

ANTI-SEMITISM THROUGH A HATE STUDIES LENS

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My 2019 Yom HaShoah talks, focusing on the intersection of hate and antisemitism, were largely written when, on the last day of Passover, John Earnest walked into the Chabad synagogue in Roway, California, saw Jews, and opened fire. But for the bravery of those who put themselves at risk to try and stop him, and the jamming of his rifle, the carnage would have been worse.

Earnest posted a manifesto a few minutes before he started shooting. Like most anti-semites who commit acts of terror, he justified his actions as noble self-defense. I opened my Holocaust Remembrance remarks at both commemorations with snippets from Earnest's screed:

What value does my life have compared to the entirety of the European race? Is it worth it for me to live a comfortable life at the cost of international Jewry sealing the doom of my race. . . . Every Jew is responsible for the meticulously planned genocide of the European race. . . . Every Jew young and old... For these crimes they deserve nothing but hell.

This statement could have been written by Adolf Hitler.

Before I spoke at the Poughkeepsie commemoration, Jewish students were called up. They had spent weeks learning about the Nazi period, and one by one they read out loud news clippings from the 1930s, 1940s, and today. They spoke about Kristallnacht and more recent cemetery desecrations. About terror then, and the carnage at the Tree of Life Synagogue and the Chabad synagogue now. The flyer for the Buffalo commemoration had two pictures on the cover: a synagogue burning during Kristallnacht, and the Tree of Life Synagogue surrounded by crime tape.

I couldn't tell, as an outsider, whether the students were learning that today's events were like the Nazi period, or different, but I thought it important to stress the obvious—the difference. The Nazi atrocities were committed by a state, the Pittsburgh and Roway shootings by a single person, motivated by hate. One person, animated by hate, can commit great damage, as we have seen too often, and Jews are not the only targets, as we witnessed at

Christchurch, Sri Lanka, Mother Emmanuel Church, the Orlando Nightclub, and elsewhere.

My keynote at the Buffalo commemoration followed a short film from the U.S. Holocaust Memorial Museum, on hatred and antisemitism. What's the relationship between the two?

Jewish organizations frequently insist we single out anti-semitism after such a horrid attack, for good reason. I worked for 25 years as the anti-semitism expert at the American Jewish Committee, and too often, particularly in Europe, officials tried to pass off attacks on Jews or Jewish-liked property as a generalized hatred. "Hooligans!" I recall a French official describing those who were throwing Molotov cocktails at synagogues in the early 2000s. Why, then, was it only synagogues, but not mosques or churches, that were being "hooliganized?" When antisemitism is homogenized into a non-specific racism or hatred, it is disguised, made to disappear, and that too frequently is the intent.

But the flip side is the more important. It is not as if only Jews are targeted with hate, and to see anti-semitism as outside this human capacity is to put on blinders. As I've written elsewhere, hate is as old as humans. Regardless of when or where, which political or economic system, major religion, or any other variable, people have always defined, and frequently dehumanized, an "other." We may need help figuring out whom to hate, but to hate is part of who we are. New studies in neuroscience and neurobiology, supplementing those in social psychology and other fields, confirm that we are hardwired, or at least pre-wired, to see an "us" and a "them." As Henri Tajfel demonstrated, one can flip a coin and divide a room full of people in half, group A and group B.

Everyone knows their assignment to a group is arbitrary, yet after a group identity is formed, each group sees itself as better than the other group. Ethnocentrism and tribal thinking is a strong part of our makeup, even though there are impulses, moral values, and theologies and ideologies which emphasize a human thirst for universalism. In this tug of war, and despite Martin Luther King's observation that the arc of history bends toward justice, there is extensive evidence that the pull of tribalism, especially when properly stoked, is stronger than that of universalism. We might like to think that love is stronger than hate, but history shows that too often hate is stronger than its closest opposite, which isn't love, but empathy.

Our hardwired minds are more likely to see a "them" threatening an "us" when their theology or ideology tells them that truth, God, or the combination identifies the "them" as a danger. On this us/them plane, anti-semitism plays out spectacularly. Whether from the early days of Christianity when Jews were ghettoized as an example of what happens when the "them" doesn't recognize "our truth" (in this case that Jesus is God), to the targeting of Jews during the black death for "poisoning wells," to the blood libel—blaming Jews for ritual sacrifice when Christian children disappeared—to its more modern manifestations, including Nazism and the world view of John Earnest, anti-semitism defines Jews as conspiring to harm non-Jews, and provides an explanation for what goes wrong in the world.

We also know from social psychology that hatred can be fueled by people in authority. They help define if a particular manifestation of hate is on the extremes (where hate will always have a home), or in the mainstream, where it is much more dangerous.

Anti-semitism today, despite these recent acts and

other incidents on the political right and left, is still much less of an issue than in prior generations. Not too many decades ago there was overt discrimination, including in college admissions and real estate sales. Twenty years ago the organized Jewish community effectively declared anti-semitism dead, which was obviously wrong even then, but recall that Joe Lieberman ran for Vice President in 2000 without any significant pushback, and the biggest threat to the Jewish community was intermarriage. Jews were being loved to death, and they still are.

Anti-semitic terror attacks are not new. White supremacist Buford Furrow shot up an LA area Jewish Community Center in 1999, white supremacist James Wenneker von Brunn killed a guard at the U.S. Holocaust Memorial Museum, and white supremacist Frazier Glenn Miller Jr. killed non-Jews when he targeted people near Jewish institutions in the Kansas City area. It's a mistake to gauge too much about the level of anti-semitism based on whether a lone shooter decides to act or not.

That said, there are reasons to worry about a potential rise of antisemitism. During the heyday of the militia movement in the 1990s (which was driven by white supremacists), the head of the Montana Human Rights Network described the militias as "a funnel moving through space." He meant that at the wide end of the funnel, people were being sucked in by mainstream issues (in the militias' case, gun control, federal intrusiveness, etc.). Further into the funnel they were exposed to us/them conspiratorial thinking. Further down, the antisemitic conspiracy theories. And, at the small end, warriors who gave their entire identity to militia ideology and committed acts of terror—like Timothy McVeigh—popped out. The beauty of this metaphor is the suggestion that the more pressure there is to move

people into the lip of the funnel, the more will pop out the short end.

I believe we are in an historical moment when there is increased pressure to push people into the funnel. When us/them thinking is mainstreamed, when a binary world view is promoted by leaders, this is the culture in which anti-semitism can most easily grow. This is one of the dangers associated with the Trump presidency.

Donald Trump came down the escalator at Trump Tower, and announced his campaign, calling Mexicans rapists. Later he said it might be a good idea to register all Muslims. Imagine what we would be saying about the level of antisemitism if a presidential candidate called Jews rapists, or suggested they register?

Then, after Charlottesville, he said there were some "very fine people" among those with tiki torches, confederate flags, and Nazi symbols. No wonder white supremacists felt empowered.

Why, at Charlottesville, which was ostensibly a protest about preserving a Confederate statue, did some of these "very fine people" chant "Jews shall not replace us?" These are white supremacists, who believe they are biologically superior to non-whites. They know non-whites will constitute a majority of Americans in just a few decades. How can it possibly be that people who are inferior are having the upper hand? Someone must be putting their thumb on the scale. That would be the conspiratorial Jews, who, recall in the words of John Earnest, are responsible for a genocide against white people. Robert Bowers—the Pittsburgh shooter—was reportedly concerned about the caravan of non-whites approaching our Southern border, which President Trump kept describing as an "invasion." But Bowers didn't seek out Ecuadorians

and Guatemalans to kill. He shot Jews, whom he clearly believed were responsible.

Hate has always worked in politics—otherwise politicians wouldn't use it. But the current administration is stoking hate and us/them thinking in profound ways, exploiting the blue/red bubbles already growing because of cable news and social media. And it is doing something else that is linked to the likelihood of hate and antisemitism growing: attacking democratic institutions, attacking the judiciary, calling people with whom you have policy disagreements "traitors," and attacking the press as the "enemy of the people." Democratic institutions are precious and fragile; they are the infrastructure of our society, and like infrastructure, corrosion may not be immediately apparent. But hate—including anti-semitism—is more likely to grow where democratic institutions are under threat.

Jewish groups are also making a mistake. I understand why it is important for mainstream Jewish organizations to keep good connections with government leaders, even those with whom you might have fundamental disagreements. But acts and statements that empower hate and anti-semitism should never be overlooked. Yet, if you are seen as a supporter of Israel, too often you get a free pass. The Zionist Organization of America feted Steve Bannon as a friend of the Jews and of Israel. Bannon's work helped propel the alt-right, the hateful community that is an important component of today's anti-semitism and white supremacy. The left is sometimes blind to anti-semitism in its midst too, usually around Israel issues. If any of us turns a blind eye to hate and anti-semitism among our political friends, we are empowering hate.



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