

ANTISEMITISM

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Even as racism and other forms of bigotry are at the center of our national debate, there is so little understanding of one widespread form of bias that *The Atlantic* recently published an article titled “Why So Many People Still Don’t Understand Anti-Semitism.”² We don’t even have consensus on how to spell what we need to talk about; whether or not to hyphenate or capitalize. Anti-Semitism or antisemitism? As we explain below, many aspects of antisemitism are misunderstood. Our purpose here is to help expand the focus of antibigotry activists to understand the relationship of antisemitism to other forms of bigotry.

Defining Antisemitism

Encyclopedia Britannica defines anti-Semitism as “hostility toward or discrimination against Jews as a religious or racial group.”³

The Anti-Defamation League’s (ADL’s) definition also focuses on hostility as an element: “Antisemitism is the belief or behavior hostile toward Jews just because they are Jewish.”⁴

Similarly, The Jerusalem Declaration on Antisemitism defines antisemitism as “discrimination, prejudice, hostility or violence against Jews as Jews (or Jewish institutions as Jewish).”⁵

The U.S. State Department⁶ is among more than three-dozen countries and international organizations that have adopted the Working Definition promoted by the International Holocaust Remembrance Alliance: “Antisemitism is a certain perception of Jews, which may be expressed as hatred toward Jews. Rhetorical and physical manifestations of anti-Semitism are directed toward Jewish or non-Jewish individuals and/or their property, toward Jewish community institutions and religious facilities.”⁷

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²Yair Rosenberg, “Why So Many People Still Don’t Understand Antisemitism,” *The Atlantic*, January 19, 2022, <https://www.theatlantic.com/ideas/archive/2022/01/texas-synagogue-anti-semitism-conspiracy-theory/621286/>.

³Michael Berenbaum, “anti-Semitism,” *Encyclopedia Britannica*, accessed May 1, 2022, <https://www.britannica.com/topic/anti-Semitism>.

⁴“Antisemitism,” *Anti-Defamation League*, accessed May 1, 2022, <https://www.adl.org/anti-semitism>.

⁵“The Jerusalem Declaration on Antisemitism,” accessed May 1, 2022, <https://jerusalemdeclaration.org/>.

⁶U.S. Department of State, Special Envoy to Monitor and Combat Anti-Semitism, “Defining Anti-Semitism,” June 8, 2010, <https://2009-2017.state.gov/j/drl/rls/fs/2010/122352.htm>.

⁷“What is antisemitism? Non-legally binding working definition of antisemitism,” *International Holocaust Remembrance Alliance*, accessed May 1, 2022, <https://www.holocaustremembrance.com/resources/working-definitions-charters/working-definition-antisemitism>.

Other definitions also include examples of antisemitism in practice. The Nexus Document states: “Antisemitism consists of anti-Jewish beliefs, attitudes, actions or systemic conditions. It includes negative beliefs and feelings about Jews, hostile behavior directed against Jews (because they are Jews), and conditions that discriminate against Jews and significantly impede their ability to participate as equals in political, religious, cultural, economic, or social life.”⁸

We don’t seek to choose one definition over another here. Examining the range of definitions – the overlaps and nuanced distinctions – is a useful foundation for real discourse about what is taking place, and why.

That said, the definition posed by Yair Rosenberg in *The Atlantic* comes closest to the way we think. “Unlike many other bigotries, Rosenberg writes, “anti-Semitism is not merely a social prejudice; it is a conspiracy theory about how the world operates.”⁹

We would add, antisemitism is a *racialized* form of social prejudice in the United States, by which we mean Jews are identified by others through whatever lens the anxiety of the moment demands. We discuss this further below.

Antisemitism functions to maintain the structural inequities that underlie all other forms of bigotry and oppression. Antisemitism in its daily manifestations causes devastating, sometimes mortal, harms to its targets, certainly – Jews are the most frequent target of reported anti-religious hate crimes in America even as they comprise less than two percent of the U.S. population and only two-tenths of one percent of the world’s population.¹⁰ More broadly, antisemitism divides potential allies, serves as a galvanizing force for white nationalist movements, and undermines democratic processes.

How Antisemitism Functions

Antisemitism functions in a similar way to all other forms of structural and unconscious bias, including racism. Antisemitism designates an “Other” who can be maligned, fetishized, dehumanized and then blamed for the difficulties that other groups of people are suffering. By tapping into an unconscious fear of the “Other,” antisemitism serves as a wedge that divides people who might be allies or form common cause, allowing those who hold structural power to escape responsibility for the conditions that are causing suffering.

Antisemitism is propagated through stereotypes and tropes about Jews. T’ruahs *Very Brief Guide to Antisemitism* delineates the most common of these:

Power: Claims that Jews are all-powerful secret puppet masters behind the scenes of world events, as popularized by the early 20th century antisemitic forgery, *Protocols of the Elders of Zion*; also, conspiracy theories that Jews cause disease, pandemic, war, or other disasters.

⁸“The Nexus Document,” Israel & Antisemitism, accessed May 1, 2022, <https://israelandantisemitism.com/the-nexus-document/>.

⁹Rosenberg, “Why So Many People Still Don’t Understand Antisemitism.”

¹⁰Although antisemitism is a racialized form of bigotry, as we discuss here, it can have anti-religious elements and antisemitic hate incidents are frequently documented as anti-religious.

Greed/Wealth: Claims that Jews love money, or control the world's financial system or the media.

Disloyalty: Claims that Jews are untrustworthy and/ or disloyal, or that Jews are more loyal to Israel or to world Jewry than to their country of citizenship.

Evil: Claims that Jews are in league with, or are children of, the Devil; that Jews drink blood or kill babies; and that Jews are a corrupting, inhuman force.¹¹

We can find all of these ideas at play today in even a casual survey of the news or social media. We must accept that antisemitism is a force in America today and that none of us are immune, including our own movements for justice.

Social Justice Movements are Not Immune

There are three primary reasons antisemitism can be found in social justice movements. The first is that we're all subject to the same unconscious biases and societal conditioning and segregation (not actually knowing the "Other") that enables any form of bigotry to flourish.

The second complicating factor is the politics of Israel and Palestine. Several definitions of antisemitism devote entire sections to parsing what is and is not antisemitic when it comes to criticism of Israel. As The Nexus Document states, "As an embodiment of collective Jewish organization and action, Israel can be a target of antisemitism and antisemitic behavior. Thus, it is important for Jews and their allies to understand what is and what is not antisemitic in relation to Israel."¹²

By way of example, the Nexus Document provides the following helpful principles:

- As a general rule, criticism of Zionism and Israel, opposition to Israel's policies, or nonviolent political action directed at the State of Israel and/or its policies should not, as such, be deemed antisemitic.
- Even contentious, strident, or harsh criticism of Israel for its policies and actions, including those that led to the creation of Israel, is not per se illegitimate or antisemitic.
- It is antisemitic to use symbols and images that present all Jews as collectively guilty for the actions of the State of Israel.
- It is antisemitic to treat Israel differently solely because it is a Jewish state, using standards different than those applied to other countries.

¹¹Truah, "A Very Brief Guide to Antisemitism," January 2022, <https://1x5p951614wm35poeh16mpzk-wpengine.netdna-ssl.com/wp-content/uploads/2022/01/Truah-Antisemitism-8.5-X-11.pdf>.

¹²"The Nexus Document."

The third factor is a widespread misunderstanding of “race” – which was invented as a category to maintain social and economic control – as defined only by skin color. We explain this misconception below.

Are Jews “White”?

In a 2018 interview with *Tikkun* on The Evolution of Identity Politics, our team member Eric K. Ward addressed the question of race and the Jewish community.¹³ As he recounted, in the 1970s, many in the Jewish community found themselves “facing less – not none, but lesser – discrimination.”¹⁴ At the same time, new liberation movements emerged in response to a liberal mainstream that seemed satisfied with legal equality, even in the face of persistent real-world inequities. Some of these movements were grounded in a vision of identity politics that offered the promise of “rebuilding people centered movements for justice.”¹⁵ Unfortunately, “[m]isrepresentations of identity policies treat race, gender and sexuality as static terms rather than fluid narratives used to expand and reinforce inequality in the United States.”¹⁶

In this context, Jews were defined as white not only by white society, but also elements of antiracist and leftist movements. Jews were left with the primary role of “white ally.”¹⁷ Jews who did not identify as white “found themselves without a political home” and “disengaged or began to claim whiteness as a primary identity so they could belong somewhere.”¹⁸ The result was that there was little opportunity for conversations about antisemitism as a current form of subordination, or its relationship to other categories of bigotry. Jewish communities within leftist social movements rarely get to self-identify, or lift up their experiences with antisemitism, which is a form of racism in the United States.

As Eric stated, “the Jewish community has never been white; it has only been allowed temporary access to privileges.” In the U.S., as in Europe, Jews have been “used as the scapegoats of the ruling class, a buffer between ‘the haves’ and ‘the have nots.’”¹⁹ In this way, “[p]ositioned perpetually as ‘the biological other,’ Jews often find themselves wrongfully cast as the existential evil behind every social disparity, scandalous leader, or societal disaster.”²⁰

Against this backdrop, “our society found itself defenseless as white nationalists intentionally used antisemitism to form its worldview, develop leadership and fuel its growing social and political power.”²¹ We discuss this further in the next section.

¹³Eric Ward, The Evolution of Identity Politics: An Interview with Eric Ward,” *Tikkun*, April 4, 2018, <https://www.tikkun.org/the-evolution-of-identity-politics-an-interview-with-eric-ward/>.

¹⁴Ward, “Evolution of Identity Politics.”

¹⁵Ward, “Evolution of Identity Politics.”

¹⁶Ward, “Evolution of Identity Politics.”

¹⁷Ward, “Evolution of Identity Politics.”

¹⁸Ward, “Evolution of Identity Politics.”

¹⁹Ward, “Evolution of Identity Politics.”

²⁰Ward, “Evolution of Identity Politics.”

²¹Ward, “Evolution of Identity Politics.”

The Relationship Between Antisemitism and White Nationalism

Like all forms of bigotry, antisemitism evolves and adapts itself, and there are specific roles and purposes to current manifestations of antisemitism in the U.S. One dominant role that antisemitism plays today is to further white nationalist rhetoric and prop up narratives of white supremacy.

Antisemitism is employed as a narrative tool to explain away advances in social movements during the 1960s and 1970s. For example, the Civil Rights movement's victories against legal forms of anti-Black discrimination was helped in part by a broad multiracial coalition that embraced nonviolent direct action. As Eric explained in *Tikkun*,

The loss of *de jure* white supremacy created a large problem for the advocates of white supremacy who long justified slavery and Jim Crow by arguing Blacks were inferior and whites were superior. If you believe you are superior, how do you explain this significant defeat? You can't say those who were inferior bested you, there must be another answer; and an adaptation of modern European antisemitism provided the explanation. In short, white supremacists began propagating the narrative that a secret Jewish cabal must have been behind the Civil Rights movement. They argued, this was the only way Black folks could have won.²²

Subsequently, asserting that Jews were responsible for social justice movements became the “go to” answer in how white nationalists understood calls for women's rights, inclusive immigration policies, reproductive justice, and an expansive understanding of gender identity. White nationalists framed these movements as “fronts that allowed Jews to enslave whites.”²³ This narrative “helped to birth the white nationalist movement from the ashes of *de jure* white supremacy.”²⁴

If white supremacy is a system used to control and exploit structurally marginalized groups, white nationalism seeks the removal of these groups all together. Antisemitism is “the fuel for the white nationalist engine.”²⁵

Instead of recognizing this threat, many antiracists, leftists and progressives insisted Jews primarily recognize themselves as whites with privileges.

²²Ward, “Evolution of Identity Politics.”

²³Ward, “Evolution of Identity Politics.”

²⁴Ward, “Evolution of Identity Politics.”

²⁵Ward, “Evolution of Identity Politics.”

Temporal Privilege

The privileges held by Jews are recent and temporal, meaning that these privileges are contingent on Jews suppressing “their primary identity as Jews, except in those ways found acceptable by larger society.”²⁶ As Eric, a Black man, told *Tikkun*:

I liken it to my experiences in philanthropy. In my years working as a grant-giver in philanthropy, I automatically became the most humorous person in the room. I was suddenly 100 times better looking. Nearly everyone returned my phone calls. People would also send me invitations informing me of fundraisers and asking for individual donations of \$500 or more. Yes, I had time-based privileges and access but it was only one small part of my identity, and a passing one at that. There were lots of assumptions being made about my identities and my background and most of it was based on a temporal position. I’m a kid who spent most of his teenage years living in a motel where rent was paid by the week. I was thin in my twenties because I was malnourished and often near-starving at times. I never made a living wage until well into my forties. When I left philanthropy, I wasn’t as good looking, I wasn’t as funny.²⁷

Indeed, “when Jews choose to self-actualize their own identities, the threat is always delivered that if the Jewish community doesn’t behave itself, access, safety and opportunity will be taken away.” Jews receive death threats, their houses of worship are targeted, their burial sites are desecrated. “Systemic antisemitic violence and threats are forms of social control and they exist to ensure that Jews know their place . . . Privileged white communities simply don’t receive threats like this; they don’t need to.”²⁸

The Threat Antisemitism Poses to Inclusive Democracy

Antisemitism harms all who benefit from an inclusive democracy and informed electorate. As Yair Rosenberg wrote in *The Atlantic*²⁹ recently, “This ignorant status quo has proved deadly for Jews, and that alone should be enough for our society to take it seriously. But it has disastrous consequences for non-Jews as well. This is because people who embrace conspiracy theories to explain their problems lose the ability to rationally solve them.”

Rosenberg quotes Bard College’s Walter Russell Mead, who states:

People who think “the Jews” run the banks lose the ability to understand, much less to operate financial systems. People who think “the Jews” dominate business through hidden structures can’t build or long maintain a successful modern economy. People who think “the Jews” dominate politics lose their ability to interpret political events, to diagnose social evils and to organize effectively for positive change.

²⁶Ward, “Evolution of Identity Politics.”

²⁷Ward, “Evolution of Identity Politics.”

²⁸Ward, “Evolution of Identity Politics.”

²⁹Rosenberg, “Why So Many People Still Don’t Understand Antisemitism.”

Rosenberg also quotes our team member Eric K. Ward, who explains:

Anti-Semitism has real impact beyond just hate crimes. It distorts our understanding of how the actual world works. It isolates us. It alienates us from our communities, from our neighbors, and from participating in governance. It kills, but it also kills our society. Anti-Semitism isn't just bigotry toward the Jewish community. It is actually utilizing bigotry toward the Jewish community in order to deconstruct democratic practices, and it does so by framing democracy as a conspiracy rather than a tool of empowerment or a functional tool of governance.

As Rosenberg concludes, “In other words, the more people buy into anti-Semitism and its understanding of the world, the more they lose faith in democracy.”³⁰

Selected Training Guides

1. Love Thy Neighbor: A Guide for Tackling Antisemitism While Committing to Justice for All –Brown University
2. A Very Brief Guide to Antisemitism – T’ruah
3. ADL's Toolkit on How to Fight Antisemitism Today – Anti-Defamation League
4. Understanding Antisemitism: An Offering to our Movement – Jews for Racial Justice
5. Responding to Antisemitism Messaging Guidelines – Western States Center

Related Writings by Eric K. Ward

- Conspiracy Theories Are Killing Us, America, Medium (Feb 24, 2021)
- “Somebody Must be Blamed,” Antisemitism: The Equal Opportunity Ideology, Medium (July 15, 2020)
- The Evolution of Identity Politics, Tikkun Magazine (April 4, 2018)
- Antisemitism at the core of white nationalism, The Jerusalem Post (March 31, 2018)
- Forcefully Opposing Antisemitism Must Be a Core Principle for the Movement to Combat White Supremacy, Tablet Magazine (December, 2017)
- As White Supremacy Falls Down, White Nationalism Stands Up, Pop Culture Collab (October, 2017)
- Skin in the Game: How Antisemitism Animates White Nationalism, The Public Eye (June 29, 2017)

³⁰Rosenberg, “Why So Many People Still Don’t Understand Antisemitism.”