Antisemitism, an essay by Jonathan Judaken argues, “requires rethinking.”¹ The term’s manifest lack of clarity, its uncertain periodization, and its complex relationship to other forms of oppression all help to explain why. Antisemitism in the United States, one might argue, likewise requires rethinking. For years, a code of silence enveloped the subject. The Jewish lay leader and scholar Cyrus Adler, longtime president of the American Jewish Historical Society, insisted in 1898 that he did “not believe it exists,” and had “entire confidence in the impossibility of its ever existing on the soil of the United States.”² The word “antisemitism” (with or without a hyphen) did not appear even once in Henrietta Szold and Elfrida Cowen’s index to the American Jewish Historical Society’s first twenty volumes of publications. Following World War II, historians focused more on anti-Jewish hatred, but tangled over whether it constituted the exception or the rule in America. How, they wondered, did it compare with other hatreds, such as anti-Black racism, anti-Catholicism, and anti-Mormonism? Should antisemitism be understood as grimly eternal, dependably cyclical, or just as an occasional and episodic factor in American history? And how best to interpret it: as a “cultural code,” revealing less about Jews than about the culture that stigmatizes them, or with a focus on Jews as historical actors, responsible in many ways for their own melancholy fate?³ Finally, is antisemitism different in the United States than in other diaspora lands where Jews have lived, or are claims of “American exceptionalism” with respect to antisemitism just a patriotic illusion?

² Reform Advocate 15 [February 19, 1898], 7.
In rethinking American antisemitism, this essay addresses these questions and likewise offers a brief history and periodization. Following Shulamit Volkov’s insistence that the historian’s role is “to explain how and why a certain form of antisemitism characterizes certain societies at certain times,” the focus here is necessarily delimited. The generalizations, nevertheless, carry implications for the study of antisemitism across space and time.

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In a pathbreaking 1957 essay that serves as a starting point for serious scholarship on American antisemitism, historian John Higham argued that antisemitism played a discontinuous rather than a constant role in American history. He showed that it waxed and waned over time, the peaks and valleys closely linked to social and economic crises. He went on to underscore the theme of ambivalence that helped to explain antisemitism’s cyclical character. “Diverse and conflicting attitudes” toward Jews coexisted in the minds of Americans, he concluded; “many were pro and anti-Jewish at the same time.” He also related antisemitism to social problems, such as mass migration, economic dislocation, and the displacement of elites. Through antisemitism, he argued, society “gave a general problem an ethnic focus.” Deprivation best explained the three core antisemitic groups of the late 19th century, he believed. Agrarian rebels caught up in the Populist movement, patriotic intellectuals in the East, and the urban poor of bustling cities all felt victimized by rapid industrialization. Manifest differences distinguished Kansas farmers, Cambridge intellectuals, and Manhattan day laborers, he knew, but the three groups (like so many other antisemites through the years) shared one great fantasy in common: they believed that Jews lay at the root of their problems.

Higham’s central themes – discontinuity, cultural ambivalence, the link between antisemitism and larger social ills, and conspiratorial
fantasies – dominate the study of American antisemitism to this day. While Higham’s essay focused on the late 19th century, when the word “anti-Semitism” entered the American lexicon, overt forms of anti-Jewish discrimination became commonplace, and immigration spiked, historians soon demonstrated that these same themes applied to earlier and later periods in American history as well.

Antagonism toward Jews, they showed, began with Jewish communal settlement in New Amsterdam (today’s New York) back in 1654. The Dutch governor of that colony, Peter Stuyvesant, who considered all forms of religious nonconformity a threat to public order, singled out Jews as “deceitful,” “very repugnant,” and “hateful enemies and blasphemers of the name of Christ.” He sought to expel the bedraggled Jewish refugees who arrived on his doorstep. “Giving them liberty, we cannot refuse the Lutherans and the Papists!” he exclaimed to the Dutch West India Company back in Amsterdam. Those words serve as a reminder that, in America, the fate of Jews and the fate of other persecuted minority groups were, from the very beginning, entwined.

The Dutch West India Company required Stuyvesant to admit the Jewish refugees. Their economic benefit, in a mercantilist economy, trumped religious prejudice. Still, Jews continued to face episodes of rejection, prejudice, and even occasional violence in the colonial era, while anti-Jewish literary stereotypes abounded. “Jew was still a dirty word,” the great historian of colonial Jewry, Jacob Rader Marcus, reminded his readers, and he showed that “it was hardly rare to see the Jews denigrated as such in the press.” At the same time, he also showed, recalling the theme of ambivalence, that Jews prospered in colonial America and maintained close, sometimes even intimate ties with their non-Jewish neighbors.

The American Revolution effected changes in law and in the relationship of religion to the state that widened the parameters of religious liberty in the new nation. New York, with its long tradition of de facto religious pluralism, became in 1777 the first state to extend the boundaries of “free exercise and enjoyment of religious profession and worship” to “all mankind,” whether Christian or not. The Northwest Ordinance, adopted by the Continental Congress in 1787, extended guarantees of freedom of worship and belief into the territories north of the Ohio River. Finally, the Federal Constitution (1787) and the Bill of Rights (1791) outlawed religious tests “as a qualification to any office or

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public trust under the United States,” and forbade Congress from making any law “respecting an establishment of religion, or prohibiting the free exercise thereof.”

Significantly, none of these major American documents bearing on religious liberty mentions Jews by name. Jews gained their religious rights as individuals along with everybody else – not, as so often the case in Europe and the Caribbean, through a special privilege or “Jew Bill” that set them apart as a group. It did require a hard-fought bill to win Jews the right to hold public office in Maryland in 1826, and it took another fifty-one years before Jews achieved full legal equality in New Hampshire. Issues like Sunday laws, school prayer, and religious celebrations in the public square reminded Jews of their minority status long after that. Nevertheless, on the national level and in most of the American communities where Jews actually lived, they achieved legal equality by the end of the 18th century.

Legal equality, of course, did not automatically translate into social equality, nor did it put an end to antisemitic stereotyping. Whenever tensions rose, such as during the closely fought 1800 election pitting Thomas Jefferson against John Adams, the baiting of Jews formed part of the arsenal of political mud-slingers, even when – as in the case of John Israel of Pittsburgh in 1800 – the candidate in question was not Jewish at all. The range of other antisemitic incidents in the early decades of the young republic spanned the spectrum from literary and cultural stereotyping, social and economic discrimination, attacks on Jewish property, all the way to blood-libel allegations in the New York Herald and lurid descriptions of purported anti-Christian sentiments in classical Jewish texts like the Talmud. In 1820, a newspaper in New York reported to German citizens that the city’s Jews were “not generally regarded with a favorable eye; and Jew is an epithet which is frequently uttered in a tone bordering on contempt.” It concluded that for all of America’s vaunted toleration, “prejudices against the Jews exist here and subject them to inconveniences from which other citizens of the United States are exempt.”

In the popular fiction of the antebellum period one likewise discerns a great many antisemitic motifs. For example, a best-selling popular


novel by George Lippard entitled *Quaker City, or The Monks of Monk Hall* (1844) portrayed a hump-backed Jewish forger, Gabriel Van Gelt, who swindles, blackmails, and commits murder for the sake of money. Joseph Holt Ingraham’s tales, best sellers too, offered a whole cast of dark-eyed Shylocks, beautiful Jewish daughters, and revolting Jewish criminals. But, significantly, Jews rarely appeared as lone villains in these novels. Not only did they have Gentile accomplices, but also in many cases the novels gave expression to more sympathetic understandings of Jewish–Gentile relations. They noted how often Christians oppressed Jews, and observed, perceptively, that people fawned over Jews when they sought to borrow money from them, but cursed those very same Jews if they could not pay that money back.\(^{11}\)

Ambivalence, so central to Higham’s analysis of the late 19th century, turns out to be the key word in understanding how earlier Americans responded to Jews as well. Conflicting emotions, changing experiences, and divergent influences pulled people now one way, now another. At times, the lure of the exotic opened doors to Jews. Rural Americans, for example, sometimes traveled miles just to catch a glimpse of one of God’s chosen people. As would also be seen in the case of Asians, however, the lure of the exotic quickly gave way to fear of the unknown. Outsiders came to view Jews as an alien force, a people apart. As patronizing curiosity yielded to xenophobic delusion, doors slammed shut and Jews found themselves excluded.

A second, even more powerful source of ambivalence, beginning before the Civil War, was a pervasive tension between *received* wisdom about Jews and *perceived* wisdom – between, in other words, the “mythical Jew,” that cursed figure of Christian tradition deeply embedded in Western culture, and the “Jew next door” who seemingly gave the lie to every element of that demonic stereotype. Usually it was the mythical Jew – the unscrupulous moneylender, the eternal wanderer, the satanic Christ-killer – who was flayed by antisemites. If they sometimes realized that Jews of their personal acquaintance did not fit the mold, that pattern was too deeply ingrained to change; it was easier to live with the contradiction. “Them Jews – I don’t mean you” was a phrase that an Upstate New Yorker recalled hearing from her neighbors. Thomas Jefferson, in spite of the liberal sentiments he expressed in correspondence with individual Jews, continued to maintain in other letters that

Jews as a people were morally depraved. Simultaneously, then, individual Jews thrived in the 19th century, often rising to positions of wealth and power. Intermarriage rates, a reliable if sometimes unwelcome sign of religious harmony, likewise spiked to high levels. Yet popular prejudice based on received wisdom continued, nonetheless. When social tensions arose, any purported manifestation of a so-called typical Jewish trait brought all of the old stereotypes back to the fore.\footnote{Jonathan Sarna, “The ‘Mythical Jew’ and the ‘Jew Next Door’ in Nineteenth Century America,” in \textit{Anti-Semitism in American History}, ed. David Gerber (Champaign, IL, 1986), 57–78.}

Of course, African Americans, Catholics, and Mormons experienced the brunt of American religious violence during the nation’s first century. Nothing in American Jewish history from that time paralleled such infamous incidents as the burning by angry white men of the famed Emanuel African Methodist Episcopal Church in Charleston in 1822; the violent anti-Catholic riots that burned and destroyed the Ursuline Convent in Charlestown (today Somerville), Massachusetts, in 1834; or the so-called extermination order issued by the Governor of Missouri in 1838 that declared “the Mormons must be treated as enemies, and must be exterminated or driven from the State.” Never were Jews the nation’s only out-group, nor was Judaism ever the nation’s least favored religion. Whatever prejudice Jews experienced, others suffered far worse.

Still, the Civil War era – a period of heightened racial and religious tension throughout the United States – resulted in an unprecedented surge in antisemitism, “far greater in articulation, repetition, frequency, and in action too,” according to historian Bertram W. Korn, “than had ever before been directed against Jews in America.”\footnote{Bertram W. Korn, \textit{American Jewry and the Civil War} (New York, 1970), xx.} The prominence of several Jews in the ranks of the Confederacy, notably President Jefferson Davis’s right-hand man and cabinet secretary, Judah P. Benjamin (dubbed “an Israelite with Egyptian principles,” by Senator Benjamin Wade of Ohio), heightened prejudice. Generalizing from the few to the many, one newspaper denounced the entire “stiff-necked generation” of the “Children of Israel” as Confederate supporters, although the majority of the nation’s 150,000 or so Jews actually supported the Union. Some likewise blamed Jews for many of the other evils associated with war – smuggling, speculating, price gouging, swindling, and producing “shoddy” merchandise for the military. Indeed, “Jews” came to personify the foulest of wartime capitalism’s ills. This helps to explain why General Ulysses S. Grant, on December
17, 1862, issued General Orders No. 11, “the most sweeping anti-Jewish regulation in all American history.” It expelled “Jews, as a class,” from his war zone – an area stretching from northern Mississippi to Cairo, Illinois, and from the Mississippi River to the Tennessee River – for violating “every regulation of trade.”

The proximity of Grant’s order to the issuing of the Emancipation Proclamation sparked fears in Jewish circles that, with the end of slavery, the status of Blacks would rise and the status of Jews correspondingly fall – a reminder of how much anti-Black racism, before and after the Civil War, shaped the impact of antisemitism in the American setting. Those fears proved groundless, however, for President Abraham Lincoln reversed Grant’s order of expulsion as soon as he heard of it, and proclaimed that he did “not like to hear a class or nationality condemned on account of a few sinners.” Nevertheless, many Civil War-era Americans [including some in the military] continued to perceive all traders, smugglers, sutlers, and wartime profiteers to be “sharp-nosed” Jews, whether they were actually Jewish or not. The implication, echoing a perennial antisemitic canard, was that Jews preferred to benefit from war rather than fight in it. In reality, some 10,000 Jews did fight in the Civil War, and some rose to become high-ranking officers. Jews likewise prospered with the rapid growth of the clothing trade during the war. In the Civil War, as earlier, Jews “as a class” suffered because of what the word “Jew” symbolized, while individual Jews won the respect of their fellow citizens and emerged from the fratricidal struggle more self-assured than they had been before.\(^\text{14}\)

By all accounts, antisemitism crested in the United States between 1877 and World War II, an era of massive social, industrial, economic, urban, and demographic change that dislocated millions of people, threatened traditional patterns of life, and transformed the whole ethnic and religious character of the United States. Outsiders and newcomers, notably Blacks, Jews, and Catholic immigrants, bore the brunt of the social tensions stirred by these cataclysmic changes. In response, “Jim Crow” legislation enshrined segregation between Blacks and whites; Social Darwinist and racialist ideas spread across the country; nativism and isolationism captured hearts and minds; and as America’s Jewish population surged from less than 250,000 to well over 4 million, some persuaded themselves that behind all the changes roiling American life lay a clandestine Jewish conspiracy.

The term “antisemitism,” born in Germany, entered American parlance early in this period. Where Jews had previously been reviled on account of their religion, which some thought conversion could fix, now, like Blacks, they suffered on account of their race; their blood deemed forever inferior to that of the lofty Anglos, Saxons, and Teutons. The late 1870s, consequently, witnessed new forms of discrimination against Jews – similar in kind, if not in degree, to the civil rights violations that characterized the early Jim Crow laws. In 1877, the famed Grand Union hotel in Saratoga, New York, excluded banker Joseph Seligman, friend of President Ulysses S. Grant and one of the country’s most respected Jewish figures. “No Israelites shall be permitted in future to stop at this hotel,” Judge Henry Hilton, the Grand Union’s new owner, announced. Within a few years, “Jews as a class” – the same phrase General Grant had used back in 1862 – were declared unwelcome even at New York’s Coney Island, and social discrimination against Jews became commonplace across the country. “The provident hotel-keeper avoids the contact of the Hebrew purse,” an 1881 article entitled “Jewish Ostracism in America” reported. “The little child in school finds no room for the Jew in the game at recess… In social and professional clubs, the ‘Jew’ is blackballed.”

A short-lived American Society for the Suppression of the Jews, established in 1879, pledged its members, among other things, not to elect Jews to public office, not to attend theaters where Jewish composers wrote the music or Jewish actors performed, not to buy or read books by Jewish authors, not to ride on Jewish-owned railroads, and not to do business with Jewish-owned insurance companies. “The highest social element,” Coney Island developer Austin Corbin explained, “won’t associate with Jews, and that’s all there is about it.”

Antisemitism escalated further in the 20th century. Especially in the years following World War I, Jews faced physical attacks, many forms of discrimination, as well as intense vilification in print, on the airwaves, in movies, and on stage. Immigration restrictions, without explicitly saying so, looked to limit the number of Jews entering the country. Educational quotas, restrictive covenants, occupational discrimination, and physical attacks against Jews limited the civil rights of those who had settled there already. A particularly infamous incident took place in Atlanta where, in 1913, a twenty-nine-year-old Jewish

16 Sarna, When General Grant Expelled the Jews, 126–127.
factory superintendent and local B’nai B’rith leader named Leo Frank was convicted of molesting and murdering one of his employees, thirteen-year-old Mary Phagan, and dumping her body in the basement of the pencil factory where they both worked. The case attracted a frenzy of publicity, and much attention centered on Frank’s religion – the mark of his being an outsider to the South, a symbol of otherness and change. Crowds around the courthouse chanted, “Hang the Jew!” When Georgia governor John Slaton, unpersuaded that Frank was the murderer, commuted his sentence in 1915 from death to life in prison, a mob that included many leading local citizens broke into the jail, kidnapped Frank, and lynched him: the first known lynching of a Jew in American history. Years later an eyewitness confirmed what Frank’s defenders had long believed: that Mary Phagan was murdered by the janitor of the pencil factory, the “star witness” against Frank. Frank himself was innocent.17

Jews’ status as founders sometimes determined the extent of antisemitism in a particular place. Comparative studies reveal that “the degree to which Jews were involved in the early growth of a city and had achieved a notable and respected place in public and private life before the era of mass immigration directly influenced how later generations of Jews were received.”18 Jews in Charleston, Cincinnati, and San Francisco, for example, enjoyed “founder” status. While no prophylactic, this significantly helped to mitigate local antisemitism. Jews in Boston, Minneapolis, and San Diego, by contrast, enjoyed no similar advantage. They arrived in numbers long after the founding of their communities, and as perceived “interlopers” the antisemitism they faced was far worse.19

Following World War I, as Americans grew “disillusioned with internationalism, fearful of Bolshevik subversion, and frightened that foreigners would corrupt the nation’s values and traditions,” manifestations of antisemitism rose further. Immigration restrictions, culminating in the National Origins Immigration (Johnson–Reed) Act of 1924, aimed directly at limiting the number of Jews entering the country. Congressman Albert Johnson, an author of that legislation, argued based

18 Judith Endelman, The Jewish Community of Indianapolis (Bloomington, IN, 1984), 3.
19 Higham, Send These to Me: Immigrants in Urban America (Baltimore, MD, 1984), 141–147.
on a report from the director of the Consular Service that America was in danger of being swamped by “abnormally twisted” and “unassimilable” Jews, “filthy, unAmerican, and often dangerous in their habits.”

Resulting legislation did not explicitly mention Jews, and other groups faced restrictions as well, but the law’s impact on persecuted Jews proved particularly severe. Between 1925 and 1934, an average of only 8,270 Jews were annually admitted into the country, less than 7 percent of those welcomed when Jewish immigration stood at its peak.

More explicitly, the president of the Central Conference of American Rabbis gravely reported that “within three years following the close of the war, there was perhaps more antisemitic literature published and distributed in the United States than in any previous period of its history.” What made this literature particularly insidious and incendiary was that so much of it bore the imprimatur of a national hero, automaker Henry Ford. For ninety-one straight issues beginning on May 22, 1920, Ford’s weekly newspaper, the Dearborn Independent, purported to describe an international Jewish conspiracy based on the notorious antisemitic forgery known as The Protocols of the Elders of Zion, first published in Russia in 1905. Four volumes entitled The International Jew, drawn from the series, reprinted these scurrilous charges and disseminated them in hundreds of thousands of copies— including such fantastic claims as “Rule of the Jewish Kehillah Grips New York” or “Jewish Jazz Becomes Our National Music.” The claims reveal more about Ford and his disdain for changes in American society than they do about Jews. Only in 1927, under intense economic and legal pressure, did Ford publicly apologize “for resurrecting exploded fictions, for giving currency to ... gross forgeries, and for contending that the Jews have been engaged in a conspiracy.” But by then the damage had been done.

While Ford attacked Jews in public, numerous American universities and colleges, including Harvard, Yale, and Princeton, privately worked to limit the number of Jewish students they admitted, as did a plethora of private academies and preparatory schools. The extent of the restrictive quotas and the means used to achieve them differed from place to place, but what really mattered for Jews was that they were excluded not on the

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basis of merit but simply on account of their ancestry and faith. Even harsher restrictions faced Jews in fraternities, clubs, hotels, resorts, and elite neighborhoods – there, in many cases, they were shut out completely. Clubs in fifteen different cities large and small are known to have barred Jews, while discrimination at luxury resorts was “near universal.” In addition, bigoted practices and “restrictive covenants” excluded Jews from some of the most desirable neighborhoods in major cities and newly emerging suburbs. Some inviting apartments on Coney Island, for example, shamelessly advertised themselves as being “sensibly priced, sensibly built, [and] sensibly restricted.”

Physical violence against Jews likewise became common during this period. In the 1920s, the revived Ku Klux Klan badly frightened Jews, though it directed most of its animus against Blacks and Catholics. Attacks increased in the 1930s, particularly in cities where German Americans sympathetic to Adolf Hitler took to the streets, and where Catholic supporters of the increasingly pro-Nazi radio priest Father Charles Coughlin beat Jews mercilessly. Coughlin, with his reputed audience of 30 million, whipped listeners into a frenzy with his depictions of alleged Jewish misdeeds around the world. He explained Nazi attacks against German Jews on Kristallnacht [November 9–10, 1938] as a “defense mechanism” against Communism, for which he held Jews totally responsible. A largely Irish quasi-military organization called the Christian Front (1938–1940), inspired by Coughlin, went on to denounce President “Rosenfelt” for what it called the “Jew Deal,” conducted Nazi propaganda meetings, and physically attacked Jews in New York, Boston, and Philadelphia. Meanwhile, the German-American Bund, established in 1936 and secretly funded by the Nazis, distributed anti-Jewish propaganda (including blood libels), organized youth camps on the model of the Hitler Youth in Germany, and conducted mass demonstrations, including one that filled Madison Square Garden on February 20, 1939. By then, more than four in ten Americans told pollsters that Jews had “too much power in the United States.” Some, as an antidote, proposed that Jews be driven from the country.


Yet for all that it had become widespread, antisemitism never went unopposed. Liberal newspapers and organizations like the Anti-Defamation League of B’nai B’rith openly fought it; a growing interfaith movement headed by liberal-minded clergy worked to counter it; and Jews themselves often found ways to circumvent it, sometimes by patronizing en masse those institutions that accepted them and by creating parallel institutions (Jewish country clubs, Jewish fraternities, etc.) to the ones that excluded them. In comparison to their counterparts in most of Europe, where Jews increasingly feared for their lives, American Jews considered themselves fortunate.

Following World War II, especially as consciousness of the destruction of European Jewry rose and Americans sought to distinguish themselves, ideologically, from the Nazis whom they had defeated, organized antisemitism in America declined dramatically. Between 1946 and 1950, the percentage of Americans who claimed to have heard “any criticism or talk against the Jews in the last six months” dropped from 64 percent to 24 percent. Thanks to federal and state legislation, pressure from returning veterans, government and media exposure (including films like Gentleman’s Agreement), and the stigma of being compared to the Nazis, discrimination against Jews in employment, housing, and daily life also markedly declined. By the early 1960s, almost all resorts and housing developments had dropped their restrictive clauses; antisemitic college quotas had mostly ended; and professional fields like law, medicine, and banking proved more receptive to Jews than at any previous time in the 20th century. The former director of the Anti-Defamation League, Benjamin R. Epstein, who devoted his career to fighting antisemitism, described the twenty years following World War II as a “golden age” for American Jews, one in which they “achieved a greater degree of economic and political security, and a broader social acceptance, than had ever been known by any Jewish community since the [ancient] Dispersion.”

The South served as the major exception to this perceived “golden age.” This was surprising since public philosemitism had long characterized the region. North Carolina’s late 19th-century governor, Zebulon B. Vance, credited Jews with “all that is excellent on earth or in heaven,” and even historians have insisted that the region “exhibited less antisemitism and even nativism than certainly the East and Midwest.” A more recent study, however, perceptively argues that southern philo-Semitism

Sarna, American Judaism, 276–277.
was foremost a ‘courting’ of a somewhat white minority in the struggle for southern white self-determination.” It portrays the region’s Jews as “integrated outsiders”: suspected because they were Jews, accepted because they were manifestly not Black.25 Jewish support for the civil rights movement threatened this knotty relationship. Fear of Communism (a movement which won support from a noisy Jewish minority, but for which the entire Jewish community was often implicated) and the extraordinary social changes that the South experienced resulted, during the 1950s, in a spate of “bombing outrages” directed against Black and Jewish institutions alike. In just one twelve-month period (1957–1958), “eleven sticks of dynamite were found at a temple in Charlotte; a synagogue in Miami and the Nashville Jewish Center were bombed on the same day; undetonated dynamite was found at a temple in Gastonia, North Carolina; a Jacksonville, Florida synagogue was dynamited; and dynamite with a burnt-out fuse was found at Temple Beth-El in Birmingham, Alabama.” Then, in the early morning hours of October 12, 1958, a nitroglycerine bomb equal to fifty sticks of dynamite tore apart The Temple, the oldest and most distinguished Reform congregation in Atlanta. All in all, some 10 percent of the bombs planted by extremists between 1954 and 1959 targeted Jewish institutions – synagogues, rabbis’ homes, and community centers. Most of the other 90 percent targeted African American institutions.26 Attacks on synagogues continued in the 1960s. A widely distributed paperback with the explosive title 165 Temples Desecrated, published in 1971, chronicled those that took place just between 1965 and 1970. The best-known and most notorious occurred in Jackson, Mississippi, in 1967, where white supremacists bombed Temple Beth Israel’s newly dedicated house of worship and then, two months later, returned to bomb the home of the temple’s rabbi, Perry Nussbaum.

Even as anti-Semites in the South targeted Jews for supporting civil rights, some African Americans in the North turned on Jews for not supporting civil rights enough. For decades, Blacks and Jews in the North had enjoyed something of a special relationship both as victims of prejudice and as allies in the battle to oppose it, but in the 1960s, the interests, visions, and priorities of the two communities began to diverge. Merit-based educational programs aided Jews far more than


they did Blacks, antisemitism declined faster than racism, and Jews moved out to sparkling suburbs while Blacks languished in dangerous inner cities. Subsequently, young radical advocates of “Black Power,” in conscious rebellion against their elders, came to view Jews more as obstacles than as allies. Some of them spread the hateful canard that Jews bore central responsibility for slavery; others embraced the Palestinian cause and railed against the State of Israel. A series of well-publicized clashes over public school governance, small business ownership, neighborhood rule, and related grievances culminated, in 1991, in an ugly riot – local Jews dubbed it a pogrom – in the Crown Heights section of Brooklyn. Jews blamed “radical extremists” within the Black community for fanning the flames of hatred, and braced themselves for worse to come.27

Contrary to expectations, though, tensions between Blacks and Jews thereafter abated, in part because Blacks and Jews, in most of America, no longer abutted one another, and partly because responsible leaders in both communities labored to tamp down tensions. When Leonard Dinnerstein published the first and only scholarly history of American antisemitism, in 1994, his book ended on a hopeful note. “Greater tolerance and acceptance of diversity in the United States,” he concluded, showed that antisemitism “has declined in potency and will continue to do so for the foreseeable future.”28 Members of the millennial generation, born at that time, soon concluded that Jews had finally become “white folks” in America and were past persecution. Only “people of color,” now faced hatred, they thought. Academic books supported this thesis; one bore the arresting title The Death of American Antisemitism (2000). Journalist Jonathan Weisman reports hearing the popular version of this same thesis from the daughter of a girlfriend. “Anti-Semitism,” she told him, “basically doesn’t exist.”29

At the margins of society, antisemitism nevertheless endured. On the extreme political right, Holocaust deniers, conspiracy theorists who maintain that Jews or Zionists control western governments (they label them “Zionist Occupied Governments” [ZOG]), neo-Nazis, and

28 Dinnerstein, Antisemitism in America, 250.
white supremacists continued to spout hatred against Jews. On the extreme political left, Black nationalists; those who delegitimize, demonize, and apply double-standards to the State of Israel; neo-Communists who blame Jews for capitalism and globalization; as well as advocates for the third world who view America and Jews as interlinked colonialist oppressors spouted anti-Jewish hatred too. Islamist elements within American Islam, influenced by their Arab counterparts in the Middle East, joined in these antisemitic attacks, eliding American Jews with Palestinians’ longtime enemies, the Israelis. These three groups, much like the antisemitic agrarian rebels, patrician intellectuals, and urban poor of the late 19th century, actually had different complaints, different agendas, and little outwardly in common. What they did share, however, was the one great fantasy that so often characterizes anti-Semites: they believed that Jews lay at the root of their problems.

From these margins, antisemitism roared back into the mainstream during the 21st century. The so-called alternative (“alt”) right, defined as “a set of far-right ideologies, groups and individuals whose core belief is that ‘white identity’ is under attack by multicultural forces using ‘political correctness’ and ‘social justice’ to undermine white people and their civilization,” developed and gained strength during these years, fueled by social media outlets and online message boards.30 A particularly popular website, launched in 2013, called itself the Daily Stormer, in conscious imitation of the Nazi newspaper Der Stürmer.

Due in no small part to the alt-right, the 2016 election was riddled with antisemitic memes and messages. A horrified Washington Post correspondent concluded that “Anti-Semitism is no longer an undertone of Trump’s campaign. It’s the melody.”31 A “Unite the Right” rally in Charlottesville, Virginia, just one year later, witnessed chants of “the Jews will not replace us.” A year after that, on October 27, 2018, a mass shooting at Pittsburgh’s Tree of Life synagogue, allegedly perpetrated by a white nationalist who railed on social networks against immigrants and the Hebrew Immigrant Aid Society, left eleven people dead and seven wounded, the deadliest attack ever on a US Jewish community. Another attack six months later on the Chabad of

Poway Synagogue, charged to a gunman who accused Jews of planning “genocide of the European race,” reinforced fears that alt-right extremists had Jews in their sights.

The alt-right, however, is not alone in fomenting contemporary antisemitism. An attack in 2019 that killed five people at a kosher market in Jersey City and another that same year on the Hanukkah party of a Hasidic rabbi in Monsey that killed one and wounded five demonstrated that militant African Americans on the extreme left have likewise committed antisemitic violence. More commonly, left-wing antisemitism has been concealed under the guise of “anti-Zionism.” It demonizes those who support Israel and insists, as Columbia University Professor Joseph Massad put it, that “The Jews are not a nation” and that “The Jewish State is a racist state that does not have a right to exist.” Nearly three quarters of all Jewish students surveyed in one 2015 study reported being victimized by antisemitic canards, mostly from left-wing faculty and students, “including the claims that Jews have too much power and that Israelis behave ‘like Nazis’ toward the Palestinians.”

Radical Islamists in the United States have been particularly prone to extend their hatred of Israel to all Jews. One Muslim, in 2006, shot up the Jewish Federation of Greater Seattle. Another, in 2018, aimed his car at Jews exiting a Los Angeles synagogue. A Muslim congresswoman from Minnesota, Ilhan Omar, while denying that she is an Islamist, charged that American politicians get paid to support Israel. “It’s all about the Benjamins,” she explained.

Fully 88 percent of American Jews described antisemitism as a “very serious problem” or “somewhat of a problem” in a 2019 Anti-Defamation League poll. Almost a third admitted that they avoided “publicly wearing, carrying, or displaying things” that might identify them as Jews. These statistics reflected a record number of antisemitic incidents in 2019, with more reports of assault, vandalism, and harassment than in any year since the Anti-Defamation League began tracking such incidents forty years earlier. Although one study found that “the perpetrators of anti-Jewish hate crimes seem to have nothing clearly uniting them – race, age, political affiliation – except their anti-Semitic intent,” and although many linked antisemitism to an overall

climate of hatred and divisiveness in the United States, the existence of antisemitism within American society could no longer seriously be questioned.

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Antisemitism’s return raised anew the question of American exceptionalism. Is America really different from other countries with respect to antisemitism? Might extremists – from the right or from the left – someday turn on Jews? Could something parallel to the Nazi Holocaust ever happen in the United States? In looking to history to help answer these questions, five key factors that have long lent a special color to American antisemitism, differentiating it from the history of antisemitism elsewhere, must be taken into account.

In America, Jews have always been able to fight back against antisemitism freely. Never having received their emancipation as an “award” (which was the case in Europe), Jews have had no fears of losing it. Instead, from the beginning, they made full use of their freedom, especially freedom of speech. As early as 1784, a “Jew Broker,” probably the famed Revolutionary-era Jewish bond dealer Haym Salomon, responded publicly and forcefully to the antisemitic charges of a prominent Quaker lawyer, not hesitating to remind him that his “own religious sectary” could also form “very proper subjects of criticism and animadversion.”

A few years later, Christian missionaries and their supporters faced Jewish responses no less strident in tone. Where European Jews often prided themselves on their “forbearance” in the face of attack, Rabbi Isaac Mayer Wise, the great Reform Jewish leader, once boasted that he was a “malicious, biting, pugnacious, challenging, and mocking monster of the pen.” In more recent times, Jewish defense organizations have taken on anyone who maligned Jews, including national heroes like General George S. Patton, and even multiple Presidents of the United States.

American antisemitism has always had to compete with other forms of animus. Racism, nativism, anti-Quakerism, Anglophobia, Islamophobia, anti-Catholicism, anti-Masonry, anti-Mormonism, anti-Orientalism, anti-Teutonism – these and other waves of hatred have

periodically swept over the American landscape, scarring and battering citizens. Americans have long been extraordinarily pluralistic in their hatreds. Precisely because the objects of hatred have been so varied, hatred has generally been diffused. No one outgroup experiences the full brunt of national odium. Mosques and Black churches today are as much at risk as synagogues. Furthermore, most Americans retain bitter memories of days past when they or their ancestors were themselves the targets of malevolence. The American strain of antisemitism is thus less potent than its European counterpart, and it faces a larger number of natural competitors. To reach epidemic proportions, it must first crowd out a vast number of contending hatreds.

**Antisemitism is more foreign to American ideals than to European ones.** The central documents of the Republic assure Jews of liberty; its first president, in his famous letter to the Jews of Newport, conferred upon them his blessing. The fact that antisemitism can properly be branded “un-American,” although no protection in the formal sense – the nation has betrayed its ideals innumerable times including in our own day – still grants Jews a measure of protection. Elsewhere antisemites could always claim legitimacy stemming from times past when the Volk ruled, and Jews knew their place. Americans could point to nothing even remotely similar to that in their own past.

**America’s religious tradition – what has been called “the great tradition of the American churches” – is inhospitable to antisemitism.** Religious freedom and diversity, church–state separation, denominationalism, and voluntarism, the key components of this tradition, militate against the kinds of us/them dichotomies (“Germans and Jews,” “Poles and Jews”, etc.) so common in Europe. In America, where religious pluralism rules supreme, there has never been a single national church from which Jews stand apart. People speak instead of American Protestants, American Catholics, American Jews, American Muslims, and American Buddhists – implying, at least as an ideal, that all faiths stand equal in the eyes of the law.

**American politics resists antisemitism.** In a two-party system where close elections are the rule, neither party can long afford to alienate any major bloc of voters. State-sponsored antisemitism, so common in Europe, has never factored in American politics. For the most part, the politics of hatred have been meted out against nonvoters like African Americans (until they won the vote), or nonvoting immigrants, or confined to noisy third parties like the anti-Catholic Know Nothings in the 19th century, or to single-issue fringe groups. America’s
most successful politicians, now and in the past, have more commonly sought support from respectable elements across the political spectrum. For the most part, appeals to unity have won more elections than appeals to narrow provincialism or to bigotry.

These five factors, historically distinguishing the American strain of antisemitism from other varieties, are as vital to recall as those common factors that are familiar to students of antisemitism everywhere in the world. As a “cultural code,” antisemitism reveals as much (or more) about America as about Jews. Historically, as John Higham observed back in 1957, the study of American antisemitism has risen and fallen along with antisemitism itself. Calls to “rethink” American antisemitism are thus, among many other things, a sign of trouble.

Further Reading


Dinnerstein, L., Antisemitism in America [New York, 1994]. The only scholarly history of American antisemitism from colonial America through the 1990s.


Higham, J., “Anti-Semitism in the Gilded Age: A Reinterpretation,” The Mississippi Valley Historical Review 43 [March 1957], 559–578. This path-breaking article began the serious study of American antisemitism and articulated concepts that remain fundamental to its comprehension and study.

Oney, S., *And the Dead Shall Rise: The Murder of Mary Phagan and the Lynching of Leo Frank* [New York, 2003]. The definitive study of the Leo Frank case which rocked Georgia and much of the American Jewish community from 1913 to 1915 and resulted in a torrent of antisemitism. Leo Frank was kidnapped from jail and lynched on the night of August 16, 1915.

Sarna, J. D., *When General Grant Expelled the Jews* [New York, 2012]. The only full-scale study of Ulysses S. Grant’s General Orders No. 11 expelling Jews from his war zone in December 1862, amid the Civil War. Abraham Lincoln overturned the order and Grant subsequently atoned for it.