

ANTISEMITISM HERE AND NOW

Deborah E. Lipstadt

Testimony Before the United States Commission on International Religious Freedom

January 8, 2020

Recently a well-educated, accomplished man, the CEO of a Fortune 500 company, one of America's most successful corporate entities, attended a seminar I gave on antisemitism. After my presentation, he raised his hand and, with a perplexed tone in his voice, observed: "Jews are so smart, so accomplished.... How is it that they have not been able to solve this problem of antisemitism?"

I told him that his question, sincere as it certainly was, was aimed in the wrong direction. He should not be asking the victim of racial prejudice to solve that problem. He should be asking the perpetrator. Similarly, if you want to solve the crime of rape, ask men *not* women. This past Sunday at the rally and march against antisemitism held in New York, I found myself walking next to a woman who carried a sign: "This Catholic Hates Antisemitism." When I thanked her for being there, she responded: "It's more our problem than yours." The purveyors of this hate and hostility should be the ones who bear the onus of having to resolve the issue. It is the rapist and not the person who has been raped who should have to supply the solution.

Of course, should we do that, the perpetrators would have a ready answer. They would fall back on the stereotypes they use to justify their prejudices. Ultimately, they would blame the victim. Of course, it is the victim who "bleeds." So, suffice it to say, antisemitism is a problem for all of us.

What then can we do about it? There is no easy solution to prejudice because it is an irrational sentiment. Prejudice: the etymology of the word itself is testimony to its irrationality: to *pre-judge*, to decide what a person's qualities are long before meeting the person him or herself. To put it more colloquially, the purveyor of prejudice encounters the stereotype even when the actual person is still 500 meters away. In other words, stereotypes exist independently of an individual's actions. That does not mean that a member of the group in question is immune from possessing the negative characteristics ascribed to the entire group. But when an individual's wrong doings are seen as characteristic of "the" entire group, because "that is how *they* are," we have entered the realm of prejudice. If a person with blond hair were to do you wrong and you, as a result, condemned all people with blond hair, everyone would no doubt think it absurd. Why then, if a Jew or a person of color does you wrong, do we not think antisemitism or racism absurd?

Antisemitism is a prejudice and, therefore, shares many of the characteristics of prejudice in general, particularly, as I have just noted, in the realm of stereotyping. However, it has certain unique characteristics that set it apart from these other hatreds.

First of all, it is a conspiracy theory. Conspiracy theorists find "culprits" to blame for something they oppose or find threatening. Those who subscribe to these theories tend to rely on familiar "enemies," e.g. Jews, to give events that may seem inexplicable an intentional explanation. By picking a familiar or common enemy, their claims seem rational to the person who has heard these charges before.

Conspiracy theorists reflexively reject facts that contradict their narrative. These theories have an internal coherence or, what researchers have described as, a "self-sealing

quality” that makes them “particularly immune to challenge.” Logic falls by the wayside and exaggerations, suspicions, and stereotypes predominate. The committed antisemite will not be dissuaded by a demonstration that they are subscribing to something irrational.

Secondly, antisemitism has another distinctive characteristic. Unlike other prejudices it comes from the right and from the left. Both rely on the same set of prejudices.

Thirdly, when one contrasts antisemitism to the prejudice of racism, yet another distinction emerges. The racism punches down, claiming that the person of color is “lesser than,” “not as smart as,” or “not as industrious as” the person who is not of color. Were they to move into “our” neighborhoods or attend “our” schools, they will lessen the quality of the school or the neighborhood. They will bring us down. In contrast, the antisemite punches up. The Jew is “smarter than,” “more powerful than,” or “craftier than” the non-Jew. Therefore, the Jew is to be, not just opposed, but feared because of what they might do to the non-Jew.

Antisemitism is delusional, ascribing to Jews contradictory qualities. For example, according to antisemites Jew are both capitalists and communists. Antisemites accuse Jews of being clannish and sticking together and, at the same time, charge them with being pushy and wanting to be accepted in circles that have no desire to accept them. It is impossible to simultaneously be a communist *and* a capitalist, pushy *and* clannish. But that is logic. And prejudice defies logic.

Antisemitism is not something random. It is not disliking a Jew. It is disliking someone *because* they are a Jew. It has a structure and it is persistent. It is with good reason that it has been called the “longest” or “oldest” hatred. Its roots can be found in the New Testament and the story of the crucifixion of Jesus. “The Jews” are accused of killing Jesus, ignoring the fact

that Jesus was a Jew, a learned one. They are accused of convincing reluctant Romans, who did the actual killing, to crucify him because he wanted to chase the money changers from the Temple.

Every stereotype has a template, and it is in this Biblical story that one finds the essential elements of the antisemitic template. It includes four elements: finance, power, and a crafty intellect. Any antisemitic charge will have one or more of these elements and will suggest that Jews continue to use their finances, power, and intellect in a nefarious and mendacious way.

Antisemitism began as anti-Judaism, as Christianity sought to differentiate itself from Judaism. It soon grew into a contempt, not just for the religion, but for the people who adhered to that religion. Jews were, not just marginalized, but seen as willfully blind to the truth of the new faith. By the Middle Ages Judaism had been rendered, no longer just a competing religion, but a font of evil and a danger to Christians. Christian anti-Judaism of the medieval period added a litany of additional accusations. Jews were charged with committing ritual murder, poisoning the wells to spread the Black Plague, profaning the “host,” engaging in sorcery and magic, and an array of other evil acts, all of which had the objective of harming non-Jews.

The striking aspect of antisemitism is the way it migrated out of the confines of the church and was adopted and adapted by those who, not only were not affiliated with the church, but were opposed to it. In the 17th century, Voltaire, an arch opponent of the church, said of the Jews “You have surpassed all nations in impertinent fables, in bad conduct and in barbarism. You deserve to be punished, for this is your destiny.” Karl Marx, a virulent critic of all religions, echoed those same accusations. Adolf Hitler and the National Socialists

propagated the same hatred. The source of the hatred may have changed but the nature of the charges remained the same.

One of the most enduring and widely circulated antisemitic classics is *The Protocol of the Elders of Zion*. This publication has been greatly responsible for reinforcing the notion of a Jewish conspiracy. Purporting to be the record of late 19th century deliberations of an unnamed group of Jewish “elders,” the *Protocols* “document” their intentions to control of the world, its economies and political systems. First published in its current form early in the 20th century by a supporter of the Russian Czar, it, in fact, began life as a mid-19th century as a tract having nothing to do with Jews. Jews were nowhere to be found in it.

When Czarist supporter Sergei Nilus published the first version early in the 20th century (he subsequently reissued many other editions), the central characters were now Jews who, not only were determined to dominate non-Jews, but to corrupt their morals as well. Car magnate Henry Ford published a half million copies in English and distributed them widely. (In the 1960’s while on a visit to the home of Jordanian diplomats in Aman, I found a copy of the English version on his bookshelf. It was signed by Henry Ford and had been given to the diplomat’s father.) Despite the fact that in 1921 the *Times of London* exposed the *Protocols* as a forgery concocted well before the time in which it was set, the publication continued and continues to have a life of its own. Over the course of the 20th century, this forgery has been republished in German, French, Arabic, and an array of other languages. It was used by Nazis to justify their antisemitic campaign. Teachers in the Third Reich used it as an historical document. Today, in addition to becoming an element in anti-Israel attacks, it is broadly

available throughout the world, including on Amazon. It reinforces all the conspiracy theories that have been the fulcrum upon antisemitic hatred pivots.

A more recent iteration of antisemitism is Holocaust denial. Though deniers have no evidence, no witnesses, no narrative and no facts to support their claims, they assert that Jews were able to plant evidence, doctor documents, arrange for “survivors” to give false testimony, and convince the Allies to hold war crimes trials that falsely charged defendants with having committed genocide. According to the deniers’ scenario, Jews used their power to compel Germany to accept responsibility for this massive crime. According to deniers, Jews have compelled Germany to bear a moral and financial burden. They have forced Germany to pay billions in reparations to these “non-existent” victims, their families, and Jewish organizations. In addition, they have compelled the world to give them a state. In this “explanation” of why the Jews have created this myth, one, once again, encounters the antisemitic template: money (reparations), power (forcing the world to give them a state), and nefarious intellect (being able to pull off such a massive hoax). According to deniers, the Germans and Palestinians, if not the entire world, were the victims of this putative hoax.

Today we see antisemitism emerging from both the right and the left. For some people on the progressive left, those who possess power cannot possibly be victim. Their view of prejudice is refracted through a prism that has two facets: class and race. Someone who is wealthy or from a group that is considered wealthy and someone who is white or from a group that is considered white cannot be a victim. When Jews claim to be victims, these progressives dismiss their claims as invalid and as a means of subterfuge designed to deflect attention from

other issues, e.g. Israel. Once again Jews have engaged in their devious ways using trickery and false accusations to accomplish their goals.

On the right, antisemitism comes from extremists and populists who, in contrast to those on the progressive left that I have described above, do not consider Jews to be white. These white supremacists believe that they are being subjected to a genocide of white Christians. Refugees, people of color, and others who are less talented and accomplished are pushing them out of their jobs and their positions. The only rational way they have of explaining this development is that someone is engineering their “replacement.” They find that culprit in “the” Jew, who, as per usual, acts in subterfuge, pulling the strings behind the scene. This is what the marchers in Charlottesville meant when they chanted, “Jews will not replace us.” It is why the shooter in Pittsburgh, even after he was subdued by the SWAT team, told officers that he wanted all Jews to die because they were committing genocide against his (white) people.

It also comes from Islamist extremist and, sadly, increasingly from some segments – certainly not all – of Muslim communities who, while they do not engage in terror or even violence, are inculcated with a hatred of Jews. We see this in Europe in particular, often among new arrivals. I stress that this is symptomatic of *segments* of that community. Certainly not all.

Irrespective of whether these charges come from the right or the left, Christians, Muslims or atheists, they always rely on the same themes that we have repeatedly seen: the nefarious Jew, unscrupulously manipulating matters behind the scene acting to his own advantage and to the detriment of the non-Jew, particularly the white Christian.

Ultimately, the hatred that is antisemitism can best be compared to a herpes virus, a disease that cannot be cured. Just like this virus, it mutates and presents in different ways and in different parts of the body. Medication may ease the symptoms. However, in its essence, it remains the same, always lurking beneath the surface ready to emerge at a time of stress. So too with antisemitism. It has taken vastly different forms. And it persists.

What then can we do about it? If it is irrational must we simply throw up our hands in defeat? I think not. We must expose its conspiratorial, irrational, and delusion nature. We must challenge others who engage in it. We must familiarize ourselves with its history and understand the terrible consequences of ignoring it. There are no easy correctives, no magic pills, and no silver bullets. This fight might be one that can never result in total victory. The roots of this hatred may be too deeply embedded to every be fully eradicated. However, we must act as if we will be able to achieve that victory. The costs of not doing so are too great.