Antisemitism: A Psychohistorical Enigma

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Abstract: Antisemitism as prejudice and discrimination against Jewish individuals and communities, a deeply troubling phenomenon, has existed since ancient times while constantly changing its expressions. This article attempts to examine the psychohistorical context of antisemitism, which is crucial in combating it as well as fostering a more inclusive and tolerant world.

Keywords: antisemitism, antisemitic tropes, Holocaust, Israel, Jew-hatred, Jewish-history, psychohistory

Introduction: Why Do We Need to Talk about Antisemitism Today?

"Antisemitism is on the Rise!" "Stop the Hate!" These slogans dominate the demonstrations and websites in *support of Jewish people*, usually *only when another atrocity happens*, such as beating Jews on the streets of New York City; killing Jews during their prayers or the baby-naming ceremonies; desecration of Jewish cemeteries; or vandalism of Jewish-owned properties. But other slogans dominate the powerful Internet that *propagate hate against Jews—daily*. For example, "Every time some anti-White, anti-American, anti-freedom event takes place, Jews are behind it." Another one that contradicts it is still antisemitic: "Jews own Wall Street! They are white colonizers/occupiers!"

Even Voltaire's name was called upon to misattribute what one of the American White nationalists said: "To learn who rules over you look to those you cannot criticize." This quote was featured on a huge banner posted a couple of years ago along the road from New York City to Philadelphia, supplementing a meme: the large fat hand (with a diamond ring on its pinky) of a person with a crooked nose that is pressing down on a crowd of little people. This was intended to assure travelers that some of the anti-Jewish tropes are correct: Jews are rich, powerful, and against freedoms.

Why should we care? Because, as Adam Milstein (July 27, 2023) said in his *Jerusalem Post* article, "*Normalized* and *tolerated* antisemitism is both a catalyst and a warning sign" (a subtitle of the article). The late Rabbi Jonathan Sacks likened antisemitism to the canary in a coal mine: "when unchecked, it's followed by broad social upheaval, economic destruction, and cultural stagnation – throughout history and today" (Milstein, 2023, para 1). His warning prediction is unraveling in real time now. On October 7, 2023, over a thousand civilian Israelis and their guests were beheaded, raped, killed, and burnt alive (and a baby roasted in an oven!)—just because they were (or assumed to be) Jews. Hundreds were taken hostages and used as human shields by the terrorist group Hamas. As much as this barbaric attack was a shock to Israelis, the whole Jewish world, and many of the world's leaders, the most shocking became the pro-Hamas protests on many college campuses (e.g., Harvard and Columbia Universities) and in American cities (like Atlanta, Chicago, New York, Washington DC, and others), as well as in the media. The terrorists were framed as the pro-Palestinian "freedom fighters," not acknowledging (or being ignorant to the fact) that everything Hamas wants is the obliteration of Israel—from "the river" (Jordan River, the eastern border of Israel) to "the sea" (Mediterranean Sea, the western border of Israel). Without any fact-checking, these protesters repeated what they were told to believe: Israel/Jews are

occupants and colonizers, who use their "White privilege" to commit the crime of apartheid against Palestinian people.

Antisemitism is a Personal Matter

I was born in the former Soviet Union, in a Jewish family, to a physician mom and an engineer and architect dad. As a child of the 1960s-1970s, I did not feel like I was experiencing antisemitism. My parents were well-respected professionals; they were able to build a house of their own, have a car (a big deal in those days), and participate in social life without restrictions. Of course, being subjected to a "Jewish quota" during medical school admission was not fair—at 16, I had to fly about 900 miles away from my family, who lived in Ukraine (with a 0/100 quota for Jews), to attend medical school in Russia proper (with a 2/100 Jewish quota).

There was a "funny" story that my mom told me when we lived already in the U.S. When I was a little over one, we traveled for three days by railroad, from Volgograd to Ukraine. Two women engaged me in a conversation, guessing if I was Armenian or Greek. When my mom said that we were Jews, they started checking my head (for horns?) and my back (for a tail?). They did not believe I was Jewish. While some people would say it was antisemitism, my thought is that it was ignorance talking, colored by antisemitic tropes.

My personal account of antisemitism is a transgenerational one, and it is felt as heartache and sorrow. This transgenerational wound is about my parents and grandparents. My dad's parents perished in the Dniester River trying to escape from Nazi-occupied Romania to the former Soviet Union. My mom's parents suffered from Petlyura's pogroms during the Russian Civil War: my grandma's three older brothers were quartered by horses, one by one, and the whole family had to watch. Later in life, in 1940, during Stalin's purges, my grandma was sent to Siberia for keeping her beloved brother's diary, a "Zionist" who was a part of a Jewish youth organization that wanted literacy for Jews. (The words "Jews" and "Zionists" were used interchangeably, so now, when I hear "I am not an antisemite, I am an anti-Zionist," I know better.)

My grandma came home in 1946 with rheumatic fever and a broken spine. Simple Russian people nursed her for over a year when the Gulag's guards threw her outside of the work camp to die. They also collected pennies to send her home to Ukraine by railroad. Although I never saw my grandma smiling, she was my hero, the most generous person I ever knew. She shared everything with our Ukrainian neighbors, who had six children. I did not know her story then, but I feel that we were always connected on a different level.

When World War II started, the Soviets were evacuating Jews from Ukraine to the eastern republics—Uzbekistan or Tajikistan, and their Ukrainian neighbors were throwing stones at the carriages, screaming "Die, Zhidans!" Germans established Jewish ghettos and left local Ukrainians in charge of them. My grandfather decided to hide the family underground, right under the ghetto. Mom remembered that the politsays (volunteer police) were looking for them, visiting their house often, but my family was lucky—they survived. My mom never told me about this until about a year before her passing.

Unfortunately, I did not question my parents about their take on being Jewish or experiencing antisemitism. I do remember that, on the one hand, Mom felt that the Soviets gave freedoms to Jews: literacy, professional education, and an ability to feel "equal." On the other hand, she was always saying that to be successful, I had to achieve five times more than non-Jews, so that my achievements could not be denied because of the "fifth (nationality) line" in our passports. That "line" identified one's ethnic origins, e.g., Georgian, Ukrainian, or Jewish. Being

"Jewish" had nothing to do with our faith, but with being different. All this was normalized. Victimhood was never a part of my upbringing.

After graduating from universities in 1982, my husband and I were sent to work in an underserved area in the Moldavian Soviet Republic. In 1989, after specialization in neurology, I started working in the Emergency department of a prestigious academic hospital. Three months into my work there, on one early spring morning, before the shift was over, I'd learned that it was a "revolution out there," and that we couldn't speak Russian anymore at work. One of the slogans outside of the hospital stated: "We will drown Russians in the blood of Zhidans (aka dirty Jews)." My transgenerational button was pressed then, and six months later, we left, stateless and penniless. Our kids were 3.5 and 4.5. Then, it was a year-and-a-half immigration process, all colored by a perception of otherness.

Antisemitism in academia is another personal matter for me, but that topic requires a separate paper.

The Meaning of the Term

The term "antisemitism" was coined in 1879 by Wilhelm Marr, a German journalist and political agitator who argued that Jews were conspiring to run the state and should be excluded from citizenship. Marr's term antisemitism meant *Jew-hatred*, and it was based on the idea of Jewish *racial inferiority* rather than religious differences (ADL, 2018). Marr collaborated with Richard Wagner and founded the first "Anti-Semitic League," which marked the distinction between religious (traditional Christian) anti-Jewish attitudes and *racist political hatred of modern antisemitism*. Antisemitism's modern definition is "the marginalization and/or oppression of people who are Jewish based on the belief in stereotypes and myths about Jewish people, Judaism, and Israel…" (ADL, 2018, paras. 1-2).

Antisemitism is not a criticism of one person (or a group of people) who are Jewish and who are/were involved in some unlawful or amoral acts (e.g., the sexual predator Harvey Weinstein and George Soros who worked for the Nazis in his early teens). It is an existential hatred toward the whole Jewish ethnicity, culture, or religion, as well as toward Israel, the only Jewish state.

Some History of Antisemitism and the Antisemitic Myths, Conspiracy Theories, and Tropes

Antisemitism's origins can be found in ancient civilizations where Jewish communities were often seen as "outsiders" due to their unique religious beliefs and practices. In Egypt, Jewish slavery during the time of Pharaoh Ramses II highlights Jews' perceived foreignness (as per the Book of Exodus in the Old Testament). Similarly, in ancient Greece and Rome, Jews were often viewed with suspicion due to their monotheistic faith and reluctance to adopt the local customs and beliefs.

The rise of Christianity marked a significant turning point in the history of antisemitism: Jews were often blamed for the crucifixion of Jesus Christ, leading to a widespread belief in their collective guilt. As Christianity became the dominant religion in Europe, Jewish communities, branded as "Christ-killers," faced persecution and discrimination. They were accused of practicing dark rituals (such as using the blood of Christian children to make matzah).

During the Middle Ages, antisemitism intensified, and discriminatory policies were enforced by both secular authorities and the Church. Jews were segregated in ghettos, restricted from owning land or engaging in certain professions, and subjected to humiliating laws. Jewish communities were violently attacked during this period.

Some Jews were involved in moneylending and financial activities due to restrictions on Christians engaging in usury, which led to envy and resentment of Jews. Even in recent history, one of the freshmen U.S. Representatives complained that U.S. policy toward the state of Israel is "all about the Benjamins," referring to $100 bills with Franklin's image as "Benjamins," also a popular name in Hebrew. This "joke" had invoked a classic antisemitic stereotype of Jews being in control of the world's money.

The Enlightenment era in the 18th century brought about significant changes in Europe, but antisemitism persisted. Jews were increasingly seen as a threat to national identity and societal cohesion. Pseudoscientific theories of Jewish racial inferiority emerged, laying the groundwork for modern antisemitism. The Dreyfus Affair in France in the late 19th century exemplified how antisemitism had become deeply ingrained in society, with a Jewish officer, Alfred Dreyfus, wrongfully accused of treason, sparking a divisive national scandal.

Like the Dreyfus Affair, there was a non-publicized harrowing investigation of American Jewish physicist Robert Oppenheimer, the "father" of the atomic bomb, who questioned the need for an arms race and the use of weapons of mass destruction during the Red Scare. He survived the two-month-long unofficial trial, and although he was not jailed as a traitor, he lost his security clearance and could not continue his lifework. Fifty years after his passing, his security clearance was restored—50 years too late.

The culmination of centuries of antisemitism reached its darkest point during the Holocaust when approximately six million Jews were systematically murdered by the Nazis and their collaborators during World War II. This unparalleled atrocity shocked the world and highlighted the consequences of unchecked hatred and prejudice. In the aftermath of the Holocaust, there was a growing global awareness of the horrors of antisemitism. International efforts were made to combat discrimination, and the Universal Declaration of Human Rights (1948) enshrined the principles of equality and freedom from persecution for all individuals, regardless of their religion or ethnicity.

Some antisemitic myths are about Jews planning to take over the world through banking globalization and media propaganda, the propagation of communism (in America and the West), or the spread of capitalistic ideas (in the socialist/communist world). No matter what the problem, Jews became a great scapegoat figure—but why? Maybe because Jews do not believe in the afterlife, valuing life "as is," avoiding death, assimilating, and being dedicated to preserving their families and contributing to the communities in which they live?

History of the Jewish people represents a journey rich with many fascinating facts and miracles, as well as sorrow and mourning losses. Unfortunately, in this short paper, I will not be able to even mention all of them, but I will continue here with the events that touched me and my family.

Jews in Tsarist Russia and the Soviet Union
Antisemitism in Tsarist Russia and the Soviet Union manifested differently in each period. Throughout the 19th and early 20th centuries, Jews in Tsarist Russia faced violent pogroms. Between 50 and 100 thousand people died and their property ruined, leading to widespread fear and insecurity among Jews. Most pogroms happened on the territory of modern Ukraine, Moldova, Poland, and a few in Belarus. As per Aleksandr Solzhenitsyn (2001), 40% of over 800 pogroms in Soviet Ukraine were perpetrated by Symon Petlyura's Ukrainian forces. The Tsarist

government confined Jews to designated areas known as the Pale of Settlement, which further marginalized and isolated Jewish communities. Most pogroms were perpetrated there.

Discriminatory anti-Jewish laws in Tsarist Russia—limiting education, employment, and land ownership—perpetuated a cycle of poverty and restricted social mobility for most Jews. The policies of Russification (aimed to assimilate ethnic minorities into Russian culture) often resulted in the suppression of Jewish cultural and religious practices. During this period, the Church propagated an antisemitic blood libel trope, which fueled hostility and reinforced stereotypes.

Traditionally, antisemitism in Russia was based on religion and religious tropes, but when it was turning more political, many Russian people stood up against Jew-hatred. This included Anton Chekhov, a famous Russian writer and playwright, who broke off a long-lasting friendship with Aleksey Suvorin, a successful Russian publisher as well as the owner of a theater company, and the popular newspaper, *New Time*, because of a very militant antisemitic stance taken by Suvorin's paper.

Experiencing suppression of their freedoms and being inspired by the ideas of Karl Marx and Friedrich Engels, many Jews participated in the Russian revolutions (February and October 1917). Some of them, like Leiba Bronshtein (known as Lev Trotsky) and Hirsch Apfelbaum (Grigoriy Zinoviev), denounced (de-facto) their Jewish identity, expressed their loyalty to the revolution, and became key leaders of the Bolshevik party.

Any revolution is a bloody matter, but this one included the killing of the Russian Tsar, all his family, as well as other prominent figures in the Russian government and culture. Also, some of the Jewish revolutionaries were "cosmopolitans" and pledged allegiance to the "world revolution." They were perceived as not minding ruining Russia in the process, if necessary. For example, Trotsky supposedly said, "Let's burn Russia in the fire of world revolution!" Russian people did not appreciate such expressions. Stalin's purges of the later years targeted a lot of Jews as being "rootless cosmopolitans."

In the late 1920s/early 1930s, the Soviets established the new "Jewish Homeland," the autonomous oblast Birobidzhan, near the China-Russia border. This geopolitical experiment was not successful, as this area was already populated by Cossacks, Koreans, Russians, and Ukrainians. There were also no cultural ties to this area for Jewish people or adequate infrastructure, and the weather was difficult for Jewish settlers who, for generations, lived in Ukraine or Belarus, and were never involved in agriculture or fishing.

During World War II, the Soviet government established the Soviet Jewish Antifascist Committee to gain support from Jewish communities abroad. However, this committee was later disbanded, and many of its members were arrested during the Stalinist purges, leading to increased antisemitism.

The "Doctors' Plot" (in the late 1940s/early 1950s) involved famous Russian Jewish doctors (some of them served as Kremlin doctors), accused of conspiring to murder Stalin and other Soviet leaders. Although the plot was later revealed to be fabricated, it left a lasting impact on Soviet Jews.

Some Notes on the Psychology of Antisemitism

To understand the psychological roots of antisemitism, we need to acknowledge not only the unconscious ego defenses of an individual (like projection, splitting, and denial), but also the psychological processes that exist in groups. This is based on "conscious and unconscious needs

for identity, boundaries, allies – and enemies" (Avner Falk, 2006, Abstract, p. 1), as well as cohesion, ideology, the group's "self," and the leaders.

In his 1921 book, *Group Psychology and the Analysis of the Ego*, Sigmund Freud investigates psychological mechanisms exhibited in mass movements, expanding upon the work of French polymath Gustave Le Bon. In the introduction to this book, Freud resisted the idea that one's prior personal relationships and experiences do not play a role in group psychology, as well as the idea about groups being guided by merely the herd instinct. He wrote that group identification is related to the group members being connected by some ideas or purpose—usually it is one's race, religion, nation, caste, profession, or institution. (In the case of antisemitism, all these distinctions are obliterated, as people are *united only by hating Jews*.)

Freud further wrote about the sense of infinite power and security experienced by an individual in a large group, and that he/she can easily act on impulses, which otherwise would need to be repressed. He concluded that each group member becomes highly suggestible and "hypnotic," and is subjected to "mutual induction" and potentiation of one's impulses and emotions (likened to being infected by emotional contagion). This way, the mass becomes "impulsive" and irrational, as it is controlled only by the unconscious. Freud also opined that the group leader serves as a binding element of the group and that two different processes are going on in each group member's psyche: idealization of the leader as well as the narcissistic libido displacement to this idealized object. This leads to more affinity and identification among the group members because they possess the same ego ideals.

Investigation of psychological roots of antisemitism as a group phenomenon should also include John Duckett's 1992 article, "Psychology and prejudice: An historical analysis and integrated framework," in which he insisted that one of the main structural psychological elements of each group is prejudice, which is based on *collective narcissism*, and that the felt threat to the group's ideology can cause *narcissistic rage*. This is also how David Teman explained the ancient and early Christian antisemitism in his 1984 article, "Anti-Semitism: A study in group vulnerability and the vicissitudes of group ideals." This narcissistic rage is fueled by a primitive, black-and-white, or good-or-bad (as in the Kleinian paranoid-schizoid position) view of the "other" group as a "malevolent force" causing the narcissistic injury to the first group. The collective injury is seen by Terman as primary, and the projection of one's own (disavowed) evil on the other group as a secondary mechanism of antisemitic rage.

In Conclusion

Throughout history, Jews have faced discrimination, persecution, and violence solely based on their identity, despite their significant contributions to human civilization: Judaism is the oldest monotheistic religion that had a profound influence on Western ethical principles. Then there are contributions of Jewish individuals: scholars, thinkers, and philosophers (Moses Maimonides, Martin Buber, and Hannah Arendt); scientists (Albert Einstein, Niels Bohr, and Rosalind Franklin); writers, poets, and artists (Franz Kafka, Isaac Babel, Joseph Brodsky, Elie Wiesel, Marc Chagall, and Camille Pissarro); as well as musicians, entertainers, innovators, and philanthropes. Of course, Jews are not foreign to the human condition, and they have their virtues and vices. As Shylock said in William Shakespeare's *The Merchant of Venice* (1596-1598), "If you prick us, do we not bleed? If you tickle us, do we not laugh? If you poison us, do we not die?"

Engaging in psychohistorical research, fostering interfaith dialogue and advocating for tolerance and inclusivity are crucial in eradicating antisemitism and building a future based on

mutual respect, understanding, and acceptance for all. Only through such efforts can we create a world that is truly free from the scourge of antisemitism and any form of discrimination.

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