

AMERICAN ANTI-SEMITISM: OXYMORON OR ONSLAUGHT

By Rabbi Moshe ben Asher, Ph.D.

In 2003, Leon Wieseltier addressed the international conference on anti-Semitism, “Old Demons, New Debates: Anti-Semitism in the West,” sponsored by the YIVO Institute for Jewish Research at the Center for Jewish History. Mr. Wieseltier’s perspective, one that is not uncommon, raises some nagging questions.

On the one hand, the titling of his remarks, as an essay on www.jewishpress.com—“The Village is Not Burning: A Realist’s Appraisal of Anti-Semitism Today”—seems to suggest that there is an unchecked epidemic of dysfunctional fear about anti-Semitism among American Jews.

On the other hand, Mr. Wieseltier proposes that, although anti-Semitism is resurgent almost everywhere else in the world, we have an “embarrassment of riches” in the United States. He explicitly rejects the Zionist conviction that the United States is only a temporary haven for Jews and, instead, suggests that the country represents a “revolution in Jewish history, a nation that—consider its philosophical foundations and its political practices—is structurally hospitable to us.”

He goes on to say that, “We cannot be pilloried as a state within a state that is comprised of states within a state. We cannot be excoriated for difference in a society in which difference is the substance of sameness.”

These remarks raise important questions: First, is there a great deal of dysfunctional fear about anti-Semitism among American Jews? And second, is it the case that the United States represents a revolution in Jewish history that, because of its philosophy and political system, permanently precludes the kind of anti-Semitism that has been endemic to Europe?

Fear of Anti-Semitism?

Several years ago, in the late 1990s, my wife and I were enjoying a quiet dinner at home with middle-aged Jewish friends who were beginning to show an interest in Judaism and congregational life, one of whom eventually became the president of her Conservative congregation. The subject of anti-Semitism came up and we described some “in-your-face” anti-Semitic hostility that we had personally encountered in local public places when wearing a yarmulke.

The reaction of these friends to several of our experiences in this vein was indifference and incredulity. They said that from their point of view, anti-Semitism in the United States was a non-starter at the end of the 20th century. Certainly, to

borrow the jewishpress.com imagery, they didn’t have any idea that “the village is burning.”

In fact, the vast majority of Jews we have met are *not* raising the alarm that anti-Semitism is rampant, but on the contrary define overt acts of anti-Semitism that don’t touch them directly as “ignorance,” a “youthful escapade,” or “an isolated incident.”

One recent example was a congregation in the Northeast, located in a town that was leafleted with anti-Semitic flyers targeting Jews as a group. The leaders of the local Conservative congregation did not take any action, although the authors of the flyer, representing the Church of the Creator, had been linked with several violent attacks on Jews and other minorities. The synagogue leaders did not feel it was necessary to institute any general security measures, to take specific steps to ensure the security of religious school students, or to participate in a citywide rally to denounce intolerance. The village certainly was not burning from their point of view.

While our experience has been that most American Jews only become concerned about anti-Semitism when it affects them personally or is very likely to do so, even then we have seen that the typical response is not dysfunctional fear but “cool anger” that produces strategic and focused initiatives, which was the case with our congregation in Northern California when three synagogues were torched in nearby Sacramento. Our members didn’t become hysterical or immobilized, imagining that a tide of anti-Semitism would engulf them. On the contrary, they conferred with regional ADL officials to learn what security measures they could take and then acted smartly to implement several that they concluded would be cost-effective.

America Revolutionary in Jewish History?

Is it true that in its philosophical foundations and political practices, the United States is structurally hospitable to Jews, that “we cannot be pilloried as a state within a state that is comprised of states within a state” and “we cannot be excoriated for difference in a society in which difference is the substance of sameness”?

These questions raise issues about the fundamentals of American anti-Semitism: What has been the long-term and recent learning history of anti-Semitism in the United States? And what are the contemporary contingencies for the expression of that learning in overt individual and institutional behavior?

Anti-Semitism in the United States has been deep and durable. From colonial times until the mid-20th century, Americans were largely open and unapologetic about their anti-Semitic attitudes and actions, both individually and institutionally.

Growing up in the 1950s in Los Angeles, it was not uncommon in public places to be openly called a “kike” or “dirty Jew” by other youngsters, within the hearing of adults who were invariably indifferent. It was well known—a fact that dawned painfully on my sister when she graduated from high school—Jews were not employed by the phone company or other public utilities in Los Angeles. There was a sign on the entrance to a private golf course in nearby Orange County that read, “no dogs, no niggers, no Jews allowed,” which was still posted in the early 1960s.

Certainly there has been a marked change in the acceptability of expressing anti-Semitic attitudes in the public square and in virtually all forms of overt institutional anti-Semitic behavior. Both law and social norms have changed so as to powerfully discourage these particular manifestations of anti-Semitism. But if anti-Semitism itself is so low as to be vanishing by historical standards, we should expect the country to be largely free of covert anti-Semitic attitudes that are revealed in individual acts of personal anti-Semitism, which in turn should be declining over the long-term.

Yet this has not been the case. The ADL reports a long-term rise over the past two decades in “harassments, threats, and assaults”—the personal in-your-face variety of anti-Semitism—in contrast to vandalism and forms of anti-Semitism that are reflected in institutional policy and practice.

Moreover, to imagine that covert anti-Semitic attitudes cannot produce highly dangerous forms of institutional anti-Semitism in the U.S., because of the country’s philosophical foundations and political realities, confuses intellectual or ideological history with its institutional counterpart. To believe otherwise would require ignoring the experience of Americans of Japanese ancestry during World War II and American Muslims since 9-11.

The government has acted in force against minority groups, suspending their civil liberties and rights and incarcerating them en masse, when it has been politically acceptable, because the majority of the population perceives the minority—typically there has been blatant manipulation of public opinion by mass media—as posing a critical threat to the nation. These situations require a convergence of circumstances in which the group in question is perceived as a threat and it does not possess the economic wherewithal and political influence to protect its interests from government actions.

The now infamous internment of Japanese-Americans following the attack on Pearl Harbor was paralleled recently on a smaller scale when

hundreds of Muslim non-citizens were swept up after 9/11. Of course, it was not until 1983 when the courts repudiated the 1944 Supreme Court decision that upheld the Japanese-American internment. Presumably, by 1983 the Japanese-American population had achieved an unassailable economic and political position in American society.

Even though it has been more than 20 years since the Congress and the President of the United States declared the Japanese-American detention a “fundamental injustice,” in the June 2006 case of *Turkmen v. Ashcroft* the judge ruled that the government has the latitude to detain *non-citizens* indefinitely on the basis of race, religion, or national origin. Although non-citizens brought the suit, the U.S. Justice Department’s argument in the case might also give pause to citizens: it was that government officials “were confronted with unprecedented law enforcement and security challenges in the wake of the Sept. 11 attacks”¹—an argument that the court apparently accepted.

Notwithstanding the notion that “we cannot be excoriated for difference in a society in which difference is the substance of sameness,” the experiences of other minorities demonstrate that their treatment by the government is a harbinger for our own if sometime in the future we come to be in their political and economic shoes, if the current population numbers of approximately 1.5 million Muslims² and 5 million Jews should come to be reversed.

We will be responsible and culpable for the anti-Semitic consequences of current demographic trends if we fail to acknowledge and respond³ to their destructive potential. The Jewish population in the United States is in long-term decline, notwithstanding deluded demographics that count as Jews those who have no meaningful Jewish identity—which inevitably must be coupled to a parallel decline in our overall economic power and political influence vis-à-vis the growing population-driven power and influence of other ethnic and cultural minorities. They often see themselves in zero-sum relationships with individual Jews and organized Jewry, so of course it’s not incidental that other minority groups have fed much of contemporary American anti-Semitism.

Lest we forget, there is nothing so dangerously lulling as the power and privileges that accompany our success as a society within a society—whether in Spain, Germany, or the United States.

Understanding American Anti-Semitism

Possibly the most important mistake we can make about American anti-Semitism is to assume that the 21st century variety will resemble that which has been notable in the past, especially in European history, which ironically has become the model for the Middle-Eastern varieties.

How are we to account for the gradual rise of personal anti-Semitism in recent decades?

The modern version of anti-Semitism in the United States, which dates roughly from 1960, does *not* punish Jewish status per se but targets Jews who visibly and vocally proclaim themselves uniquely Jewish in the public square. One who on the job or in civic affairs wears a yarmulke or argues government or corporate policy from an explicitly Jewish point of view, in our experience, will learn quickly that anti-Semitism is alive and well in the United States.

The phenomenon isn't limited to stereotypical bigots. A report from recent anti-war organizing related a number of instances in which Jews were, without apparent justification, excluded or treated with hostility. The progressive author of the report concluded: "When Jews are out and about in a highly visible manner as Jews, they confound expectations. Jews who are invisible, or who distance themselves from a Jewish constituency ('I'm not like those other Jews. . .'), are accepted without reservation. But Jews demanding to be seen as part of a Jewish community are seen as suspicious, as though they are tainted with the same kind of nationalism that makes Israel so problematic."⁴

Many Jews have discovered this phenomenon and they have responded to the negative incentives to downplay their beliefs and practices as Jews. When they do so, their personal experience of anti-Semitism declines. And thus they are increasingly likely to believe that anti-Semitism in general is declining. But in surveys they consistently report their low-level anxiety about anti-Semitism, possibly because they have no illusions that it has disappeared permanently—they know it is their own

Jewish commitment and practice that is disappearing—and so they live with a quiet but gnawing anxiousness.

More to the point, as the number of Jews who make themselves publicly visible as Jews declines, those who stand out and are counted as such make increasingly attractive and vulnerable targets for anti-Semitic rhetoric and behavior.

Persistence and Change

What do we conclude about persistence and change in American anti-Semitism?

Anti-Semitic attitudes, although declared to be declining in frequency by self-reporting surveys, have no more disappeared from the United States after a half-century of legal and social condemnation than they did in Eastern Europe after more than a half-century of Soviet homogenizing of ethnic populations. Neither has the potential for virulent forms of institutional bigotry and discrimination, including anti-Semitism, disappeared from the American landscape.

What has changed is that, except for the Orthodox, increasing numbers of American Jews are abandoning those features of their identity that are uniquely and visibly Jewish, at least when in the public square—which almost certainly corresponds to their record rates of intermarriage and assimilation. Whether religious self-abjuration or simply a jettisoning of ethnic identity, this response has neither diminished their private anxiety about anti-Semitism nor the public vulnerability of others who remain identifiably Jewish in belief and practice, who continue to be visible targets for the rancor of anti-Semites.

¹ "Relatives of Interned Japanese-Americans Side With Muslims, *New York Times* (April 3, 2007).

² See Barry A Kosmin and Egon Mayer, "American Religious Identification Survey 2001," The Graduate Center of the City University of New York, (http://www.gc.cuny.edu/studies/aris_part_two.htm), which concludes that, "In statistical terms, this means there is a 95 percent probability that the adult US Muslim population is in the range of 1.1 to 2.2 million," which of course is not the same as the total Arab-American population, estimated to be 75 percent Christian by the Arab-American Institute.

³ The how-to of this imperative is much more difficult to describe. In simplest terms it may be fair to say that until significant numbers of Jews actively ally themselves politically and economically with other organized ethnic and cultural minorities, they will continue to be perceived as competitors for scarce resources and rights rather than compatriots.

⁴ Malka Fenyesi, "Report to The Shalom Center on the Chicago UFPJ Conference," J-list@ShalomCtr.org (July 13, 2003).

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