The Shofar Report

A CALL TO DEFEND DEMOCRACY AND CONFRONT ANTISEMITISM

NEXUS

Contents

The Nexus Project was founded in 2020 to address the dual threat of rising antisemitism and the growing misuse of antisemitism as a political weapon. For more information, go to www.nexusproject.us.

Executive Summary

The *Shofar Report* is a call to defend both democracy and Jewish safety. It is the Nexus Project's answer to Project Esther, which is the Heritage Foundation's blueprint for using weaponized claims of antisemitism to undermine democratic institutions.

We reject that vision. **For Nexus, democracy and Jewish safety are inseparable, and protecting democracy is a foundational strategy for combating antisemitism.**

The *Shofar Report* offers recommendations to strengthen protections for civil rights and democratic institutions, invest in education, and build cross-community alliances, including tangible steps that policymakers and community leaders can and should take to achieve these goals, including:

- **Fully fund** comprehensive education initiatives — including Holocaust education, media literacy, and programming that teach about diverse Jewish contributions to American society, as well as the history of antisemitism alongside other communities' histories.
- **Ensure** vigorous enforcement of existing civil rights laws by providing adequate funding for the Department of Education's Office for Civil Rights, the Department of Justice's civil rights programs, and the Equal Employment Opportunity Commission's activities.
- **Focus** enforcement on clear cases of discrimination and harassment while **protecting** political expression and academic freedom.
- **Secure funding** for nonprofit security grants and **ensure** that grantees and sub-grantees are not beholden to an administration's ideological whims on issues like diversity or immigration.

Implementing these recommendations requires sustained commitment to democratic values and rejection of authoritarian shortcuts that leave communities more vulnerable. Success means fewer antisemitic incidents and hate crimes; a society more knowledgeable about Jewish history and antisemitism; stronger interfaith and intercultural relationships; and communities more resilient against extremist recruitment. In short, success looks like democracy.

These recommendations are followed by essays addressing urgent challenges: **Rabbi Seth Limmer** on ensuring Jewish safety; **Amy Spitalnick** on rejecting the false choice between protecting Jews and protecting democracy; **Hannah Rosenthal** on the links between antisemitism and xenophobia; **David N. Myers** on defending academic independence; **Eric Ward** on how attacks on diversity, equity, and inclusion fracture pro-democracy coalitions; **Judith Lichtman**

Photo by Gage Skidmore

on resisting cynical claims of antisemitism used to weaken civil society; and **Dov Waxman and Jeremy Ben-Ami** on how US foreign policy hinders efforts to combat antisemitism.

Finally, the *Shofar Report* turns to a series of in-depth essays that trace the forces shaping this moment. **Lila Corwin Berman** examines how the historical narrative of American exceptionalism for Jews obscure antisemitism's ties to other hatreds. **Itamar Mann and Lihi Yona** explore how policing criticism of Israel risks placing Jewish identity in the hands of courts. **Joshua Shanes** traces the persistence and manipulation of antisemitic tropes, including their use to deflect criticism. And **Irwin Kula** reflects on why younger Jews are challenging the architectures of safety and power embraced by older generations. Together, these essays deepen our understanding of the past and present — and give us language for imagining a better future.

This is the Shofar Report. Now is the time to heed its call.

Introduction

JONATHAN JACOBY

Jonathan Jacoby is National Director of the Nexus Project

Every Jewish New Year, the blows of the shofar are meant to be a wake-up call — a summons to our conscience, a reminder of what has been, and of the work still to be done.

It is in that spirit that the Nexus Project presents the *Shofar Report*: an assessment of what is happening to this country; how Jews, antisemitism, and its trivialization and weaponization shape this moment; and what must be done to confront antisemitism and reverse America's democratic descent — intertwined challenges we can no longer ignore.

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On October 7, 2024 — one year after Hamas attacked Israel, killing over 1,000 Israelis, taking over 200 hostages into Gaza, and reigniting global fears of antisemitism — the Heritage Foundation unveiled *Project Esther: A National Strategy to Combat Antisemitism*.

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Despite its name, Project Esther is not a strategy for confronting rising anti-Jewish prejudice, discrimination, or violence. Rather, it is a blueprint for weaponizing the politicized charge of antisemitism to advance the goals of its ideological forebear at the Heritage Foundation: *Project 2025*. Project Esther and Project 2025 share a single goal: dismantling liberal democratic institutions in favor of reactionary authoritarian control. The Trump administration appears to be using both.

Though framed as a national strategy, Project Esther is little more than a partisan manifesto. It is a blunt instrument intended to advance a reactionary agenda by conflating anti-Zionism with antisemitism, equating pro-Palestinian advocacy with support for terrorism, and portraying progressive institutions as hotbeds of Jew-hatred. Rather than offering real solutions to rising antisemitism, it repurposes Jewish safety as a political weapon aimed squarely at dissent, diversity, and democratic norms.

Project Esther's goal is not to make American Jews safer. It is to dismantle American democracy.

Under the banner of fighting antisemitism, the Trump administration rejected the Biden administration's landmark National Strategy to Counter Antisemitism, which reflected extensive input from Jewish institutions and individuals across the political spectrum. Instead, it deployed Project Esther's framework to bolster its broader anti-democratic agenda. (Project Esther, incidentally, had almost no input from American Jewish groups.)

The Department of Education has launched investigations into universities not to protect Jewish students, but to suppress pro-Palestinian advocacy and dismantle diversity, equity, and inclusion programs. The administration has also pressured law firms, businesses, and corporations to abandon DEI policies. In both cases, accusations of antisemitism serve as a pretext to reshape internal practices and enforce ideological conformity.

History demonstrates that civil liberties, equal protection under the law, and open political expression are among the most effective safeguards for Jewish communities.

Even if Project Esther sincerely aimed to fight antisemitism, its strategy would still be fundamentally flawed. Abandoning democratic norms does not protect Jews; it endangers them. History demonstrates that civil liberties, equal protection under the law, and open political expression are among the most effective safeguards for Jewish communities. Undermining those foundations in the name of Jewish safety ultimately leaves all minorities — including Jews themselves — more vulnerable.

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In the pages that follow, we outline a strategy for combating antisemitism by protecting democracy. We begin with recommendations for policymakers and community leaders, followed by essays examining how charges of antisemitism are being used to weaken democratic institutions and civil society — and how real, lasting Jewish safety depends on defending democratic values. These are followed by analytical essays on Jewish American history and politics, each seeking to help the reader understand how we got here and how we might find our way forward.

We hope these essays offer guidance for community leaders and policymakers as we confront these challenges in the New Year — and that they empower us, as individuals and as a collective, to answer the shofar's call.

Policy Recommendations: Fighting Antisemitism by Protecting Democracy

ALAN SOLOW AND KEVIN RACHLIN

Alan Solow is Chair of the Nexus Project and former Chair, Conference of Major American Jewish Organizations. Kevin Rachlin is Washington Director of the Nexus Project.

The following recommendations, drawn from and inspired by the essays in the first part of the Shofar Report, provide a comprehensive framework for addressing antisemitism through policies that have demonstrated track records of success — and that strengthen democratic institutions while protecting Jewish communities. These actions prioritize education, civil rights enforcement, and coalition-building over punitive measures that risk undermining the pluralistic democracy where Jews are historically safest.

While these recommendations are intended for policymakers, we hope they will help community leaders, Jewish and otherwise, as they educate, advocate, and share resources to protect democracy and combat antisemitism specifically and broader extremism.

1. Restore and Expand Investment in Education
2. Strengthen Civil Rights Enforcement
3. Support Community-Based Prevention of Antisemitism and Hate Crimes
4. Counter Disinformation and Conspiracy Theories
5. Protect Congressional Oversight of Democratic Processes
6. Preserve Academic Freedom
7. Restore Refugee and Asylum Protections
8. Build Coalitions to Protect Democracy

Recommended Legislative and Executive Actions

1 Restore and Expand Educational Investment

- Fully fund comprehensive education initiatives, including Holocaust education, media literacy, and programming, that teach about diverse Jewish contributions to and of antisemitism in American society alongside other communities' histories
- Fund and expand media literacy programs
- Expand funding for educational programs that address the 63% knowledge gap among young Americans about Holocaust history
- Integrate Jewish history into broader American history curricula
- Develop media literacy programs that teach recognition of conspiracy theories and manipulation techniques
- Support programs that highlight Jewish contributions to civil rights, labor movements, and democratic institutions

2 Strengthen Civil Rights Enforcement

- Ensure vigorous enforcement of existing civil rights laws through adequate funding for the Department of Education's Office for Civil Rights, Department of Justice civil rights programs, and Equal Employment Opportunity Commission activities
- Focus enforcement on clear discrimination and harassment while protecting political expression and academic freedom
- Provide technical assistance to institutions on meeting civil rights obligations without suppressing legitimate discourse
- Rather than expanding definitions of antisemitism beyond their proper scope or focusing on codifying them, maximize the effectiveness of current legal frameworks that distinguish between protected speech and discriminatory conduct.

3 Support Community-Based Prevention

- Expand programs supporting community-based approaches to hate crime prevention, including initiatives addressing antisemitism through education, relationship-building, and early intervention
- Invest in successful programs building community resilience against extremist recruitment

- Fund "off-ramp" programs helping individuals leave extremist movements through mental health services, job training, and community reintegration assistance
- Ensure that nonprofit security grants are fully funded and that grantees and sub-grantees are not beholden to an administration's ideological whims on issues like diversity or immigration.

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4 Counter Disinformation and Conspiracy Theories

- Develop coordinated approaches addressing the conspiracy theories that drive both antisemitism and anti-democratic extremism
- Support research into disinformation spread patterns and transmission mechanisms
- Fund media literacy education that builds cognitive resistance to conspiracy thinking
- Work with platforms to disrupt coordinated inauthentic behavior without censoring legitimate discourse
- Target Great Replacement and QAnon conspiracy theories, which are the strongest predictors of both antisemitism and support for political violence
- Address online amplification through bot networks during political crises

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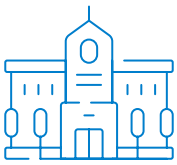
5 Maintain Democratic Oversight:

- Protect NGOs and their funding from efforts to chill civil society by politicizing definitions of, for example, terrorism and extremism
- Conduct rigorous oversight, ensuring antisemitism policies align with democratic principles rather than serving political purposes
- Investigate any efforts to weaponize antisemitism concerns against civil society organizations, academic institutions, or political dissent
- Ensure resource allocation reflects actual threat data rather than political calculations
- Provide for regular reporting on policy effectiveness using measurable outcomes
- Make enforcement priorities and resource allocation public
- Protection of whistleblowers reporting misuse of antisemitism policies

6 Preserve Academic Freedom



- Provide resources for institutions to combat genuine harassment while maintaining open intellectual environments
- Support rather than threaten universities addressing antisemitism through existing civil rights frameworks
- Protect research funding from political interference while ensuring civil rights compliance

7 Restore Refugee and Asylum Protections

- Reverse suspensions of refugee admissions and restore protections for asylum seekers, including Iranian Jews and others fleeing antisemitic persecution
- Demonstrate commitment to values that have historically made America a refuge while enhancing moral authority in global antisemitism efforts

8 Build Coalitions to Protect Democracy

- Fund initiatives that bring diverse communities together around shared democratic values rather than programs that isolate Jewish concerns from broader struggles
- Support relationship-building between Jewish communities and other minorities facing extremist threats
- Leverage the 78-84% public support for messaging connecting Jewish safety with democracy and protecting other communities
- Recognize that extremist movements deliberately create conflicts between Jewish communities and other minorities, requiring intentional bridge-building to counter divide-and-conquer tactics.

Working Framework

COORDINATION REQUIREMENTS

- Align federal agency antisemitism work with broader civil rights and security missions
- Provide federal support to state and local governments without micromanagement
- Support civil society organizations through funding and coordination rather than attempting to replace them
- Engage the private sector, particularly technology companies, while balancing free expression with harm prevention

Conclusion

These recommendations prioritize evidence-based approaches that address antisemitism's root causes while strengthening the democratic institutions that provide genuine long-term security for Jewish communities and all Americans. Implementation requires sustained commitment to democratic values and rejection of authoritarian shortcuts that ultimately increase vulnerability for the communities they claim to protect.

And what does success look like? It looks like fewer antisemitic incidents and hate crimes; a society that's more knowledgeable about Jewish history and antisemitism, and in which Jewish communities have stronger interfaith and intercultural relationships. Success will look like communities that are more resilient in the face of extremist recruitment. In short, it will look like democracy.

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Antisemitism and Jewish Safety

RABBI SETH M. LIMMER

Rabbi Seth M. Limmer is Director of Public Affairs at PERIL: The Polarization & Extremism Research and Innovation Lab

We are at a painful moment in American Jewish history. On the very evening of October 7th — when 1,195 human beings in Israel were murdered by Hamas and 251 additional human beings were taken hostage — chants advocating the erasure of Israel from the world map resonated around the world. Since that fateful day, many in the Jewish community have simply felt besieged. Acts of vandalism that once marked the apogee of American antisemitism, the desecration of synagogues and cemeteries, were the canary in the coalmine as they rose by 20%; since October 7th, 2023, FBI data on antisemitic hate crimes and incidents shows a 200-300% increase. College campuses have become hotbeds of anti-Israel and even, in some cases, anti-Jewish activities.

Jewish organizations and federal agencies alike have noted the rise of these and other antisemitic assaults — warnings that reached their culmination in the murder of Jews in Washington, D.C. and Boulder, Colorado, this year. Amid these unfolding horrors, Jews perceive a lack of support from other communities, which has been documented to add harm to our communal spirit, as our very real trauma remains invalidated by much of the world.

Photo by D.A. Varela/Miami Herald/Tribune News Service via Getty Images

The question on the minds of many Jewish communities, as we both welcome the season of the High Holy Days and anticipate the second anniversary of the October 7th slaughter, is: where do we go from here? How, in this current environment of escalating animosity towards Jews and Judaism, do we find security for our community?

To address that essential issue, we must honestly evaluate what we have done to date to secure the Jewish community. We need to be honest about what might have helped but certainly hasn't *worked*. It is understandably tempting to think that physical security will forestall attacks on the Jewish community, or that our tradition of interfaith dialogue will halt the spread of harmful antisemitic narratives. But we need to evaluate those premises.

We can learn cautionary tales of dollars spent on physical security from the wider world: RAND estimates that the US collectively spends $20.5B on physical security in K-12 settings, and sadly, school shootings have increased linearly since the Columbine tragedy in 1999. Our instincts are to protect our children and our communities, but there is no volume of cameras or guards that will, by themselves, decrease the violence. And so, in painful fashion, we must admit that the millions of dollars spent on securitizing Jewish spaces since the Tree of Life massacre in Pittsburgh in 2018 has only moved the location of Jewish attacks from *inside* our institutions to *outside* their doors. Building bollards and barricades — setting aside the psychological harm they do to our community by increasing our sense of vulnerability — have literally only moved attacks to the other side of our security stations. In the last five years alone, the hallmark federal program that funds *physical* synagogue security — the Nonprofit Security Grant Program — has increased its funding from $180 million to over $430 million. Yet fewer people feel as safe now as they did when the program started. Securitizing our sanctuaries does little to change the growing landscape of antisemitism running rampant on our streets.

Building bollards and barricades — setting aside the psychological harm they do to our community by increasing our sense of vulnerability — have literally only moved attacks to the other side of our security stations.

Also ineffective on any large scale are the societal interventions the Jewish community routinely undertakes both proactively to engage with others and prophylactically to proscribe antisemitism. Some Federations and JCRCs across America have routinely hosted interfaith dialogue opportunities and sent political missions to Israel, with a major goal of creating more favorable attitudes towards the Jewish community. Granted, sometimes these programs are either *pro forma* or taken for granted amidst what are considered higher priorities. Yet, according to recent PEW Polling, negative public opinions of Israel — which often are transferred to the Jewish community writ large — have increased from 42% to a majority 53%. Likewise, more left-leaning Jewish communities often engage in community organizing across lines of race, class, and faith both to advance the work of *tikkun olam* and to create meaningful bonds of allyship with others. Yet, in cities like DC, where the wider Jewish community actively participates in Faith In Action's CAN, this has neither diminished antisemitism in the progressive community nor forestalled continuous anti-Israel demonstrations or murder. In one last act of demonstrated inefficacy, we should note the continued Jewish argument — screaming into a void, really — that slogans like "From the River to the Sea" or "Free, Free Palestine" are antisemitic, has done nothing to mitigate the widespread usage, if not spread, of these phrases.

If we want to address the issue of improving Jewish security, then we must first admit that the techniques we have tried have *not* worked. It's not that they failed, or even aren't worthwhile: they are simply, and demonstrably, insufficient to the task. The aforementioned efforts should remain part of a larger strategy for Jewish security, yet only as certain pieces of a larger puzzle. To assemble that puzzle and create a holistic picture of Jewish safety, we need to reframe

the problem of contemporary American antisemitism. First of all, we need to remember that "antisemitism from the left" and criticism of Israel that bleeds into exclusion of many Jews isn't a by-product of October 7th; at the very least, some academics have been visibly planting seeds of this hatred since at least 2007 with the first threat to exclude Israeli scholars. Secondly, we need to note that "antisemitism from the right" didn't just appear in Charlottesville; in 1977, Nazis marched openly in the home of Holocaust survivors, Skokie. Lastly, we shouldn't fall victim to thinking that heightened antisemitism is the result of social media; as scholar Steve Zipperstein taught in his book Pogrom, new forms of communication have long accelerated antisemitic hatred.

Photo by Jeff Swensen via Getty Images

What *will* work? We should not pretend there are simple, quick solutions. We are *not* going to extinguish American antisemitism in one grant or any single approach. Our responses to the frightening and deadly increase in antisemitism needs to be as multifaceted and multidisciplinary as is the hate focused at us. This need to work in many arenas is why temporary solutions like stronger security and active outreach *do* matter: even if the combination of these solutions has proved inadequate to the need, combating the hatred of Jews and Judaism remains a war that must be waged on many fronts. It is only when we put all our eggs in one proverbial basket that we add heightened risk and exposure. We should continue to make Jewish spaces as safe as we can; we should continue to build relations across lines of difference for many reasons, especially, given the subject of antisemitism, to increase understanding and reduce damaging stereotypes and false narratives.

Antisemitism is a widespread social sickness. While the Jewish community has attacked the symptoms of this sickness — securing separate institutions from attack, engaging individual leaders, taking on a misleading slogan — we must attempt to create a public health solution to a societal sickness.

Applying a public health approach to mitigating antisemitism (or any form of targeted violence) means creating a suite of protections against this hatred, testing those interventions, and employing successful interventions nationally.

Applying a public health approach to mitigating antisemitism (or any form of targeted violence) means creating a suite of protections against this hatred, testing those interventions, and employing successful interventions nationally. To begin with, adopting this approach could provide the Jewish community with sorely needed internal resources. Creating and testing toolkits for understanding, preventing, and responding to antisemitism — which should definitely include a rapid response guide — would fill a noticeable gap. Likewise, training modules should be created (and improved through testing) for leaders and communities; this could include workshops to understand the history and currency of antisemitic thought or curated curricular guides for noticing and responding to early signs of radicalization and hate.

While these resources would be invaluable within the Jewish community, effective public-health interventions must demonstrably engage the wider community. Here, rigorous academic testing — not just market research — is essential. The *Foundation to Combat Antisemitism* launched a $25 million ad campaign this year: for all the statistics the Foundation enumerates, measurement of how those millions moved even a single mind are not mentioned. PSA campaigns can make an impact; we should hold Jewish PSA campaigns to standards of accountability, and improve them if they fail to reach their goals.

Public health work is not only about wider campaigns. Guides for communities and educators exist to promote tobacco cessation, more commonly known as highly effective anti-smoking public health campaigns. In one example, some Jews walk out of a conversation anytime anything antisemitic is mentioned while others sometimes let a questionable phrase pass by in the name of communal unity: which is appropriate? Which actually is effective in mitigating antisemitism? How do we know? A well-researched and tested guide could be invaluable in giving us real answers to those questions.

In another example, Americans are accustomed to freedom of expression and freedom of religion: How, then, should Jews respond when a university department on Race, Diaspora, and Indigeneity does not include an expert in Jewish history on its 18-person faculty? How should the Jewish community treat a national megachurch leader who is both supportive of the State of Israel and harbors and abides antisemitism? It's not only that the Jewish community could benefit from guidance on these very real-world issues. It's *also* that public-health-style resources, tested thoroughly before widespread implementation, guide people towards productive and healthy outcomes.

For example, despite last year's efforts to claim that the slogan "Free Free Palestine" was a "license to kill," research in political extremism has proven that attempts to demonize or even outlaw slogans only strengthens the resolve (and often the resources) of hateful communities.

Public health lessons on extremism don't just suggest—they instruct: Banning speech is a counterproductive tactic. How much more could the Jewish community learn about countering antisemitism if it were committed not to being right, not to being outspoken, but to researching methods that work best and disseminating those techniques widely?

It is true that, as ineffective as they are at mitigating the rise of antisemitism, the Jewish community needs to continue to look to its immediate physical and psychological security. At the same time, a good look in the mirror demonstrates that the Jewish community needs an entirely new set of tools to change the American environment in which antisemitism is thriving. Many of these resources need to be developed; some already exist, but call for wider deployment. The NSGP can equip a JCC with upgraded technology and SCN can train the staff of a Jewish institution on how to protect themselves and others from attack: *neither does a single thing to prevent an attack*. As a matter of fact, very little — and precious less that has had its effectiveness undergo testing — has been done to prevent antisemitism from spreading. Those who take Jewish safety seriously must widen the scope of their efforts; that broader approach must adopt a public health approach to reducing antisemitism. Jews do not feel secure when the hatred of Jews is at all-time highs.

Extinguishing the flames that fan that hatred, suffocating the spread of antisemitism from the left and right and center: these will make every Jew in America feel more secure.

RECOMMENDATIONS

- **Invest in a wide range of community resources**, rigorously researched and tested, covering topics such as: a rapid-response guide; best practices for protection from antisemitic activity; toolkits for communication on issues antisemitism; and guides for clergy and youth leaders for responding to signs of radicalization.
- **Align public awareness campaigns**, centering them on messaging that is proven through research to impact antisemitic thought and action
- **Develop protocols for engagement** with academic and evangelical communities that can make demonstrable shifts in antisemitic attitudes, speech, programs, and curricula.

In sum, in this age of rampant antisemitism, the Jewish community should begin to invest its time and resources in a public health approach to work more holistically towards Jewish safety.

Antisemitism and Democracy

AMY SPITALNICK

Amy Spitalnick is the CEO of the Jewish Council for Public Affairs (JCPA). She is a nationally-recognized leader on countering antisemitism, hate, and extremism and protecting democracy — previously authoring the Antisemitism x Democracy report and leading Integrity First for America, which won its groundbreaking lawsuit against the neo-Nazis who attacked Charlottesville.

American Jews are being offered a false choice that suggests countering real and rising antisemitism requires us to abandon the democratic norms and values inherent to our safety and advancement. We are told that we can protect ourselves or our democracy; that we can look out for Jews or for other minorities, but not both. The truth is that one is not possible without the other.

This is not a simple right versus left issue, even if it would be easier to understand it through that lens. Antisemitism is not only a form of bigotry and prejudice. It is also an insidious conspiracy theory rooted in tropes and lies about Jewish control and power, aimed at pitting communities against one another and sowing distrust in democracy and its institutions – which makes it particularly salient as a wedge across the political spectrum.

On the right, from the White House on down, leaders are exploiting the Jewish community's legitimate fears of rising antisemitism to undermine the rule of law and core democratic rights. Universities are being extorted as the federal government threatens billions in research funding

to undermine academic freedom and advance its agenda, all while claiming that it's necessary to protect the Jewish students who attend them. Students are picked up off the street without due process or the protection of other fundamental rights. None of this makes Jews any safer.

The administration is doing this all while further normalizing dangerous antisemitism. This includes giving a platform to antisemitic conspiracy theories like the Great Replacement, which has already fueled a cycle of violence — including the deadliest attack on the Jewish community in US history in Pittsburgh — and is now used to advance dehumanizing policies attacking immigrants, voting rights, and more; appointing extremists to senior roles, including in defense and counterterror; and gutting the very programs needed to counter hate and extremism, such as the Office of Civil Rights and critical hate crime prevention grants.

There is a false choice on the other end of the ideological spectrum, too: between fighting antisemitism and standing up for human and democratic rights. On the left, extreme voices are exploiting legitimate concerns over Palestinian human rights and the humanitarian crisis in Gaza to isolate, marginalize, and attack Jews: from those who celebrated Hamas's brutal terror attacks on October 7th, to efforts to ban Jews or "Zionists" from certain spaces, to the targeting of Jews here because of our real or perceived connection to Israel — manifesting in two deadly attacks in recent months in DC and Boulder and a broader climate of fear and isolation for many Jewish Americans.

All of this has the effect of not only making Jews unsafe — which should be enough on its own — but of also dividing the very coalitions we need in a moment when our rights and our democracy are under dire threat.

Ultimately, this all threatens Jews, each and every other community, and our democracy itself — because **there is no Jewish safety without inclusive democracy, and no inclusive democracy without Jewish safety**.

Yet we're stuck in a feedback loop in which antisemitism and threats to democracy fuel one another. As antisemitism is normalized in all of its forms, it fundamentally sows distrust and division and undercuts the safety and rights of all communities and our democracy. And as democracy erodes, it only creates the conditions for antisemitism to further flourish.

This requires us to lean into the hard work of relationship and coalition-building at a moment when it's never felt harder — because the goal of extremists is to divide us so that we can't work together in pursuit of an inclusive democracy in which Jews, and all communities, are safe.

We need to recognize that our safety is bound together. We need to act as though our fight against antisemitism is only as strong as our democracy, and our democracy only as safe as all minorities in it, including Jews. That is what we are doing at JCPA. Partnering with the teachers' unions at a time when both Jewish students and educators are understandably fearful *and* the

right-wing is exploiting antisemitism to undermine unions and the right to organize. Leading a strong coalition of mainstream Jewish organizations to reject the false choice between Jewish safety and democratic norms. Bringing together a broad group of civil rights partners to state that targeting Jews over Israel's actions is antisemitism - period. Making clear that protecting diversity, equity, inclusion, and accessibility is inherent to Jewish safety and values — and that it can be done in a way that's inclusive of Jewish identity and concerns.

Our safety as Jews is inextricably bound to the strength of our democracy and the rights and safety of all. We have no other choice.

RECOMMENDATIONS:

- **Stay at the table.** The Jewish community is too often told to walk away from those with whom we may have differing views on Israel or in understanding antisemitism. And we see extremists use these issues to divide the very coalitions we need to protect our communities and our democracy — because isolation is a key extremist tactic. At the core of true community relations is the willingness to confront the elephants in the room and have the hard, frank conversations across lines of disagreement and difference.
- **Invest in democratic resiliency.** Physical security measures and legal accountability matter. But we also cannot barricade, sue, or prosecute our way out of the crisis of antisemitism and extremism. We must invest in the policies proven to build societal resilience to hate — from media and digital literacy, to hate crimes prevention, to defending the rule of law and equal justice.
- **Reject the false binaries.** Binary thinking is among the greatest hurdles to countering antisemitism and protecting democracy — whether it's those pitting Jewish safety and democracy against one another; or suggesting that countering one form of hate comes at the expense of another; or painting the Israeli-Palestinian conflict in zero-sum terms. The more we can bring complexity to these conversations, the more we show potential allies that countering antisemitism and protecting all communities and our democracy are one and the same.

Antisemitism and Xenophobia

HANNAH ROSENTHAL

Hannah Rosenthal is the former US Special Envoy for Monitoring and Combating Antisemitism and former head of the Jewish Council for Public Affairs.

As the child of a Holocaust survivor, I grew up understanding the urgency of making a difference and combating evil when it rears its head. I was surrounded by real evidence of how evil could destroy people, evidence shown to me every day by my parents and missing grandparents, and I wanted to do everything I could to stand against it. Today, I feel the rise of antisemitism acutely. Yet I also believe that antisemitism is being exploited and weaponized to divide people, including Jews, to instill fear and demonize people.

At present, the Trump administration is convening task forces and advancing projects predicated on a fiction that the left is singularly responsible for antisemitism in our country, while ignoring its root causes and the vile ways in which it is expressed by those in power. In Trump's statements, there is no mention of white nationalism, Christian nationalism, Holocaust denial, or Hitler salutes, nor of blood libel or deicide, and zero discussion of how antisemitism works in tandem with these other hatreds, including xenophobia. Taking it even further, officials within the Trump administration have embraced antisemitic conspiracy theories and associated with known white supremacists.

Photo by Geopix / Alamy Stock Photo

There is perhaps no clearer example of how antisemitism and xenophobia work in tandem than the Great Replacement Theory, a conspiracy echoed by several members of the administration, stating that "elites"—often code for Jews—are working to flood the country with migrants to change its demographics. In over-assigning agency to shadowy Jewish figures seeking to corrode the nation, this is antisemitic. In ignoring that people come to this country not via a puppet master, but in search of a better life, it's xenophobic and dehumanizing.

As the Trump administration ramps up its attacks on immigrants, often by plain-clothes or masked Immigrants and Customs Enforcement Officers, the rhetorical ties between ideas like the Great Replacement Theory and the actions of the Trump administration are clear. But

rhetoric never stands on its own. The Trump administration's embrace of conspiracy theories, associations with white supremacists, and targeting of immigrant communities should be a warning not only to Jews but to marginalized communities around the country.

Xenophobia and antisemitism have already worked together effectively and tragically. The massacre at the Tree of Life synagogue in 2018, the deadliest attack on Jews in American history, was carried out by a right-wing extremist who believed Jews were flooding this country with immigrants. Failing to fight hatreds in tandem allows individual hatreds to fester, and also surrenders one of our unique strengths: the power we find in coalitions. The power we can harness from working together to fight bigotry is more important than ever, a point as Amy Spitalnick makes in her essay from this strategy, Antisemitism x Democracy: "To effectively combat antisemitism, we must understand how it is used as a tool to fuel broader hate, violence, and anti-democratic extremism, and build solutions that recognize this deep interconnection."

Failing to fight hatreds in tandem allows individual hatreds to fester, and also surrenders one of our unique strengths: the power we find in coalitions.

In my time at the State Department, I learned that coalition building is something we in the United States do uniquely well and has been one of our great strengths as Americans and American Jews. To give it up now would be self-defeating. At this historic time in both Jewish and American history, forging coalitions across communities should be our top priority. Our safety, and the safety of American democracy, depends on it.

In addition, Trump's Executive Order on antisemitism threatens to target people on visas, including students, for participating in protests critical of Israel — all under the guise of combating antisemitism. The White House has since made good on this threat. Project Esther, a policy initiative developed with minimal Jewish input last fall and which has been nearly replicated by the administration, explicitly designates pro-Palestinian activism as part of an alleged "Hamas-Support Network." These actions threaten to cast antisemitism as an imported, rather than a homegrown, problem.

It also recalls a dark period of American history. In the early 20th century, Jews fleeing persecution and pogroms in Europe sought a new home in America. But as a pretext to deny them entry, American political leaders warned that they were coming here only to smuggle in Bolshevism. Some also argued that Jews were incapable of acculturation and assimilation, charges used against the community to prevent their integration into American life.

Today, Jews, too, will be impacted by President Trump's immigration plans. His suspension of the US Refugee Admissions Program is keeping Iranian Jews out of the United States. The stop-work orders, which paused all foreign aid spending, also hamper the ability of groups like the Hebrew Immigrant Aid Society (HIAS), which is trying to continue helping Venezuela's 6,000-strong Jewish community.

It is only by working together — building coalitions and partnerships across communities — that we can best combat antisemitism, xenophobia, and all forms of bigotry.

RECOMMENDATIONS:

- **Building coalitions is more important than ever**: We should all be focused on building and supporting partnerships across communities that make everyone, including Jews, safer.
- Jewish communities should commit, as hundreds of Jewish clergy have done, to **pushing back against the suspension of refugee admissions** through the US refugee resettlement program and the elimination of the right to seek asylum.
- **Members of Congress must shed light on the impact of the executive orders**, including the impact of the suspension of the United States Refugee Admissions Program (USRAP) and stop-work orders. We should all be working at the federal, state, and local levels to help refugee communities already here.
- **Jewish communities have a particular obligation to return to their historic commitment** to these pro-immigrant and refugee efforts and to work in coalition to prevent antisemitism from being used as a pretext to deport people for engaging in free assembly or free speech.
- **We should educate young people about America's immigration history,** including the ways in which it intersects with antisemitism. It isn't just that we should fight xenophobia so others will join us in the fight against antisemitism. It's that one cannot be fought without also fighting the other. We should push for more robust, nuanced history education, even when that history is uncomfortable and painful. It is the only way we can learn from it.

Antisemitism and Universities

DAVID N. MYERS

David N. Myers is a distinguished professor of history at the University of California, Los Angeles, where he holds the Sady and Ludwig Kahn Chair in Jewish History.

For centuries, the university has been a bellwether of the Jewish condition. At the same time, the state of the university has often been a mirror onto the health of the society in which it is located. The current attacks by the Trump Administration on the university in the United States, in the name of combating antisemitism, risk producing profound and lasting damage to higher education in the US A number of universities have received demands to pay hundreds of millions, and in one case, one billion dollars, for their alleged inattention to antisemitism. Both because of Trump's own troubling characterization of Jews and because of the presence of administration officials whose words seem to cross the line into antisemitic rhetoric, it is not clear what exactly the Administration aims to fight. Is it antisemitism, or is it a certain kind of Jewish politics that they find anathema? Nor is it clear that impoverishing universities will redound to the benefit or well-being of Jews. The stakes are even higher. All of American society, including but not restricted to Jews, stands to lose if the golden age of higher education in the US comes to a crashing end in the next few years. Universities have not only been sites of huge economic innovation and mobility; they have bastions of American democracy, promoting ideals of equality, free expression, and the right to protest.

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In medieval and early modern universities, Jewish attendance was severely restricted, with a number of notable exceptions (for example, Jews were permitted to study medicine at the University of Padua in the 15th century and later at Leiden in the 17th century). This overall pattern of exclusion reflected the stigmatization of Jews as undesirables in Christian society.

The 18th-century Enlightenment heralded a new age in which religious bias, it was declared, would no longer be tolerated. Jews in Europe looked to education—and especially the university—as a means of casting off millennia-old shackles of prejudice. There were some encouraging signs. Jews were permitted to study in many fields from which they had been excluded previously. And yet, for much of the nineteenth century, they were not permitted to assume positions as professors. Moreover, many European institutions placed strict quotas on Jewish attendance at university, in some cases, limited it to 3% of the total student population.

The United States, at the turn of the century, seemed to represent a different model. It opened its gates to millions of immigrants from Europe, including more than two million Jews. Public institutions of higher education in the country were an important portal of entry into the American cultural and economic mainstream for many children of immigrants. In the first decades of the twentieth century, Jewish students were given access to colleges and universities, where they excelled in many domains of study. They achieved a degree of representation—over 20% at some top universities–far beyond their numbers in the general population. In response, Ivy League institutions imposed quotas on Jewish attendance from the 1920s to the 1960s, believing that many Jews were detrimental to a good social and cultural mix.

Public institutions of higher education in the country were an important portal of entry into the American cultural and economic mainstream for many children of immigrants.

The next half-century was a golden age for Jews in the American university. The percentage of Jewish students in elite universities rose, as did the number of Jewish faculty. Similarly, Jews broke through a remaining barrier by assuming leadership positions at institutions of higher education. Over the last decade, six out of eight presidents of Ivy League universities were Jewish. These developments reflect the opportunity afforded to Jews to enter previously closed corridors of power and influence in the United States. They also reflect the way in which colleges and universities have modeled what a broad, multicultural society could look like.

In recent years, the high percentage of Jews at leading colleges and universities has dropped. Some argue that a key reason is that college campuses have become sites of hostility toward Jews. Critics point to the protests against Israel after the Hamas attack of October 7, 2023, as evidence.

Indeed, there were instances of harassment and intimidation directed against Jewish students in the aftermath of October 7. College campuses have become challenging, particularly for those who strongly identify with Israel. The Trump Administration has waded into the fray by making exaggerated claims about how unsafe college campuses are for Jews. Its manifest weaponization of antisemitism against critics of Israel doesn't mean that universities should be lax in combating threats to Jews.

But we should know where the challenge really lies. The threat to Jews and to the university in the United States today does not emanate, in the first instance, from pro-Palestinian protesters. Rather, it comes, ironically enough, from new attempts to silence protesters in the name of protecting Jews.

The Heritage Foundation's "Project Esther" and President Trump's Executive Order on "Additional Measures to Combat Anti-Semitism" seek to stifle voices on campus by casting a vast

net to identify and potentially sanction those who disagree with the pro-Netanyahu view of Israeli policy. They are accused, incredulously, of belonging to a "Hamas Support Network." Not only do such claims stigmatize Palestinian, Arab, and Muslim critics; they are also directed with equal fervor against progressive Jews who oppose Israel's brutal war in Gaza or its 58-year-long occupation of the West Bank.

Photo by Wolfgang Cibura - stock.adobe.com

The consequences of these claims have been dramatic. Since his executive order in January 2025, President Trump has cut over $400 million in funding for Columbia University over allegations of failing to combat antisemitism. More recently, he has threatened UCLA with our $1.5 billion in withheld funds or fines. Several student activists—lawful residents of the United States—have been arrested for their pro-Palestinian activism, and the visas of more than 6000 international students have been revoked as of August 2025. In the face of such pressure from the federal government, universities such as Columbia have chosen to arrive at settlements with the Trump administration, agreeing to pay huge sums of money and to accept outside monitors of their academic activity.

Such agreements do not promote the interests or well-being of Jews, who have benefited enormously from the social mobility that the university has provided. The proposed actions against dissident voices on American universities will upend the traditions of inclusivity and academic freedom that have served Jews well since the early twentieth century. And it should

be clear that the ultimate goal is not to protect Jews by rooting out pro-Palestinian protesters. It is to degrade American universities as they currently exist in order to subordinate them to the decidedly anti-liberal, authoritarian, and conformist agenda of the Trump administration. This agenda is antithetical to protecting Jews.

All concerned citizens should be alarmed by the plans underway. History reveals that imposing draconian restrictions on universities —whether in Nazi Germany, Communist Russia, or fascist South America— is a classic move by anti-democratic regimes, which subsequently weaponize these policies to serve their own nefarious interests. We may well be on the brink of such a moment today, and Jews, above all, must be vigilant and resist destructive efforts justified in their name. If we do not, we will be contributing to the rapid decline of what was an illustrious golden age for Jews and the university in the United States.

RECOMMENDATIONS:

- **Resist the weaponization of antisemitism** by using the Nexus Campus Guide to Identifying Antisemitism, along with other nuanced instruments (such as the Nexus and JDA definitions of antisemitism), in order to distinguish between legitimate speech and behavior, and hateful and discriminatory speech and behavior. In particular, these instruments allow for a more subtle determination of when anti-Zionism may become antisemitic.
- **Resist the call** in the Trump Administration's Fact Sheet on Combating Antisemitism, as enthusiastically echoed and acted on by organizations such as Betar USA, to identify members of campus communities on student visas who may be subject to deportation because of their support of Palestinian liberation.
- **Encourage college and university leaders to join together to take concerted action against efforts that diminish the independence of institutions of higher learning,** impose restrictions on free speech, and seek to identify and act against those deemed political undesirables. The administration's proposed steps will inflict grievous damage on campuses and universities, which have been such an important site of Jewish advancement in American society.
- **Invest in additional education about Jews** rather than in legal sanctions as a key tool to combat antisemitism.

Antisemitism and the Attack on Diversity, Equity, and Inclusion

ERIC WARD

Eric Ward is the executive vice president of Race Forward. He is a nationally recognized expert on the relationship between authoritarian movements, hate violence, and preserving inclusive democracy. Ward is the only American recipient of the Civil Courage Prize.

President Donald Trump has effectively utilized the unresolved conflict among Israelis and Palestinians to fracture one of the remaining barriers to authoritarianism here at home: the Civil Rights Movement. By exploiting these divisions, his administration is weakening the alliances that have historically defended democracy, equal justice and belonging in America.

Photo by Mark Scheuern / Alamy Stock Photo

This divide-and-conquer wedge strategy doesn't just create discord. It clears the way for a broader assault on civil rights. By stoking confusion and backlash against diversity, equity, and inclusion initiatives, President Trump's policies have prevented civil rights organizations from mounting a united front against his attack on the 14th Amendment. This portion of the US Constitution is the bedrock of citizenship and equal protection under the law. Undermining diversity, equity, and inclusion also disrupts the teaching of Black and Jewish histories side by side, weakening public understanding of how racism and antisemitism reinforce each other.

Since his election, President Trump has disparaged and systematically dismantled DEI initiatives through coordinated policy changes. The president blamed a plane crash, which killed 67 people, on DEI. Members of his administration use DEI to compare Jewish students' experiences to so-called reverse-racist attacks on white students. In March, President Trump signed an executive order removing DEI from the Foreign Service. He has removed Women's and LGBTQ+ resources from government offices, including information on transgender identity and women's health. And he certainly doesn't show any signs of stopping soon.

With this fragmentation in place, President Trump has also faced little resistance in reframing birthright citizenship as a racial slur and launching a policy attack on the Immigration and Nationality Act (INA) of 1965 — the very law that dismantled antisemitic immigration policies. These were the same policies that once barred Jews fleeing pogroms and the Holocaust from seeking refuge in the US. Now, those policies continue to be under attack by the Trump administration.

The irony is glaring: some Jewish leaders are now being drawn into dismantling a law that, had it existed in the 1930s, might have saved Anne Frank and her family. But this is not just a historical lesson, it is a warning.

WHY THIS MATTERS — FOR JEWS AND BEYOND

This strategy has direct, real-world consequences. State laws banning so-called diversity, equity and inclusion explicitly forbid teaching that racism is embedded in American society. At the same time, these laws mandate Holocaust education while prohibiting discussion of the systemic racism that shaped it. This contradiction forces educators into an impossible position: teaching about Nazi policies without acknowledging how they were influenced by Jim Crow laws in the US. Even more broadly: teaching about systemic hatred without recognizing the system itself.

Imagine a history teacher teaching about the Holocaust. In attempting to show how the leaders of Nazi Germany studied US Jim Crow laws, they would risk violating these new state restrictions. If they further connected this history to modern voter suppression efforts in those same states, they could find themselves punished with dismissal or civil litigation – much like pulling the Monopoly "Go to Jail" card.

There's nothing new about these divide-and-conquer tactics. One of the oldest antisemitic strategies is to position Jews as a buffer between the ruling class and marginalized communities — ensuring that public frustration is redirected toward Jewish communities rather than those in power.

This played out in Tsarist Russia, where pogroms were unleashed to deflect economic grievances away from the monarchy and onto Jewish villages. A similar pattern emerged during the McCarthy era in the US, when Jewish intellectuals and activists were disproportionately

targeted as alleged communist threats. By singling out Jewish figures in leftist movements, the government created a wedge between Jewish and non-Jewish organizers, in the process weakening multiracial resistance to state repression.

Today, President Trump and his enablers are deploying the same strategy: using Jewish fears, some deeply valid, to push Jewish leaders into a reactionary stance that isolates them from other communities still battling racism and bigotry, their most natural allies.

It is a cynical ploy, but hardly a surprising one. After all, the president has boosted the claim that some Jews view him as "The King of Israel" while simultaneously laying claim to Gaza as his next real estate venture. Fulfilling campaign promises, Trump has called for the arrest and deportation of students involved in pro-Palestinian protests and has threatened, sometimes successfully, to pull federal funding from universities accused of failing to protect Jewish students. But state surveillance and censorship do not equal safety. What would protect Jewish communities is the same thing that protects all communities: real, sustained, accountable partnerships across lines of race, faith, and identity. The president will never build those partnerships because they would threaten his power.

Antisemitism doesn't wait for democracy to collapse. It accelerates it. And no single community can hold the line alone. Protection, real and lasting protection, comes when no group is left to face hate in isolation.

Antisemitism doesn't wait for democracy to collapse. It accelerates it.

The Jewish community must recognize when its leadership is being weaponized against the community's own long-term interests. This means resisting reactionary impulses and reaffirming the historical alliances that have safeguarded Jewish communities, rather than undermining them. The same movements that fought for the Civil Rights Act, for fair housing, and for voting rights, are the movements that helped ensure equal Jewish inclusion in American public life. Weakening these movements does not strengthen Jewish security. It endangers it.

To be clear, antisemitism does exist on the left, particularly when legitimate critiques of Israel cross into demonization of Jews or the denial of Jewish peoplehood. It must be condemned. But President Trump seeks to exploit both real and exaggerated instances of left-wing antisemitism, framing them as defining traits of progressive and racial justice movements. His goal is not to combat antisemitism but to drive a wedge between Jewish and non-Jewish communities, weakening the collective power of the Civil Rights Movement.

If the medical system has flaws, we don't dismantle hospitals. We work to fix them. The same must be true for diversity, equity, and inclusion. The Jewish community can and should critique aspects of these initiatives, movements, and organizations when they fail to adequately

address antisemitism, but dismantling them outright only serves the interests of those seeking to erode civil rights for all.

History has shown what happens when Jews are left isolated, convinced that assimilation or hyper-isolation is their only defense. But the path forward is not retreat but rather solidarity. The survival of democracy, like the survival of Jewish communities, depends not on isolation, but on strong alliances rooted in multiracial inclusion and civil rights.

That means taking action.

RECOMMENDATIONS:

- **Oppose state laws that ban diversity, equity, and inclusion** and restrict how racism and antisemitism are taught by contacting state legislators
- **Supporting lawsuits challenging these bans** and backing organizations fighting for inclusive education.
- **Push back against attacks on birthright citizenship** by urging members of Congress to defend the 14th Amendment and reject any legislative or executive actions that strip citizenship rights.
- Most importantly, **do not allow these divide-and-conquer tactics to succeed**. Stay engaged, stay at the table, and refuse to let fear drive our communities apart.

Antisemitism and the Attack on Civil Society

JUDITH LICHTMAN

Judith Lichtman is an American attorney specializing in women's rights and an advocate for human and civil rights.

Civil society is core to democracy. That civil society organizations in the United States today face a specific, urgent threat means that democracy itself is under attack.

Multiple times when the last Congress was in session, members introduced legislation that would empower the treasury secretary to strip nonprofits of their tax-exempt status if they are deemed to be engaging in "terrorism," a term open to political interpretation and application.

In February, President Trump signed an executive order to "stop funding NGOs which undermine the national interest." But like "terrorism," "national interest" can be defined by political actors to serve their own interests: not to protect Americans, but to attack civil society organizations when they try to hold those in power to account.

Photo by Andrew Harnik via Getty Images

The threat, then, is that fears of safety and security are preyed upon to dismantle checks against power. But we can meet that threat.

We should be prepared to remain engaged as citizens who are part of the democratic process. Groups and outlets like Democracy Docket track election litigation to ensure we can continue to participate in democracy through voting. But democracy doesn't only happen during elections. The Trump administration is attacking what happens *between* elections, too.

But democracy doesn't only happen during elections. The Trump administration is attacking what happens *between* elections, too.

This brings us back to attacks on nonprofits under the guise of fighting terrorism. To be clear, support for terrorism and extremism is never justified. And there are measures in place to guarantee that those who promote it are sanctioned. Indeed, it is and must remain illegal for nonprofits to support terrorism. Yet the proposals like the ones mentioned above manipulate the term "terrorism," using it for political purposes to expand the powers of the executive and trample on the constitutional rights of those who disagree with the administration on issues related to foreign policy without providing for due process.

Organizations engaged in pro-Palestinian protest face the most immediate risk. But history suggests such powers, once granted, expand beyond their original targets. Foundations that support pro-Palestinian organizations could be next. We've already seen this pattern with other groups. A 2020 police guide suggested that Black Lives Matter protesters should be treated like terrorists. The same logic could extend to NGOs supporting racial justice or groups—including Jewish ones—that support refugees and asylum seekers.

This threat to NGOs is particularly concerning given the broader political context. On one hand, the administration seeks expanded powers to target NGOs, claiming this will help fight antisemitism. Yet, as reporting by ProPublica shows, this same administration is also creating a more permissive environment for white nationalists, for whom antisemitism is a key ideological component.

Antisemitism and all forms of racism and discrimination must be confronted — by all of us, together, from wherever on the political spectrum these hatreds arise. Empowering an administration that encourages white nationalism and cracks down on civil society only harms that fight and, indeed, creates new dangers. For when such an administration gains power to target NGOs, it can target any NGO whose agenda is at odds with its policies. This not only threatens to drive a wedge between Jewish communities and other allies in civil society. It is a danger to a democratic, pluralistic, liberal, nation and is a threat to the safety of everyone, including Jews.

RECOMMENDATIONS:

- Our elected representatives must speak out against hate and oppose legislation that would empower this administration to go after nonprofits. Our community leaders must speak up and out against such efforts as well.
- Congress should pass legislation on evaluating and reporting hate crimes and provide oversight on the implementation of hate crime data collection and enforcement.
- Congress should also work to address white supremacy in law enforcement and authorize funding for interagency coordination against hate crimes. These efforts combat hate without attacking civil society.

Antisemitism and US Foreign Policy

DOV WAXMAN AND JEREMY BEN-AMI

Dov Waxman is the Rosalinde and Arthur Gilbert Foundation Chair in Israel Studies at the University of California, Los Angeles. Jeremy Ben-Ami is president of J Street.

Photo by Evan Vucci / The Associated Press

The Trump administration continues to falsely equate pro-Palestine activism in the United States with antisemitism while claiming that its stalwart support for Israel — i.e., its uncritical backing of Prime Minister Benjamin Netanyahu and his unpopular far-right government — is equivalent to supporting Jews. The administration even touts its purportedly "pro-Israel" policies as proof of its concern for Jews.

But giving Netanyahu and his far-right allies carte blanche to do what they like in the Gaza Strip and the West Bank does not protect Jews, it makes them less safe.

Implying, as Trump does, that Israel is an extension of all Jewish Americans fuels the misdirection of anger over Israeli government actions toward Jewish Americans.

And allying the United States with far-right movements around the world boosts antisemitism in this country and around the world.

History and research show that whenever Israel engages in major military operations causing significant Palestinian casualties, antisemitic incidents and hate crimes against Jews spike worldwide, as Jews are unfairly blamed for Israel's actions. Antisemitic attitudes also harden at such moments.

Today, after two years of devastating war in Gaza — with over 67,000 Palestinians reported killed, vast neighborhoods destroyed, and millions suffering in a humanitarian catastrophe — anger toward Israel is at an unprecedented level. By allowing Netanyahu to break the ceasefire with Hamas in March 2025 and then block vital humanitarian aid from entering Gaza, the Trump administration effectively helped further fuel the surge in antisemitism in the US and around the world. Now that President Trump has finally forced Netanyahu to accept another ceasefire agreement, it is incumbent on the Trump administration to ensure that the President's 20-point

plan is fully implemented so that the current ceasefire not only permanently ends the war in Gaza but also paves the way to Israeli-Palestinian peace. This will help deliver security for Israel and greater safety for Jews around the world.

This also requires the Trump administration to stop giving a green light to the Netanyahu government's dangerous and destructive actions in the West Bank. Such a laissez-faire approach doesn't protect Jews — it endangers them. When the US enables Israeli actions that inflame tensions with Palestinians and worsen the suffering of Palestinians living under Israeli occupation, it only deepens global outrage toward Israel, which too often spills over into antisemitic sentiment and attacks. By aligning the United States with the most extreme policies of the Israeli right, the Trump administration not only undermines prospects for peace and Israel's long-term security, but also damages the global fight against antisemitism — because hostility toward Jews worldwide inevitably grows.

When the US enables Israeli actions that inflame tensions with Palestinians and worsen the suffering of Palestinians living under Israeli occupation, it only deepens global outrage toward Israel, which too often spills over into antisemitic sentiment and attacks.

The danger doesn't stop in the Middle East. Trump officials have openly cultivated ties with far-right, antisemitic parties abroad. Most notably and shockingly, Vice President JD Vance told an audience of European officials that they should both stop censoring far-right speech and start working with far-right political parties; he then met with the leader of the far-right Alternative for Germany party (AfD), which, per a German court ruling last year, is formally suspected of extremism. (Vance declined a meeting with the German chancellor). The AfD went on to win roughly 21% of the vote in Germany's national election election, nearly doubling its share of the electorate since the last election and making it now the second-largest party in the German parliament. The growing political power of AfD members— some of whom met with neo-Nazis in November 2023 to discuss the mass deportation of migrants, asylum seekers and German citizens of foreign origin — represents a clear danger to Jews in Germany. Legitimizing such a party, as Vance has done, directly undermines Jewish safety in Germany.

The Trump administration's growing alignment with authoritarian regimes and its public disputes and trade wars with liberal democracies such as Canada and the European Union also threaten to weaken and destabilize precisely the kinds of societies that have proven to be the most hospitable and secure for Jews and other minorities.

The two societies where Jews have had the most safety, freedom and prosperity in centuries are the United States and Israel, countries which till now have had robust if imperfect democracies, strong education and research institutions and respect for the rule of law. By contrast,

authoritarian regimes have a long record of targeting, vilifying and persecuting Jews. This history should not be ignored and efforts to undermine democracy, protections for minorities and the independence of the judiciary should be regarded as attacks on fundamental protections on which the Jewish people depend.

RECOMMENDATIONS:

- Press the administration to secure the release of all hostages, whether living or dead, surge aid into Gaza, prevent a resumption of the war, and fully realize the US-backed 20-point plan. Push for the disarmament of Hamas and oppose any long-term Israeli military occupation in Gaza.
- US policymakers need to make clear that there is growing support across party lines for an end to the "blank check" approach to US aid to Israel and to the diplomatic immunity the US has provided to Israel in international fora. Among the steps that would be helpful are:
  - Clear delineation of restrictions on American security assistance to Israel so that it is only used for legitimately defensive purposes and in accordance with US and international law.
  - Enforcement of existing laws with meaningful consequences for violations in order to stop enabling Israeli actions that create the atmosphere in which opposition to Israeli policies can morph into antisemitism.
  - Establish clear US penalties for the extremists on the Israeli and Palestinian sides who engage in terror and other activities that put American citizens and interests at risk.
- Encourage policymakers to help de-escalate and ultimately resolve the Israeli-Palestinian conflict through a regional agreement that includes the creation of an independent Palestinian state in the West Bank and Gaza. New models for statehood, such as a confederation of two states, should be seriously considered.
- Urge Jewish leaders and organizations to actively oppose any efforts by US officials to legitimize far-right parties and movements abroad and to commit to defending liberal democracy worldwide, including in the United States itself.

A Language for and From Here:
Introducing the Shofar Report, Part II

EMILY TAMKIN

Emily Tamkin is a journalist and author. She is a fellow with the Nexus Project Task Force.

How did we get here?

By "here," I am referring to a place where American democracy is being dismantled and instrumentalized antisemitism is one of the tools taking it apart. Where the question of what it means to be an American Jew is at risk of morphing from a communal question to a matter of law, decided for political purposes, and where the charge of "antisemitism" is regularly used to try to silence criticism of Israel and US foreign policy.

What follows is a series of essays that tries to provide language with which to think and speak about the answer to that question: to describe the journey we followed to get here.

First, Lila Corwin Berman, professor of American Jewish history at New York University and a member of the Nexus Task Force, writes about antisemitism and US history — showing how the story of American exceptionalism toward Jews obscures antisemitism's links to other hatreds and the way American Jews' fates are bound with those of other minorities.

Next, Itamar Mann and Lihi Yona, associate professors of law at the University of Haifa, analyze antisemitism's place in the US legal system, arguing that efforts to quiet criticism of Israel by forcing Jewish identity into the framework of American law risk turning the question of "who counts as a Jew" over to the courts, excluding actual American Jews in the process.

Joshua Shanes, professor of Jewish history at University of California at Davis and a member of the Nexus Task Force, then takes us through a history of antisemitic tropes and their uses — and how some cynically claim tropes have been deployed in order to detract from criticism.

Finally, Irwin Kula, a seventh-generation rabbi and president emeritus of the National Jewish Center for Learning and Leadership (CLAL), explores the architectures of safety and power older generations of American Jews have clung to — and why younger Jews are rejecting them.

Taken together, these essays paint a picture not only of American Jews' past, but of our present. They should also provide insight into what could be our possible futures: the "there" toward which we might go. It is our hope that in better understanding how we got here, we might also find a language to describe how to move somewhere better.

Antisemitism in the "Golden Land"?

LILA CORWIN BERMAN

Lila Corwin Berman is the Paul & Sylvia Steinberg Professor of American Jewish History and the director of the Goldstein-Goren Center for American Jewish History at New York University

For a very long time, historians of American Jews and many American Jews insisted that the only kind of antisemitism that existed in the United States was private and social in nature: a snub from an elite private school; the exclusion from a country club; a quiet comment or nasty look. Indeed, the history of antisemitism in America conformed to the overarching plot of a Golden Land story for Jews, where even the bad could not obscure the sparkling good of American progress and the perfectibility of the Jewish experience within it.

Photo by Freepik/EyeEm

The Golden Land story has relied on three ideological preconceptions as filters through which to view history. First, it insisted that antisemitism in the United States was mild or inconsequential when compared to the real antisemitism in Europe. Second, it characterized antisemitism as wholly distinct and sometimes, as one historian has written, "crowded out," by the predominant

hatred of anti-Black racism in the United States.[1] And, third, it pronounced antisemitism as marginal from the real story of America.

On their face, these claims may seem defensible. Antisemitism in the United States has not culminated in genocide as it did in midcentury Europe. Anti-Black racism, anchored in the forcible transfer and enslavement of Africans, is indisputably the center of the history of American oppression. And, finally, for many Jews, the United States has offered remarkable opportunities for advancement and success.

Yet faith in the Golden Land story has also blinded American Jews and their historians to a deeper, more entangled, and more accurate story of antisemitism in the United States.

Yet faith in the Golden Land story has also blinded American Jews and their historians to a deeper, more entangled, and more accurate story of antisemitism in the United States. Only by setting aside the Golden Land story can we more clearly see antisemitism as implicated within the very political, legal, and civic structure of the United States. One should not mistake this as an oppositional or starkly revisionist call, to replace a Golden Land story with a Dark Ages one. Instead, when we release ourselves from the presumptions of the Golden Land story, we can appreciate the porousness between Old and New World histories, the connections among different forms of group hatred, and the backsliding paths of American and human progress.

Far from a mere intellectual exercise, a responsible history of antisemitism in the United States is necessary in our present moment. Over the last decade, community leaders and pundits have proclaimed a crisis in antisemitism. While one cannot—and should not—dispute the increased incidents of violence directed against Jews, only a benighted historical imagination supports apocalyptic-like claims made by journalists and others that "The Golden Age of American Jews Is Ending."[2] In fact, careful examination of the past reveals that antisemitism, like other ideologies of exclusion, illiberalism, and inequality, is stitched into American life. Even more significantly, an unblinkered historical assessment proves that the fight against antisemitism is never just that, but rather requires confronting systems of oppression that thrive in anti-democratic, nativist, xenophobic, and white supremacist visions of the United States.

FOUNDATIONAL STORIES

The typical points of origin for the Golden Land story are the arrival of Jews in New Amsterdam in 1654 and the correspondence between President George Washington and early republic Jews in 1790. Each, ironically, exposes the shortcomings of the story itself.

Let's start in 1654, when a band of Jews, expelled from Spanish-controlled Brazil, arrived in the colony of New Holland (later New York) seeking the right to settle. Peter Stuyvesant, the

governor of the Dutch colony, expressed fury at "such hateful enemies and blasphemers of the name of Christ" and wished to banish them. But these Jews successfully petitioned the officers of the Dutch West India Company, the colony's holding company, to gain entrance. In correspondence with Stuyvesant, the company leaders carefully noted that the Jewish entrants had connections to Jewish shareholders who controlled a "large amount of capital" invested in the colonial venture, and, thus, the cost of expelling them was simply too steep. Still, with a nod to Stuyvesant's indignation and fiscal concerns, the Dutch West India Company stipulated that Jews should expect no support or welfare from the colonial power.[3]

How did such an episode — of anti-Jewish vitriol, of Jewish finance as the collateral for begrudging acceptance, and of Jewish segregation from social institutions — wind its way into a Golden Land story? The year 1654 came to serve as evidence of the longevity of Jewish life in the country, never mind the fleeting nature of the New Amsterdam Jewish settlement and the contested terms of Jews' inclusion in it. In 1954, American Jewish leaders orchestrated a grand and public celebration of the tercentennial of Jewish life on American soil. That year, the famed Harvard immigration historian Oscar Handlin, a Jewish man whose parents had immigrated from the Russian empire, wrote one of the first truly synthetic histories of American Jews. Called *Adventures in Freedom*, the book explained that from the roots of the late-seventeenth century, "sprang the Jewish community that would, three centuries later, be the largest and most influential in the world." One-by-one, his book hit the core themes of the Golden Land narrative: that the true America was one of opportunity and progress, that Jews entered it as just one "among the varieties of strangers," and that American institutions were "altogether different from those of Europe."[4]

How did such an episode — of anti-Jewish vitriol, of Jewish finance as the collateral for begrudging acceptance, and of Jewish segregation from social institutions — wind its way into a Golden Land story?

Reinterpreting the agreement that restricted Jews from receiving any public assistance as a measure of Jewish pluck and self-reliance, historians and leaders of American Jewish communities often referred to the "Stuyvesant Promise" as a point of pride. Jews merited inclusion because they worked hard and did not drain social resources. But another way to understand the entire episode is that it reinforced exclusionary instruments so fundamental to European imperial expansion: Jews were only given entrance because they were useful to the financial backing of these endeavors — had they not been, they surely would have been expelled. On top of this, they had to pledge not to sap any resources from the primary goal of transforming the land into Dutch colonial property.

A second episode that would become iconic in the Golden Land story evinces similar strain upon examination. In 1790, the newly elected Washington set out on a victory tour, visiting civic and religious institutions across the country. Over the course of his travels, he stopped in Newport,

Rhode Island, a thriving port city and home to an affluent Jewish community and the Touro Synagogue. "For happily the Government of the United States, which gives to bigotry no sanction, to persecution no assistance requires only that they who live under its protection should demean themselves as good citizens, in giving it on all occasions their effectual support," he wrote to the congregation after his visit.[5]

The words — or more specifically their attribution to Washington — tell only a slice of a messy story. When Washington visited the city, he was handed a letter of congratulations written by the synagogue warden, a man named Moses Seixas. It was Seixas, not Washington, who penned the phrase, "to bigotry no sanction, to persecution no assistance." Indeed, when read in their original context the words serve as a petition, an anxious plea, from Jews to the leader of the new country for tolerance and rights.

A few months before Washington's tour, the young US Congress had passed the 1790 Naturalization Act granting citizenship to all "free white person[s]." Jews' inclusion within these categories of legal personhood was hardly self-evident. In the first place, roughly half of all Jews, the women among them, did not pass the threshold. Just as critically, the federal edict had little bearing on states and localities that primarily controlled the practices of citizenship. Christian oaths for political service, laws limiting Jews' economic rights, established churches, and more, all compromised Jews' political rights well into the nineteenth century in many states. The designs of American citizenship—predicated on fundamental exclusions, marked by a patchwork of practices that privileged Christians, and susceptible to legal reinterpretations — proved that Jews could not take for granted the "invaluable rights of free Citizens."[6]

Only a decontextualized view of 1654 or 1790 could possibly arrive at these moments as origins for a Golden Land story. While that perspective may have had some use — for example, helping late-nineteenth or mid-twentieth-century American Jews show their patriotism and legitimate their belonging — it also eclipsed the entanglement of Jews' status with that of other American colonial subjects, excluded persons, and uncertain citizens. The Golden Land story sacrificed complexity in the name of certainty, all the while betraying an undercurrent of Jewish anxiety about the terms of their belonging.

FROM PUBLIC DISCRIMINATION TO PRIVATE PREJUDICE

By describing antisemitism as removed from the structures of American politics and law — for example, by insisting that political leaders or citizenship laws simply did not see Jews, despite examples to the contrary — the Golden Land story did not deny antisemitism, but instead converted it from a public matter to a private one. Britt Tevis's groundbreaking research on this transformation exposes an intentional project to privatize antisemitism that began in the late nineteenth century and flourished in mid-twentieth century Golden Land tellings of American Jewish history. As she explains, the effort to strip antisemitism of its legal and political meaning in the United States minimized its significance, while also cleaving it from other discriminatory practices and ideologies.[7]

A case from 1877 involving the Bavarian-born banker Joseph Seligman illustrates how the Golden Land story converted antisemitism from a matter of public law to a private force. That year, Seligman and his family were refused accommodation at the Grand Union Hotel in Saratoga Springs, New York, where they had often vacationed. When pushed for an explanation, the manager told him that the hotel no longer welcomed Jewish guests. As the press reported, the hotel had likely violated New York state law and the federal Civil Rights Act of 1875. According to both jurisprudences, places of public accommodation, including hotels, were barred from excluding people based on race, color, or previous servitude.

With civil rights law on their side, Seligman's attorneys prepared a lawsuit, and the hotel mustered a defense. Unable to dispute that the hotel was a place of public accommodation, the defendant followed a Reconstruction-era playbook of disputing intent to discriminate. The argument would go that Seligman had been refused service because he was "undesirable" and not because of his membership in a protected category. The language of undesirability, familiar from segregationists' efforts to resist civil rights law, transformed an act of illegal discrimination into a permissible private preference.

As it happens, Seligman backed away from the lawsuit, worried, it seems, that the defense would be difficult to overcome and that a legal action would draw more attention to an unfortunate episode than simply swallowing it. Had the case proceeded, it might have offered some clarity about whether Congress—and judicial interpreters of the day—believed Jews fit within the parameters of the protected classes of "race or color." It also would have undercut the eventual historical packaging of Seligman's story, especially in the hands of the mid-twentieth century historian John Higham, as a consummate case of private or social antisemitism, removed from American law.[8]

By recovering experiences like Seligman's as part of public contests about individual rights and group protections, we see once again the shortcomings of the Golden Land story that isolated antisemitism from its broader context. Already, the Saratoga hotel's Jim-Crow era legal defense of its exclusion of Jews reveals the connections between anti-Black discrimination and antisemitism. Less on the surface, but surely just as significant, Seligman's treatment also reflected the rising fever of American isolationism, budding eugenicist thought and scientific racism, and policies ideas that crisscrossed the Atlantic about how to root out so-called undesirables.[9]

RUPTURE & REPAIR OF THE GOLDEN LAND STORY

In the 1930s and 1940s, as fascism rose in the United States and beyond, there appeared to be a moment of reflection, when some Jewish leaders and organizations seemed ready to question the Golden Land narrative. Open to solidarity with communist-aligned groups, including Jewish and Black ones, a materialist critique of American liberalism emerged that castigated its over-reliance on individual property rights at the expense of true equality. Without true economic reform, these voices urged, liberal democracy could never defeat fascism. A 1945

publication issued from the American Jewish Congress's recently formed Commission on Law and Social Action, averred "Racial and religious discrimination are only two fibers of the complex fabric of human injustice…and these fibers themselves are sometimes intimately interwoven with discrimination based on wealth or with resentment due to poverty."[10]

By the 1950s, however, these voices fell out of step with the vital center of American and American-Jewish institutional life and with intensifying anti-communism that irreparably tarred organizations and individuals for advancing radicalism in the United States. Disciplined and bullied by anticommunism, Jewish organizations helped solidify the Golden Land story by maintaining that prejudice was an individual problem, a private matter, that could be cured through education, so that America could live up to its promise. Midcentury historians from Oscar Handlin to John Higham amplified this narrative, and for many Jews who experienced the psychological comfort and material rewards of American life, the Golden Land idea simply felt true.[11]

Rising claims about the unimpeachable whiteness of Jews further recommended the Golden Land story. Despite evidence to the contrary, many Jewish groups such as the Anti-Defamation League (ADL) pushed the circular idea that because whiteness kept American Jews safe, antisemitism in the United States must come from the nonwhite world. In the guise of the "new antisemitism," a term that came into use in the 1960s**,** Jewish communal organizations, such as the ADL, and some historians simultaneously viewed antisemitism as emanating from outside of American power structures and yet as necessary to defeat in order to protect Jews and maintain social and national stability.

In an essay from 1967, the Black intellectual and novelist James Baldwin seemed to echo exactly what many Jewish leaders believed at the time: "Negroes are Anti-Semitic Because They're Anti-White." Yet unlike the Jewish representatives, Baldwin explained that the inverse of Jews' whiteness was not Black antisemitism. Rather, Jews' whiteness, like Black people's antisemitism, was symptomatic of white America's twinned racism and antisemitism. As a price for tolerance, he explained, Jews had converted to whiteness, almost as a quasi-religious act. To Baldwin, this represented the rule of "the old, rugged Roman cross" in the United States. Jews could not be accepted on their own terms, but rather were only acceptable insofar as they upheld the primacy of white Christendom.[12]

Baldwin's message had no place in the Golden Land story, which continued to insist on the marginality of American antisemitism, not only because it did not occupy the space of power but also because it quite literally came from the most marginal places. In 1982, feminist Letty Cottin Pogrebin published what was hailed as a brave article in *Ms* magazine titled, "Anti-Semitism in the Women's Movement." She catalogued the discrimination she faced on two counts: her whiteness and her Zionism. She wrote, "I began to wonder why the Movement's healing embrace can encompass the black woman, the Chicana, the white ethnic woman, the disabled woman, and every other female whose struggle is complicated by an extra element of 'outness,' but the Jewish woman is not honored in her specificity?"[13] Setting aside the fact that all of those groups (and also lesbian women, who did not make her list) would have told a different story, her point was that Jews had been so thoroughly engulfed as white that antisemitic

statements — which she catalogued as both attacking Jews for being white (like Baldwin) and attacking Jews for being Zionists — now served as acceptable criticism of hegemonic power.

One reason the "new antisemitism" narrative stuck was because it was hardly so new. Rather, it was an extension of the Golden Land narrative. It continued to hammer the specialness of America in its acceptance of Jews. It continued to sharply divide between anti-Black racism and antisemitism. And it continued to depict antisemitism as exogenous to American power, especially in its focus on anti-Zionism.

A NEW STORY?

If the end of the Golden Land story is upon us — as the journalist Franklin Foer and many others are wont to say — then this is an opportunity to reflect on what can be learned by escaping its grasp.

Only by removing the shackles of the Golden Land story can we understand the tangled plotlines of an American story of antisemitism and its warning of the vulnerability of the American experiment. Anti-democratic forces are inherent in American history and have long tied together the fates of many different Americans. Yet movements of hatred, exclusion, and discrimination thrive on undermining solidarity, making groups believe that they are alone in their struggles and their victories. Even as many Jews subscribed to the Golden Land story as an affirmation of their belonging to America, they also experienced it as a source of division from countless other Americans who have experienced the country's deep imperfections.

Antisemitism is part of the story of American Jews and part of the story of the United States.

The Golden Land story made it possible to neglect these facts. It encouraged American Jews to approach antisemitism superficially, as the hackneyed exception that proved the rule of American goodness. Putting to rest the Golden Land story does not require embracing moral panics or scare tactics, which use an inverse yet similar logic to separate Jews from the fights for American justice and equality for all. For too long, the glittering glare of the Golden Land blinded Jews from seeing that only through connection and shared struggle can we live together in this tarnished world.

[1] Jonathan Sarna, "The Future of the Pittsburgh Synagogue Massacre," *Tablet*, Nov 5, 2018, https://www.tabletmag.com/jewish-news-and-politics/274291/future-pittsburgh-synagogue-massacre.

[2] See Frankin Foer, "The Golden Age of American Jews Is Ending," *The Atlantic*, April 2024, https://www.theatlantic.com/magazine/archive/2024/04/us-anti-semitism-jewish-american-safety/677469/. Predictions of the demise of Jewish life in the US are nothing new. For an insightful discussion on American-Jewish end-of-times prognosticating, see Naomi Seidman, "The End of the Story: And Other Adventures in American Jewish Apocalypse," *Reshit: The Academic Journal of the Shalom Hartman Institute*, March 15, 2022, https://www.hartman.org.il/the-end-of-the-story/.

[3] Paul Mendes-Flohr and Jehuda Reinharz, *Jews in the Modern World: A Documentary History* (New York: Oxford University Press, 1995), 452-453. For an excellent analysis of this historical episode, see Eli Faber, "America's Earliest Jewish Settlers, 1654-1820," in Marc Lee Raphael, ed., *The Columbia History of Jews and Judaism in America* (New York: Columbia University Press, 2008).

[4] Oscar Handlin, *Adventures in Freedom: Three Hundred Years of Jewish Life in America* (New York: McGraw-Hill Book Company, Inc., 1954), 6-8, 11-14, 20-21.

[5] George Washington to the Hebrew Congregation in Newport, Rhode Island, August 18, 1790, National Archives, https://founders.archives.gov/documents/Washington/05-06-02-0135.

[6] For an excellent discussion of Washington's letter in the context of American citizenship, see John Dixon "Rethinking American Jewish Emancipation: New Views on George Washington's Newport Letter," *American Jewish History* 107, no. 4 (Oct 2023), 731-756.

[7] Britt Tevis, " 'Jews Not Admitted'": Anti-Semitism, Civil Rights, and Public Accommodation Laws," *Journal of American History* 107, no. 4 (March 2021): 847-870, https://doi.org/10.1093/jahist/jaaa461.

[8] John Higham, *Strangers in the Land: Patterns of American Nativism, 1860-1925* (New Brunswick, NJ: Rutgers University, 1955).

[9] James Whitman, *Hitler's American Model: The United States and the Making of Nazi Race Law* (Princeton, NJ: Princeton University Press, 2017).

[10] From Alexander Pekelis, "Full Equality in a Free Society," (1945), reprinted in Pekelis, *Law and Social Action* (Ithaca, NY: Cornell University Press, 1950).

[11] Rachel Gordan, "The Sin of American Jewish Exceptionalism," *AJS Review* 45, no. 2 (Nov 2021): 282-301, https://doi.org/10.1017/S0364009421000088.

[12] James Baldwin, "Negroes Are Anti-Semitic Because They're Anti-White," *New York Times*, April 9, 1967, https://www.nytimes.com/1967/04/09/archives/negroes-are-antisemitic-because-theyre-antiwhite-why-negroes-are.html.

[13] Letty Cottin Pogrebin, "Anti-Semitism in the Women's Movement," *Ms. Magazine*, June 1982, https://jwa.org/media/anti-semitism-in-womens-movement-by-letty-cottin-pogrebin.

Governing Jews: Antisemitism, Pluralism, and the Role of Law in the Trump Era

ITAMAR MANN AND LIHI YONA

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Since October 7, Israel's atrocities in Gaza have fractured Jewish identity, raising urgent questions about its meaning today, as well as its connection to Israel and Israeli actions. US law has sought to provide a definitive answer to these questions, labeling harsh criticism of Israel and of Zionism as antisemitic.

What began as an effort to protect Jewish communities from bigotry has, through a series of legal efforts, become a tool for governing Jewish identity itself. In the name of combating antisemitism, we are observing a pattern not only of gatekeeping Jewish identity, but the active casting out of those deemed "illegitimate" Jews.

Photo by Brendan Smialowski/AFP via Getty Images

As part of this effort, US policymakers appear to have embraced a new consensus: combating antisemitism requires expanding its definition to encompass certain forms of criticism of Israel, as well as hostility towards, or bias against, Israelis. But many of the measures advanced under this definition of antisemitism have put not only Palestinians, but Jews (and some Israelis), at greater risk.

The turn to law gained momentum in 2016 with the adoption of the International Holocaust Remembrance Alliance (IHRA) working definition of antisemitism. At the time, the definition purportedly sought to reflect a neutral commitment to combat the hatred of Jews. While there have long been occasional efforts to use the definition to suppress speech, today its institutional entrenchment, through executive orders, legislation, and university policies, has recast the boundaries of Jewish identity in state-sanctioned terms.

Protecting Jewish identity requires first confronting the contested nature of what counts as anti-Jewish hate. It demands careful attention to the distinctions between Jewishness, Israeli identity, and the State of Israel. Above all, it requires a commitment to preserving the plurality and internal dissent that have long characterized Jewish life.

A CHANGING LEGAL LANDSCAPE

While the IHRA definition is framed and was originally intended as a non-binding educational tool, its examples, which include labeling Israel a "racist endeavor" or applying "double standards… by requiring of it a behavior not expected or demanded of any other democratic nation," to its policies, have been codified into legislation, executive orders, and administrative guidance.

In early 2025, a new executive order directed federal agencies to "prosecute, remove, or otherwise hold to account" individuals engaged in what it deems antisemitic conduct, using the IHRA definition as its reference point (without explicitly mentioning the definition but by referring to a 2019 executive order that does). Columbia University, one of its first targets, saw $400 million in research funding withdrawn over its alleged tolerance of antisemitism, a charge largely rooted in pro-Palestinian and anti-Israeli activism on campus. The university recently announced it would pay $200 million to the federal government to settle claims related to antisemitism, as well as monitor the compliance of students and faculty. In doing so, it conceded to the government's terms of debate. Similar investigations and financial threats have followed at other universities, reshaping academic policy under the banner of Jewish safety.

This shift is not confined to higher education. In workplaces, government agencies, and Jewish communal institutions, individuals who criticize Israeli policy, including both Jews and some Israelis, have faced harassment, termination, or reputational harm. Some legacy Jewish groups have made the passage of the proposed Antisemitism Awareness Act a key goal. This would incorporate the IHRA framework into federal law.

When the law enforces a singular vision of Jewishness, it intervenes in the essence of Jewish identity, cutting against its myriad social, cultural, and political expressions.

When the law enforces a singular vision of Jewishness, it intervenes in the essence of Jewish identity, cutting against its myriad social, cultural, and political expressions. At the same time, it positions Jews as the symbolic beneficiaries of authoritarian tools: campus repression, speech policing, and surveillance. In this sense, Jews become not only the target of weaponized antisemitism claims, but also their collateral damage.

These developments raise an urgent question: what role should courts play when the very term antisemitism is legally expanded and obscured, often to realize political goals well beyond the protection of Jews?

THE COMPLEXITY OF JEWISH IDENTITY

Unlike many other protected identities in antidiscrimination law, Jewishness has always defied simple categorization along the liberal division between faith and politics. It is religious, but also encompasses a set of dictates prescribing quasi-constitutional values for life within a community.

In "the diaspora"—a term that in the Jewish context is very different from other national diasporas—Judaism has been marked by both belief and peoplehood. In Israel, a country that many but not all Jews embrace as a political expression of Judaism, it is linked to citizenship, nationality, and often state power. Neither side of the church and state divide fully captures its meaning. And no single authority, legal or communal, can fully define its contours.

The unique nature of Jewish identity can help explain why US law has bound together Jewish identity to Israel and Israelis: It recognized Israel as the political manifestation of Jewish identity, labeling attacks on Israel as attacks on Jews everywhere. If Jewish identity is an amalgamation of faith and politics, and if Israel is the quintessential—perhaps even *only*—recognizable form of this amalgamation, then attacking Israel is attacking Jews.

But the political nature of Jewish identity has never been singular. Throughout history, diverse Jewish communities have incorporated different, and often conflicting, political ideas into their Jewish identities. Some of those ideas draw on anti-nationalist or diasporic traditions; some understood their Jewish identity as compelling them to stand in solidarity with Palestinians and against human rights violations. By codifying a single, state-aligned vision of Jewishness, the definition of antisemitism renders alternative expressions of Jewish identity illegitimate, and, in some cases, unlawful.

HOW LEGAL ACTORS CAN DEFEND JEWISH PLURALITY

The first task for courts is to resist the abuse of the definition of antisemitism. Two distinctions are especially critical here.

First, in cases involving criticism of Israel, courts must stand firm in defending freedom of expression, including speech that is harshly critical of Israeli policy or of Zionism itself. That kind of dissent is protected under the First Amendment and essential to democratic discourse.

Two recent decisions, one from a district court in Pennsylvania and one from a district court in Texas, offer an example of the type of distinction that the legal discourse desperately needs.

Dismissing a lawsuit filed against the University of Pennsylvania for alleged antisemitism, the district court judge in Yakobi v. Penn stated: "Indeed, I could find no allegations that Penn or its administration has itself taken any actions or positions which, even when read in the most favorable light, could be interpreted as antisemitic with the intention of causing harm to the Plaintiffs. *At worst, Plaintiffs accuse Penn of tolerating and permitting the expression of viewpoints which differ from their own*."

In Texas, Students for Justice in Palestine (SJP) directly challenged the constitutionality of the IHRA definition, which was incorporated into the University of Texas policies following an Executive Order issued by Governor Abott. Considering SJP's request for a preliminary injunction, the judge in SJP v. Abbott acknowledged that "the Court finds the incorporation of [the IHRA] specific definition of antisemitism is viewpoint discrimination," stating that plaintiffs are "likely to succeed on their claim" that this definition violates the First Amendment.

In cases where courts will face claims of anti-Israeli bias— that is, treating individuals unfairly because of their Israeli nationality or perceived affiliation with Israel—courts should recognize the harm, but address it through the appropriate legal channels. In recent years, Israelis in the US have faced exclusion and discrimination, not only due to their political views, but also because of their very nationality. But while such unjust treatment deserves legal redress, it should not be addressed under the already overstretched rubric of antisemitism. Anti-Israeli bias is a distinct phenomenon, not fundamentally different from discrimination against the citizens of any other country. As such, it is best treated within the conceptual framework of anti-discrimination law.

To protect Jews in ways that honor the complexity of Jewish life, we must undertake a clear-eyed effort to define not only what antisemitism is, but just as importantly, what it is not.

To protect Jews in ways that honor the complexity of Jewish life, we must undertake a clear-eyed effort to define not only what antisemitism is, but just as importantly, what it is not. This requires legal frameworks capable of distinguishing between qualitatively different types of harm, as well as between harm and protected expression.

Courts must also ensure that the IHRA definition of antisemitism, pushed by the Trump administration, is not used to punish Jews for expressing dissenting or nonconforming views. This requires doctrinal tools that do not simply protect Jews as a vulnerable minority, but also defend their ability to define themselves, even in disagreement with one another. The US Constitution, as well as other federal statutory protections, offer meaningful tools for this task.

One crucial starting point is religious liberty. Over the last decade, the US Supreme Court has aggressively expanded the scope of religious protections under the Free Exercise Clause. This

jurisprudence has often served conservative Christian litigants. But its underlying doctrinal logic can be applied more broadly. When dissenting Jews are punished for voicing positions rooted in their understanding of Jewish law, ethics, or tradition, courts can and should treat that as a burden on religious exercise. Jews who view solidarity with Palestinians as a religious obligation, grounded in *tikkun olam*, or the pursuit of justice, should be entitled to constitutional protection.

Notably, courts have begun to recognize Jewish religious commitments as grounds for legal protection in other contexts, including challenges to conservative agendas such as abortion bans. The same logic could apply in cases where antisemitism law penalizes religiously grounded dissent. Even secular Jews, whose dissent is grounded in their membership in a trans-historical Jewish community, may enjoy such protection.

A related tool is the Establishment Clause, which prohibits the state from intervening in theological disputes or favoring one interpretation of a faith over another. When the state adopts legal definitions that equate criticism of Israel with antisemitism, as it does through the IHRA framework, it effectively enshrines one vision of Judaism over others. Courts have long refused to adjudicate which rabbinic teachings count as "authentic" Judaism. They should extend the same principle to disputes over Zionism and Jewish political identity. A legal regime that rewards Jews for expressing one set of beliefs, and penalizes them for expressing another, amounts to state-sponsored religious orthodoxy.

Beyond First Amendment protections, antidiscrimination law also offers promising and underutilized avenues. Under Title VII and Title VI, courts have recognized two doctrines that could protect US Jews from becoming targets of the new antisemitism discourse: the interracial solidarity doctrine and the stereotype doctrine.

The interracial solidarity doctrine, originating from race discrimination cases, recognizes that individuals may face discrimination for associating with or advocating on behalf of a protected group. Applied here, it suggests that when Jewish students or employees are targeted for expressing solidarity with Palestinians, they are not merely facing political backlash, but they may be experiencing unlawful discrimination based on their interracial solidarity. Courts have recognized such dynamics as unlawful.

Likewise, the stereotype doctrine, developed in the context of sex discrimination in *Price Waterhouse v. Hopkins*, forbids punishing individuals for failing to conform to identity-based stereotypes regarding how they should behave or perform their identity. This logic applies to Jews who are critical of Israel, and thus often reprimanded as "self-hating" or antisemitic. Just as Ann Hopkins was denied partnership for not behaving the way women were "supposed to," dissenting Jews may be sanctioned for deviating from how Jews are expected to act. When employers or institutions punish Jews for failing to express the "right" kind of Jewish identity—by not supporting Israel, for example—they are enforcing identity performance through coercion. That, too, is a form of discrimination under US law.

In seeking to define what counts as antisemitism, the law has also begun to define what counts as Judaism. The preferred subject of protection is increasingly a Jew who affirms the legitimacy of the Israeli state. Other Jewish expressions, those rooted in diaspora traditions, religious anti-Zionism, or progressive critiques of occupation, starvation or genocide, are rendered suspect. Worse, they are often labelled antisemitic themselves.

Over the last 23 months, Israeli atrocities in Gaza have torn apart any sense of unity within Jewish identity. That Jewish identity has been cast into such crisis is now unchangeable. But how this crisis is negotiated among Jews, and between them and their larger communities, is still an open question. The idea that Jewish identity requires some acceptance of the atrocities in Gaza is a deeply regrettable outcome that will not protect any Jew from antisemitism.

In an era where Jewish identity is increasingly subject to legal prescription, and flattened into a narrow political loyalty, courts have a role to play.

In an era where Jewish identity is increasingly subject to legal prescription, and flattened into a narrow political loyalty, courts have a role to play. They cannot, and should not, resolve theological or ideological disputes within Judaism. But they can create the space in which those disputes can unfold.

This means protecting Jews not only from threats of violence or exclusion, but also from the state's attempts to decide who is "really" Jewish. It means distinguishing between antisemitism—the very real animus against Jews as such—and the discomfort of political disagreement, including disagreement over Israel. And it means recognizing that anti-Israeli bias, when it does arise, is a separate harm requiring its own legal response; one that should not be tolerated, precisely as other non-voluntary aspects of one's identity can be a ground for discrimination against them.

The courts, for all their limits, may still be one site where that space can be defended. But they cannot do so alone. The project of protecting Jewish identity from both hatred and governance is a shared political responsibility that demands clarity, solidarity, and an uncompromising commitment to pluralism.

If Jewish safety means anything, it must include the freedom to be Jewish differently. That is what democracy promises. That is what law, at its best, can deliver.

The Shifting Uses of Antisemitic Tropes

JOSHUA SHANES

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The charge of antisemitism is often leveled not because of an explicit statement about Jews, but after someone deploys a trope: some subtle (or not so subtle) dog whistle pushing nefarious ideas about Jewish people. A politician does not need to say, "Jews have no real loyalty to their nations," because they can instead say, "globalists are out to destroy us."

These are tropes and to understand and fight antisemitism today, we need to be able to recognize tropes but also be able to recognize when the allegation has been wrongly alleged.

Antisemitic "tropes" are phrases or images that evoke myths, stereotypes, and conspiracy theories about Jews rather than state them explicitly. As shorthand tools to express hatred towards Jews or Judaism, they are directly and indirectly responsible for sparking and stoking violent persecution of Jews over many centuries. They can also be expressed inadvertently – though still dangerous in the hateful emotions and myths they evoke – because of their cultural embeddedness in Western civilization. Sometimes their fame as tropes is tapped ironically by comedians, Jewish and not, as parody.

Critically, they can also be invoked cynically as a method of falsely smearing individuals or ideas with the broad brush of antisemitism by accusing them of expressing an antisemitic trope.

A BRIEF HISTORY OF TROPES

The list of tropes has evolved and grown over the past two thousand years, though earlier layers continue to operate both purposefully and inadvertently.

Anti-Jewish animosity dates to antiquity. The early Christian church attacked Jews for rejecting Christ and blamed them collectively for crucifying him. In other words, they blamed Jews collectively for the crime of deicide. The Gospel of John in the New Testament was particularly vitriolic, accusing Jews of being Satan's children. The fourth century church father John Chrysostom called them demons intent on sacrificing the souls of men.

Medieval Christians built on to this foundation of tropes connecting Jews to Satan. They added new myths, such as the infamous blood libel: the lie that Jews ritually murdered Christian chil-

dren for their blood. Other myths accused them of poisoning water wells or desecrating the consecrated host of the Eucharist to reenact the murder of Christ. Some even claimed that they had inhuman biology such as horns or that they suckled at the teats (and anus) of pigs. This trope became known in German as *Judensau*, or "Jew Pig," and its image still appears on German churches to this day.

In the 19th century, these myths were supplanted by the additional element of race – the claim that Jewishness was immutable and could not be changed via conversion. Though this idea first appeared in 15th-century Spain, which developed the idea of "Jewish blood," it was especially connected to the rise of modern nationalism. Nineteenth-century ethno-nationalists rejected the idea of a political nation united in a social contract with each other. They imagined the nation as a biological community linked by common descent in which Jews might be tolerated but could never truly belong.

United States Holocaust MemorialMuseum, courtesy of Library of Congress

Finally, in 1879, the German journalist Wilhelm Marr popularized the term "antisemitism" to reflect that his anti-Jewish ideology was based on race, not religion. He chose the term because he imagined the Jews as a foreign, "semitic" race, referring to the language group that includes Hebrew since language was then imagined as a racial category. The term has since persisted to mean specifically anti-Jewish hostility or prejudice.

Modern antisemitism built on those premodern foundations, which never completely disappeared, but was fundamentally different. It emerged as part of the new politics of the democratic modern era.

THE MODERN ERA

Modern antisemitism built on those premodern foundations, which never completely disappeared, but was fundamentally different. It emerged as part of the new politics of the dem-

ocratic modern era. Antisemitism became the core platform of new political parties, which used it to unite otherwise opposing groups such as shopkeepers and farmers, anxious about the modernizing world. In other words, it was not merely prejudice – it was an ideology that explained the entire world to its believers by blaming all its faults on this scapegoat.

Unlike anti-Jewish hatred in this past, its tropes were less about religion, that Jews rejected or killed Christ, and more about political and social issues. Antisemites believed the conspiracy theory that Jews all over the world controlled the levers of government, media, and banking, and that defeating them would solve society's problems. Thus, one of the most important features of modern antisemitic mythology was the belief that Jews constituted a single, malevolent group, with one mind, organized for the purpose of conquering and destroying the world.

The central trope of modern antisemitism was the "international Jew," a shadowy figure they blamed for leading a global conspiracy, strangling and destroying society. Antisemitic books and cartoons often used claws or tentacles to symbolize him. Others depicted him as a puppet master running the world. In the late 19th century, Edmond Rothschild, head of the most famous Jewish banking family, was villainized as the symbol of international Jewish wealth and nefarious power. Today, it is more often the billionaire liberal philanthropist George Soros who is often portrayed in similar ways. Caricatures of Soros portray him as a puppet master secretly controlling all levers of government, media, the economy, and even foreign migration.

This myth that Jews constitute an international creature plotting to harm the nation has inspired massacres of Jews since the 19th century, beginning with the Russian pogroms of 1881 and leading up to the Holocaust. For example, German antisemites after the First World War accused Jews collectively of a "stab in the back," that they attacked Germany from behind and thereby weakened them and cost them victory. The theoretical basis of this slur were actual socialist and communist uprisings, which were then connected to Jews because of the antisemitic trope of "Judeo Bolshevism" – that communism was embodied and pursued by Jews – a trope that would play a central role in Nazism and the Holocaust. Nazis also coined the phrase "cultural Bolshevism" to refer to the Jewish conspiracy to subvert German society with "modern" values. In the 1990s, this trope was reborn as "cultural Marxism," arguing similarly that a Jewish conspiracy led by Jewish academics was leading a cultural war to replace America's Christian values with progressive ones.

TODAY'S TROPES

Modern antisemites ascribe many immutable negative traits to Jews, but two are particularly widespread. First, Jews are said to be ruthless misers who care more about their ill-gotten wealth than the interests of their countries or other people. Greed and stinginess are thus common contemporary antisemitic tropes. Second, Jews' loyalty to their countries is considered suspect because they are said to constitute a foreign element. Among the most common tropes here is the "rootless cosmopolitan" or "globalist," who is contrasted with the rooted

member of the folk. It is evoked, for example, when New York Jews are contrasted with white Protestant farmers from the "heartland." Other times, Jews are accused of "dual loyalty," that their true loyalty lies with international Jewry rather than the nation-state in which they live. Since Israel's establishment in 1948, this hatred has focused on the accusation that Jews' primary loyalty is to Israel, rather than to the countries in which they live.

Tropes appear explicitly in overt antisemitic texts like the Nazi journal *Der Stürmer* and equally in Nazi propaganda like their feature film, *Jud Suess*. The latter packs a remarkably large collection of ancient and modern tropes into one film. The text most associated with modern antisemitic tropes is certainly *The Protocols of the Elders of Zion*. The text – first produced by the Russian Tsarist regime but widely distributed in the United States by Henry Ford – is the imagined minutes of a meeting of international Jewish conspirators that accuses Jews of an incredibly wide range of sins, including apparent opposites like communism and capitalism. These are connected as symbols of modernity, which threaten the rooted nation.

Since the Holocaust, all these tropes continue to circulate, both purposefully and accidentally, but the accusation of a sinister world Jewish conspiracy headed by a powerful mogul like Soros or by a nefarious "Jewish lobby" continues to lie at their center. A particularly popular version in America today is the "Great Replacement Theory." This posits that Jews are leading a "white genocide" by orchestrating the replacement of the white population with nonwhite immigrants. This was the meaning of the famous chant at the 2017 "Unite the Right" rally in Charlottesville, "Jews will not replace us." This also motivated Robert Bowers to murder 11 Jews at the Tree of Life synagogue in Pittsburgh in 2018 because he was convinced that Jews, collectively under the guidance of George Soros, were working to destroy America by facilitating the mass migration of nonwhite people into the country.

Identifying malicious use of tropes today can be challenging for several reasons.

Identifying malicious use of tropes today can be challenging for several reasons. First, as noted, some have become so embedded in our culture that those who repeat them may be doing so inadvertently. Some study of their persistent use of such tropes and response to criticism of it would be necessary to evaluate their purposes.

Second, increasingly politicians and other figures may use clearly antisemitic tropes despite their expressing seemingly pro-Israel sympathies in other ways. For example, Donald Trump has repeatedly evoked the trope of "dual loyalty," that Jews' true loyalty is to Israel or that they are "disloyal" if they do not support him, as well as the trope of Jewish obsession and innate talent with money.

Finally, tropes can be invoked cynically by politicians and others to attack people and ideas without merit. The clearest example of this is certainly Israeli leaders like Benjamin Netanyahu

who accuse critics of the slaughter in Gaza – or other Israeli violence – of propagating a "blood libel." Equally, tropes that would be antisemitic when referring to Jews globally might not be when referring to Israel. For example, "Jewish power" would be an antisemitic trope when referring to global Jewry. However, there is Jewish power in Israel, in the territory that Israel controls, and it is not antisemitic to identify or discuss it. Similarly, referring to an "Israel lobby" might be a dog whistle reference to global "Jewish power" or a nefarious Jewish conspiracy, but it also might refer to registered, legal groups like AIPAC that do lobby and fund candidates to benefit Israel.

There *are* antisemitic tropes. There have been for centuries. They do impact our politics; they do make Jews less safe. The difficulty in identifying them – and identifying the intent of those who use them - does not mean it should not be done. However, the purposeful conflation of antisemitic tropes with descriptions of reality is not only a cynical political ploy to unfairly smear people. It also makes it more difficult to identify and push back against the actual use of antisemitic tropes—and the hatred they promote.

Between Power and Peril: The Fracturing of Antisemitism

IRWIN KULA

Irwin Kula is a seventh-generation rabbi

The American Jewish community, long shaped by shared historical trauma and solidarity with Israel, now finds itself splintered — politically, generationally, and morally. Families can't talk across dinner tables. Synagogues and communal agencies are paralyzed by division. Legacy institutions, once obsessed with ensuring the next generation's Jewish identity, now attack young Jews as self-hating. Rabbis and thought leaders remain silent for fear of backlash.

The ongoing war in Gaza has intensified a raw, dangerous fracture: What constitutes antisemitism? Who defines it? And how does it intersect with Jewish power, justice, and identity?

Beneath debates over terminology and geopolitics is a fraught psychological faultline. How do we reconcile being a historically persecuted people with possessing real political, military, financial, and cultural power?

Beneath debates over terminology and geopolitics is a fraught psychological faultline. How do we reconcile being a historically persecuted people with possessing real political, military, financial, and cultural power? At the heart of this lies what I call **Architectures of Safety**: the generationally distinct psychological frameworks that Jews have developed in response to threat and promise of danger, acceptance, and belonging. These architectures shape how we experience threat, how we define antisemitism, and how we judge one another.

But what one generation feels in its bones, another sees as projection. What one calls loyalty, another sees as complicity. What one calls self-defense, another sees as moral evasion. This divergence underpins much of today's polarization around what so recently united all Jews: the threat of antisemitism.

American Jews today live with unprecedented influence, yet the psychological architecture of Jewish identity still leans heavily on the trauma of the past. The Holocaust looms large; pogroms and expulsion shape our collective memory. This creates a deep-seated ambivalence: to critique Jewish power — especially Israel's power — is felt by many as a betrayal of the memory of Jews murdered and as a dangerous form of antisemitism. It evokes not only fear, but shame.

Photo by Ronen Tivony/NurPhoto via Getty Images

Among many Jews over 60, a post-Holocaust framework emerged in which Jewish exceptionalism is rooted not in the wisdom and practice of Torah, but in the moral wound of abandonment and the terror of powerlessness. The founding of Israel was not just political necessity — it was redemptive. "Never again" became more than a slogan; it was a psychic contract. Jewish safety would never depend on the mercy of the world. We internalized the belief that no nation — not even the United States — retains the moral standing to question how Jews defend themselves. Jewish safety, as embodied in the State of Israel, trumps all other rules—be they international law or Jewish ethics — and any criticism of Israel that creates any ambivalence is defined as antisemitism.

My father z"l, the kindest man I ever knew, fled Poland as a nine-year-old boy in 1938 with only his parents and younger brother, never to see his extended family again. Often, in overt and more hidden ways, I could feel his pain. I viscerally understand how this architecture of safety offered coherence and dignity in a post-Holocaust world. But over time, this narrative has metastasized. Jewish suffering has come to confer moral exemption and the term "antisemitism" has been weaponized to shield Israel—and ourselves — from accountability. The architecture is not sheltering or serving us.

Thus, any critique of Israel's conduct, especially in wartime, is often cast as antisemitism — not because it is, but because it ruptures the psychic contract formed after the Holocaust that Jewish safety must remain above scrutiny. Our collective trauma has become a shield against ethical reflection.

THE VICTIM-POWER PARADOX

From a psycho-spiritual perspective, this defense mechanism resembles a dangerous split: We disavow complexity, dividing the Jewish self into good victim and righteous protector. The image of the vulnerable Jew becomes sacrosanct — unavailable for revision — while the reality of Jewish power becomes repressed, denied, or justified without ethical scrutiny. In different ways, for both the left and the right, the parts of our Jewish self that remember helplessness and horror and the parts that now wield power and influence are kept hermetically sealed from each other. To bridge that gap — to say the IDF can protect and slaughter, that the Jewish state can be both safe refuge and oppressive occupier, or that billionaires can be philanthropic and exploitative — is experienced as an intolerable threat to our very identity.

This victim-power paradox becomes tragically recursive. Our historical trauma rightly demands vigilance, but when trauma becomes the primary lens through which power is understood, it disables our moral clarity. It turns critique into heresy and dissent into threat. In this state, as in all forms of splitting, no integration is possible. We become only victims — or only villains. Palestinians become only perpetrators — or only innocents. The world divides us into unconditional supporters or antisemites.

This paradox plays out across generations as trans-generational trauma — the unconscious transmission of unprocessed traumatic experience — has imprinted itself onto the psychic architecture of post-Holocaust Jewish identity. Each generation of Jews has inherited and adapted to trauma differently, constructing divergent architectures of safety for interpreting threat and defining antisemitism.

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For Holocaust survivors and their children, antisemitism is embodied memory. Their nervous systems were shaped by real or inherited terror. Safety is always provisional. Threat can appear at any moment. Vigilance is survival. For this group, Israel's military strength and American Jewish solidarity are not political positions — they are physical, psychological, and spiritual necessities. Criticism of Israel, especially its use of force, reactivates the fear of abandonment and threat of annihilation and therefore is labeled with such ferocity as antisemitism.

My generation, the Baby Boomers, came of age in an era of both civil rights and Jewish upward mobility. Our architecture of safety is structured around achievement, respectability, and the defense of hard-earned legitimacy. We were welcomed into elite institutions but carried inherited anxiety that Jewish success was real but its permanence uncertain. We built Jewish

organizations not only to preserve Jewish identity, but to consolidate power and protection. For us, antisemitism, when we experienced it, was personally and perhaps socially uncomfortable but never an existential threat.

Generation X experienced antisemitism as history more than reality. Their safety architecture reflects basic trust, or the unconscious belief that the world is fundamentally safe. For them, antisemitism is real but manageable — something addressed with education, not alarm.

Younger generations, shaped by digital life and intersectional frameworks, view Jewishness as one identity among many. Fluent in the language of privilege, systems of oppression, and solidarity across difference, they understand antisemitism as a form of bigotry — important but not exceptional. They evaluate Israeli policy using the same standards applied to other democracies and their support for Israel is often conditional, not tribal. For this generation, conflating anti-Zionism or pro-Palestinian protests with antisemitism feels manipulative and politically expedient.

These divergent architectures explain why conversations about antisemitism so often collapse into rage or disbelief. What one generation calls protection, another hears as repression. What one calls loyalty, the other sees as complicity. What one experiences as existential, another views as exaggerated. The very definition of antisemitism becomes a battleground — not because Jews no longer care, but because we no longer share a single psychic grammar for understanding what constitutes threat. Unless we name these frameworks, we will continue to mis-recognize each other and to experience growing rupture — ironically making us all collectively less safe.

THE UNBEARABLE TENSION

Not surprisingly, the war in Gaza has become the site of collision for our different architectures of safety. It shattered the fragile consensus that held American Jewry together post-1967 — a consensus that allowed Jews to wield power while maintaining a self-image of vulnerability.

The paradox — of institutional strength paired with psychic fragility — was always precarious. But Gaza exposed its limits. When Jewish donors threaten universities, dox students, or demand Congressional hearings on antisemitism, it becomes impossible to deny the extent of Jewish influence. When tens of thousands of innocent women and children are killed by the Israeli army, when making Gaza unlivable and imposing hunger is a strategic policy, calling Jewish victimhood is unsustainable. At the same time, the horrifying images from October 7th and the angry protests on college campuses and the streets of major cities against Israel activated trauma in older Jews and produced the familiar fusion of helplessness and hyper-defensiveness.

This duality — of immense power and deep vulnerability — creates emotional whiplash. We feel persecuted and omnipotent at the same time. Gaza made visible what we could no longer compartmentalize: that Jewish safety can no longer be maintained through silence or control.

In this emotionally volatile context, accusations of antisemitism have become strategic tools. The term has been stretched, blurred, and manipulated to deflect criticism and consolidate control. Politicians, advocacy organizations, and media platforms invoke antisemitism selectively — not in response to systemic threats, but to discipline civil society, intimidate activists, and silence critics of Israeli policy. The IHRA definition of antisemitism, wrapped in the language of "safety" and "solidarity," has eroded the very liberal norms it claims to defend: academic freedom, open discourse, and democratic pluralism. The IHRA definition, which has been adopted by many institutions and which Congress itself is still pushed to adopt, has been used not to protect Jews from hate but to silence dissent . Campus events are canceled. Faculty are threatened. Donors withdraw funds. All in the name of Jewish safety — but often at the cost of democratic norms.

This is not to say that there are not elements within the progressive community that if not full fledged antisemites have traded in dangerous antisemitic tropes. And to be clear: antisemitism is rising. Violent attacks, conspiracy theories, and white supremacist rhetoric are real threats. But conflating criticism of Israel with antisemitism dilutes the term and hollows out its moral weight.

Psychologically, this is a form of *projective identification*. The unbearable tension of complicity is split off and projected onto the critic, who is labeled antisemitic. This allows our Jewish self to remain innocent, righteous, and above scrutiny while turning complex, nuanced conversations into loyalty tests and binary struggles of good versus evil. This defense against shame is what psychoanalyst Jessica Benjamin might call the "refusal of mutual recognition" — the inability to acknowledge the other's pain without collapsing one's own moral self-image.

But this defense against shame comes at a price. It erodes trust. It alienates younger Jews. It transforms antisemitism from a shared concern into a partisan weapon. And it betrays the Jewish ethical tradition — a tradition rooted in argument, accountability, and self-examination.

On a deeper level, the invocation of antisemitism to attack liberal institutions also reveals a kind of unconscious identification with authoritarian power. Where once antisemitism was used to exclude Jews from the liberal order, now it is used by some Jews to police that very order — ironically replicating the dynamics of silencing and marginalization that Jewish history so powerfully resists. In this way, the weaponization of antisemitism becomes not only a betrayal of democratic norms but a repetition of trauma, where we, the once-excluded, become the excluding force.

The result is a legitimacy crisis: antisemitism, once a unifying cause, has become a terrain of contestation, where identity, historical trauma, and political ideology collide.

What are we trying to protect ourselves from with this architecture, this understanding, of antisemitism? Genuine hate? Or the discomfort of facing Jewish moral entanglement with the exercise of power, violence, and exclusion?

COLLAPSE OF CONSENSUS

The post-Holocaust consensus — rooted in shared trauma, Zionist pride, and institutional integration — is no longer tenable. This consensus depended on unconscious agreements that Gaza has made impossible to maintain: that Israeli actions are always defensive; that the deaths of thousands of innocent Palestinians is Hamas's fault; that criticism of Israel reflects antisemitic motivation; that Jewish vulnerability trumps Palestinian suffering; and that the community does not need to examine the full extent of Jewish institutional power.

This consensus has collapsed, not because we care less about being Jewish, but because we care in increasingly different ways. A new generation, shaped more by privilege than persecution, by intersectionality more than insularity, is reshaping Jewish identity. And in doing so, they are also redefining antisemitism.

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Older generations often respond to this challenge with psychological defenses: denial of moral injury, doubling down on threat perception, or reframing Palestinian suffering as Hamas manipulation. Critics of Israel are labeled antisemitic not because they hate Jews, but because they disrupt the inherited architecture of Jewish survival.

Many younger Jews, by contrast, rely on reality-testing. They assess Israel by the same standards they apply to other democracies. When those standards are unmet, they experience moral injury — a rupture between Jewish values and Jewish actions. And when their protest is labeled antisemitic, it damages not only trust but Jewish identity itself.

We are not witnessing a semantic or political disagreement but a collapse of a once-dominant architecture of safety. The current crisis around antisemitism is a failure to build a shared psychic shelter — collective spaces where different architectures of safety can coexist, be recognized, and evolve. Without a new architecture of safety — one that honors both trauma and transformation, loyalty and dissent — we risk greater fragmentation and moral confusion. As debates over antisemitism intensify, they expose not just political differences but deep psychological wounds: unintegrated traumas, moral disorientation, the desperate need to belong, nightmares of powerlessness and fantasies of power.

We must recognize that our conflicts are not just ideological — they are about survival strategies. We are not merely arguing about terms. We are speaking from profoundly different architectures of safety.

The task now is not to force consensus — whether around antisemitism or Israel — but to create containment — to hold space for multiple truths. A future-oriented American Jewish politics must be emotionally mature, morally courageous, and psychically flexible. We must cultivate spaces where dissent is not betrayal, trauma is not weaponized, and power is not above moral scrutiny.

Antisemitism cannot be fought effectively if it is distorted for tribal gain or wielded to shut down necessary critique. We need to name antisemitism where it exists, resist it where it threatens, and refuse to let it be used to silence ethical clarity.

The question we now face — the question beneath all others — is this: What kind of people will we be at the nexus of our nightmares of powerlessness and our fantasies of power, of the perils of our recent past and the promise of no longer being only survivors?