

The Return of the Jewish Question

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There is an old joke that Jews tell themselves: What is the definition of antisemitism? “Antisemitism is disliking Jews more than absolutely necessary.” But this will only get us so far as a definition, although like all good jokes it contains an element of profound truth, which I’ll return to in a couple of minutes.

As for its origins, negative attitudes towards Jews have been with us for all of recorded history—in fact the first pogrom—localized violence by non-Jews against their Jewish neighbors—was documented by Philo of Alexandria in 38CE. Scholars of pre-Christian antiquity highlight popular dislike of Jews for their abstract, invisible yet all powerful god, for their practice of male circumcision, for their dietary laws which prevented them from accepted the hospitality of non-Jews, for their communal solidarity and supposed clannishness and refusal to wed outside of the community, for the sense of allegiance to the priestly authority in Jerusalem, and for the willingness to pray “for” but not “to” non-Jewish kings and emperors.

Christianity of course added to this mix a whole new set of charges—Jews stubborn focus on the literal as opposed to the spirit of their own laws and texts (St Paul spoke of a circumcision of the heart as a substitute for the physical deed) and most importantly their refusal to accept the enveloping and superceding of their own practices and beliefs within Christianity and, perhaps most crucially for Jews characterizing the worship of Jesus as a form of idolatry, a stance connected to their supposed guilt for having a hand in Jesus’s death. The epithet “Judaizer” became a common form of criticism among early Christians.

It is undoubtedly true that these much older sources of anti-Jewish sentiments persist in some quarters, but when we speak of anti-Semitism, we are talking about a specific ideology that took shape only in the 19th century as a response to what was known then as The Jewish Question. It is the Jewish question that produced modern anti-Semitism, something that may have taken on certain features of the older anti-Judaism but was qualitatively different.

What is the Jewish Question? More precisely, what was termed the Jewish question? What scholars and observers came to call the Jewish question in the 18th and 19th century, they meant in a very technical sense, and it involved the political, social, and legal status of the Jews in the wake of the French revolution and even more precisely the extension of citizenship to the masses. Could Jews also be citizens? Would they be loyal to the French nation or to the Jewish people? If so, could they be citizens of France or England or Germany as Jews? Surging national aspirations of the Hungarians, Poles, Czechs and Germans in 1848 put the question squarely on the table: if citizens of specific national cultures were now the sovereigns of their countries, if they owned the polity, what would be the status of the Jews? Could they be integrated into modern society? In some ways,

the Jewish question as defined in the 18th, 19th, and early 20th centuries, occupied a huge space in public discourse in Europe and it wouldn't be an exaggeration to say it was the equivalent then to what became the race question in the United States.

The Jewish question divided European public opinion, sometimes bitterly. Some argued that Jews could become citizens if they gave up their religious distinctiveness, that is, if they converted to Christianity, others argued that they could remain Jews if they kept their religion a private matter (citizens in the street, Jews at home), other maintained that Jews were simply unassimilable, they would never be loyal to the nation, and their role and status in modern societies was downright poisonous. It is this latter group, those who saw the Jews as a foreign and undesirable body in the nation, who first articulated the ideology of anti-Semitism.

Antisemites saw Jews either as exemplars of a new soulless, urban, materialist modernity or alternatively as competitors for the dominance of modern sectors of the economy. Conspiracy theories were the stock and trade of antisemitism. Jews secretly controlled societies. They were equally powerful within the capitalist economy and in the socialist movements and communist parties that sought to overthrow capitalism. Jews, seen through this lens were everywhere, in culture, in science in journalism, in politics, in art, in the cities, and the world had become a Jewish world. This obsession with a world that had become Jewish marked and continues to mark the worldview of the antisemite. Antisemites were not in a majority everywhere and its proponents waxed and waned in popularity, but they did set the tone for public discussion of the Jewish questions virtually everywhere.

So, we have antisemitism as a specific response to the rise of modern citizenship throughout Europe in the 18th and 19th centuries. It won't surprise you to know that the era of the pogrom, a Russian word to describe modern and localized exclusionary violence against Jews, began in Western Europe and spread to Eastern Europe with the spread of citizenship rights, from France and Germany in 1815 to Germany, Prague and Budapest in 1848, to Poland and the Russian empire from 1881 onward. Of course, the core feature of modern politics and modern citizenship is the franchise, the right to vote. Where few Jews lived the extension of the franchise did not threaten dominant ethnic majorities, but where Jews lived in millions, the potential of large Jewish voting blocks, voting for Jewish parties of various sorts and this posed a serious threat to the cultural, social, economic, and ultimately political dominance of the majority.

Where all of this ends, we know, and it need not detain us for long; I have devoted a great deal of my career to understanding the Holocaust. The German extermination effort in some ways constitutes an endpoint for the Jewish question in Europe as I have defined it here.

Demographic changes—six million Jews killed in World War II, if before the war, there were 14 million Jews in the world, today there now again approximately 14 million. But if before they war they lived in Europe and America, today more than 80 percent live in Israel and the United States.

Does the Jewish question exist in the same way as it did before? Clearly not exactly, as there is now a Jewish sovereign state. But clearly a European problem has now become an Asian problem. The new Jewish question is the question of Israel. The hope of the creation of the state of Israel is that it would alter the situation for both Jews in the Diaspora and in the Jewish state itself. And this has largely occurred, but not completely.

In the wake of the Holocaust and in the general democratization of American society, Antisemitism waned in both the US and American occupied Western Europe. The existence and security of the state of Israel largely saved the Jews of the dictatorial regimes of the Arab and Communist world, where anti-Semitism was a quasi state ideology for almost 40 years. In the democratic West, however, especially the United States, however, things were different. It is worth pondering for a moment, why the existence of Israel for so long did not lead to a charge a dual loyalty (and such a charge would indeed constitute a revival of the old Jewish question). Jews after all are proud of Isarel and it would not be an exaggeration to say that for many Jews the existence of the state of Israel is what allows them to lead normal lives in the Diaspora—the creation of a Jewish army helped diminish the contempt with which Jews were viewed even by those who did not actively hate them.

It seems to me that Jews have largely not been charged with dual loyalty for a couple of reasons. First, the strategic relationship between Israel and the United States has now existed for more than a quarter century and the connections between the two countries are exceptionally close. This is true both at the level of military and strategic cooperation, but perhaps even more profoundly, at a cultural level. I'm a frequent visit to Israel and have held a recurrent visiting professorship at the Hebrew University. I can't recall ever having heard a lecture in Hebrew in Israel without the speaker throwing in some Americanism—usually in the original or even more comically with some Israeli ending, my favorite is the Israel plural for Hipster, which is hipsterim. Though Isarelis learn English at school from an early age, most of what they know as adults seems to come from watching American movies and thus imbibing American popular culture. Whereas the founders of the state were shaped by European ideas and their languages, today's generation gets its orientation from the United states. I think most Israelis feel a special bond with America.

But even this affinity between the United States and Israel might not have prevented charges of dual loyalty against American Jews were it not for a change in the meaning of citizenship itself in the United States since World War II. The change from a regime of national citizenship to one of multicultural and even cosmopolitan citizenship has made it much easier for Americans of all backgrounds to spread their affections between the United States itself and their cultural homelands whether those homelands are in Latin America, Asia, or the Middle East. But of course we live in interesting times—this new model of citizenship is currently being brought into question by a new, let us call it neo-nationalist model here in the United States and one could easily envision a renewal of charges of dual loyalty coming from the political right, in a similar key to that articulated by Pat Buchanan in the 1990s and taken up by the alt-right today. In a strange way, one

could ever foresee a situation in which the American right became pro-Israel but anti-Semitic. Indeed, one doesn't have to read too deeply into the right-wing press to encounter such attitudes. Israel is fine, so the argument would go, and that's where Jews who like it should go live. The charge of dual loyalty, which one might say motivated the original Jewish question has not disappeared and Israel has not solved that problem for Jews living in the United States or elsewhere in the diaspora.

It is, however, perhaps ironic that the charge of dual loyalty over the past decade has not primarily been one from the right but has been a hazy feature of the academic left. And here Israel reenters the picture. For those critical of Israel the logic involved is simple enough and runs as follows: the Israeli government discriminates against its Arab minority and continues a military occupation for over five decades of the West Bank, and has not done its part in solving the long standing territorial dispute because the United States lets it and subsidizes it with billions of dollars in military aid each year, and why does the United States permit this and even promote it? Because guess who controls US decision making behind the scenes in the United States? You got it, the Jews. It's a painful set of syllogisms and in some ways harkens back to the anti-Semitic rhetoric of the 19th century in which Jewish conspiracies lurk behind every corner. This discourse infects campus politics, and the politics of Israel on campus is a neuralgic point virtually everywhere, including my own university. But this discourse of the left which casts virtually every Jew with some warm feelings for the existence of a Jewish state as somehow an ambassador for this state, does in some way bring us back to the older Jewish question of 19th and 20th century Europe, and I have to say I worry about that.