe you could reach for a different metaphor, where it's a little too close for comfort.

And I don't think microaggressions are the main problem here. I think the macroaggression of right-wing institutional antisemitism is a much bigger problem. And yet when we turn to education, I think it's some of those subtler questions that really do arise.

I've been feeling more despair than hope in the last few months, because it does feel like right-wing nationalist antisemitism is being integrated into the future of the Republican party in a shocking way. And yet the kind of myopic view of antisemitism as being mostly about anti-Israel stuff on the left also seems to be increasing. I wish I could trade the annual budgets of Nexus and the ADL and have more resources for doing the kind of work that could actually undo antisemitism.

But I think where I'll close is actually by complicating a lot of what we've just said, and noticing the true horseshoe effect of right and left-wing antisemitism just in the last few weeks. The horseshoe — for folks who don't know the metaphor — is where something on the right becomes so far extreme that it ends up next to the left. It's always disorienting; it's like being in the antisemitism twilight zone.

But it has actually happened. Just in the last few days, the head of a very hard right-wing, quasi-militia organization came out against the Iran war and against Trump. People were like, "That's pretty interesting — there's like a MAGA civil war happening over the Iran war." But then he did it for fundamentally antisemitic reasons, with rhetoric that wasn't so different from hard-left anti-Zionist antisemitism. The horseshoe is now fully complete when people like Tucker Carlson are critiquing US imperialism — which sounds like the left — but doing so with a heavily antisemitic message, blaming Israel, and in Tucker Carlson's case blaming the Chabad-Lubavitch sect for the war. In case there was any concern about whether Tucker Carlson really is antisemitic, that should set that one to rest.

It's a really disorienting time when the hard left and the hard right are saying the same things about Jewish influence over American policy. It really complicates trying to identify antisemitism where it exists.

I don't really have an optimistic note to end on, but I will say this: I've joked that one must imagine Sisyphus happy. In other words — the watchdogs and institutions aren't doing their job, conflation continues apace, silencing of critique continues, all the things that make it worse — and antisemitism is getting worse. And yet, what is there to do but to continue the work? To be Jewish. To not be afraid of being Jewish. To not be afraid of confronting antisemitism, and not be afraid of confronting its weaponization. To try to find our way out of this and toward something better. So to me, this conversation is a part of that.

Emily Tamkin: Jay Michaelson, thank you so much for joining today.

Jay Michaelson: Thank you, Emily.