



Why Addressing Antisemitism Requires Fighting for Justice



Isaac Luria

Given how often accusations of antisemitism are levied at critics of Israel, recent battles over how to define antisemitism have provoked wide controversy across the political spectrum, both within the Jewish community and beyond.

For years, Jewish organizations and leaders have held to a broad consensus supporting the International Holocaust Remembrance Alliance (IHRA) definition of antisemitism, including its understanding that it is antisemitic to deny the “Jewish right to self-determination in Israel” or to “[claim] that the existence of a State of Israel is a racist endeavor.”¹

This consensus has dissolved in recent years as critics have taken issue with the definition’s conflation of harsh criticism of Israel and

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antisemitism. Concurrently, the political right has sought to use the definition to restrict free speech of pro-Palestinian advocates. President Trump signed an executive order in December 2019 to enshrine the IHRA definition of antisemitism as United States policy, offering new avenues for the federal government to set restrictions on government funding for educational institutions if those institutions were found to have facilitated harsh criticism of Israel that met the definition of antisemitism.

The lead author of IHRA definition, Kenneth Stern, wrote at the time that the definition was developed as a data tracking tool and should not be used to restrict funding to educational institutions. The Anti-Defamation League, however, welcomed it: “Today’s announcement that the U.S. will adopt the IHRA working definition of anti-Semitism is an important step acknowledging the growing concern about anti-Semitism on American college campuses.”

Critics from the left also called foul as state-based bills sought to use elements of IHRA definition of antisemitism to criminalize pro-Palestinian non-violent advocacy and the Boycott, Divestment, and Sanctions movement against Israel. According, again, to the ADL, 17 states have approved measures to “prevent discrimination in state contracts and investments by ensuring that taxpayer funds are not used to subsidize discrimination against Israel or a person doing business in Israel.” These laws have real world impacts. A Palestinian-owned engineering company in Texas, which had a 17-year business relationship with the city of Houston, recently filed a lawsuit challenging a new contractual obligation that the company not engage in any BDS activity, citing free speech concerns. As business owner Russ Hassouna stated in his complaint, “Israel is an occupier of my homeland and it is an Apartheid State. It is my right and duty to boycott Israel and any products of Israel.”

Today, newer definitions of antisemitism, such as those proposed by Nexus Project and the Jerusalem Declaration on Antisemitism, are challenging the hegemony of the IHRA definition. Supporters of IHRA, in turn, have lobbied the Trump and Biden administrations

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as well as members of Congress to publicly affirm the IHRA definition and exclude all others.

Regardless of where one lines up on this debate, there is something essential missing in the public fray over the definition of antisemitism. Rather than arguing over definitions (is this or that antisemitic?) we should be exploring how political systems, including our own, encourage and sustain antisemitic speech and activity.

Definitions also risk separating antisemitism from other forms of racism, like anti-black racism and Islamophobia. Defining antisemitism in a vacuum creates the ground for bad analysis and worse strategy, and leaves Jews and our allies dangerously ill-equipped to mount an effective response to the recent reemergence of antisemitism and to motivate allies to join the Jewish community’s just battle against antisemitism.

ANTISEMITISM AS INSTRUMENT

Antisemitism can lead to violent acts of Jew-hatred or policies that prevent Jewish participation in political, social, academic, or cultural life—as in Germany in the 1930s, across the Russian Empire from 1700s–1900s, and at certain moments in U.S. history. We can call these forms of *structural antisemitism*. Today, the structural antisemitism that denied Jews access to the privileges afforded to people who are considered white in the United States has mostly faded away.

But antisemitism can generate a political constituency that aspires to purify society from “contaminants” without ever resorting to violence or egregious policy. Populist political projects across the political spectrum use antisemitism as a dirty fuel for their reactionary movements, even in places where there are tiny or non-existent Jewish communities, such as Hungary, Sweden, and Japan.^{2,3} David Nirenberg, a scholar of antisemitism at the University of Chicago, explains: “Anti-Judaism is actually a system of thought that people can use to explain many of the challenges they face, even when there are no Jews around.”⁴ This is reminiscent of older forms of European antisemitism that turned Jewish money lenders and merchants into “useful scapegoats.” We might say that antisemitism is so politically useful that if it didn’t exist, it would have to be invented. These forms of antisemitism we can refer to as *instrumental antisemitism*, and

they currently have a greater impact on our politics than structural antisemitism has in the recent past.

Instrumental antisemitism inspires episodic attacks on Jewish people and institutions. In August 2017, at a Unite the Right rally held in Charlottesville, Virginia, white supremacists chanted “Jews will not replace us,” while opposing the removal of Confederate monuments from public places and the gaining of political power by Black and Brown people in the city government. In October 2018, a white nationalist yelling “All Jews must die” opened fire on worshippers at the Tree of Life synagogue in Squirrel Hill, Pittsburgh, killing eleven congregants and wounding six others, resulting in the most violent antisemitic attack in American history.

We cannot and should not ignore these instances of violence. But the greatest impact of instrumental antisemitism today is not on its near-term murderous effects on Jewish people, but rather its energizing of far-right white supremacist social movements and its undermining of racial and economic justice movements advocating for equitable policies in multiracial democratic societies. This insight holds the key to effectively combating antisemitism.

“ON BOTH SIDES”: HOW COMMON IS INSTRUMENTAL ANTISEMITISM?

It is all too common today for Jewish leaders to call out antisemitism on “the left,” “the right,” or on “both sides.” This is lazy analysis. Antisemitism is better understood as a political tool employed by reactionary forces to organize their supporters. Examples help illustrate how this works; what follows are examples of how four very different movements use instrumental antisemitism for this purpose: white supremacists, elements of the Israeli right, the Nation of Islam, and Hamas militants.

Far-right ideologues stoke antisemitism to make sense of why people they believe to be subhuman are winning the larger fight for equality and civil rights. As well as coddling antisemitism in its ranks, the American right also uses antisemitism to undermine center-left and leftist alliances, push Jewish institutions and funders away from the left and towards the right, and draw attention away from the antisemitism of white nationalists. They claim that movements for racial justice are orchestrated by shadowy anti-American Jewish interlopers intent on destabilizing the country. (George Soros is paying Black

Lives Matter protestors in Minneapolis!) The kind of antisemitism that aims to discredit social movements fighting for anti-racist policies, while dangerous to Jews, hurts people of color even more because of its efficacy in undermining wide multiracial coalitions for economic and racial justice that might deliver on an anti-racist vision for U.S. government policy.

Even the Israeli right is not immune to the temptation of using antisemitic ideas to attack their political opposition. In 2010, Im Tirtzu, an NGO that describes itself as “non-profit organization working to strengthen the values of Zionism in Israel as a Jewish and democratic state,” led a campaign attacking Israeli civil society leader and former parliamentarian Naomi Chazan using an image of Chazan with a large horn protruding from her forehead, a visual that deserves a place in any textbook on modern antisemitism.⁵

Antisemitism is of course useful to some anti-Zionists who seek to undermine Israel’s legitimacy as a Jewish nation state and indulge in conspiracies that track with antisemitic thought (e.g., blaming the omnipotent Israel lobby or calling for Jews to “go back to where they came from”). Reasonable people can debate whether justice for Palestinians and Jews is best accomplished within a one-state, two-states, or a confederation model. To be clear, a non-Zionist vision of the governing authority of Israel/Palestine is not inherently antisemitic, as long as it attends to defending Jewish collective and individual rights, just as it would for Palestinians. The same could be true of a two-state model. And in each case, democratic governance that protects minority rights is a required element for any progressive position -- in both Palestinian and Israeli societies. We can draw, however, a red line against imagining the expulsion of Jews from the Holy Land as antisemitic, just as we should against the idea of shipping Palestinians to Jordan as anti-Palestinian.

As we note how different reactionary movements employ antisemitism for political gain, we should be careful not to flatten the lived experience of Black Americans under white supremacy or Palestinians under occupation. These groups experience clear systematic racialized oppression and cannot be understood as equivalent to the politics of white grievance. Veterans of the fight against Soviet anti-Jewish hatred understand that diverse, reactionary social movements mirror each other in their use of antisemitism drawing from the wells of far-right white supremacists. Izabella Tabarovsky, a scholar at the

Wilson Center’s Kennan Institute, notes that the USSR’s antisemitic anti-Zionist propaganda served the foreign policy goals and Middle East ambitions of a global power. As she writes, this approach was “formulated and disseminated by master propagandists operating within a left-wing ideological framework, but they drew heavily on far-right, racist ideas.”

Drawing heavily from white supremacists, the Nation of Islam (NOI) blames “satanic Jews” for persistent black poverty. NOI occasionally explicitly allied itself with white supremacists to pursue an agenda of racial purity. When people see Jewish landlords who benefit from black poverty, there is an opportunity for antisemitism to be organized on behalf of a political project. Accordingly, NOI uses the term “bloodsuckers” to describe “Jewish shopkeepers in black neighborhoods... The charge evoked the medieval blood libel, which had sparked many pogroms over the centuries.”⁶ In this way, the NOI harnesses antisemitism that already exists to make sense of racist conditions.

Globally, many reactionary political movements use antisemitism in ways that mirror white supremacist thinking. Article 11 of the 1988 Hamas Charter (since revised) could have been written by white nationalists:

For a long time, the enemies have been planning...to amass great and substantive material wealth which they devoted to the realization of their dream. With their money, they took control of the world media, news agencies, the press, publishing houses, broadcasting stations, and others. With their money they stirred revolutions in various parts of the world with the purpose of achieving their interests and reaping the fruit therein. They were behind the French Revolution, the Communist revolution and most of the revolutions we heard and hear about, here and there. With their money they formed secret societies, such as Freemasons, Rotary Clubs, the Lions, and others in different parts of the world for the purpose of sabotaging societies and achieving Zionist interests...

Some American white supremacists have even sought alliances with Hamas, purporting to share an enemy in the American State,

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racial “mongrelization,” and the nefarious Jew.⁷ This is not antisemitism “on the left,” but the use of antisemitism to feign affiliation with the “oppressed” of the world, much like Soviet propaganda.

ANTISEMITISM AS RACISM

Instrumental antisemitism is not the only tool that such political forces harness. It is often used in conjunction with racist thinking. Scholars of racism have been unpacking this for decades, and we can learn from their analysis.

Ibram X. Kendi, in his book *Stamped from the Beginning*, chronicles his evolution in understanding of racism. At first, he believed that slavery stemmed from hate and bigotry. Later he understood how wealthy white people’s pursuit of cheap labor led to the enslavement of black people:

Time and again, powerful and brilliant men and women have produced racist ideas in order to justify the racist policies of their era, in order to redirect the blame for their era’s racial disparities away from those policies and onto Black people.⁸

Kendi’s evolution—from thinking that racism is based on hatred of Black folk to understanding racism as a political tool that helps extend the life of policies that deepen inequality—can be a model for how we interpret antisemitism.

Another scholar of racism writing from the left, Ian Haney López at the University of California, Berkeley, states:

Big money interests and the politicians and media outlets they bankroll have been selling the same basic lie for fifty years: Distrust liberals and government for coddling rather than controlling people of color. Demand that government start punishing dangerous and undeserving people, by slashing social spending, launching a war on crime, and a war on immigrants, too. Punish government itself, by cutting taxes to starve it and gutting its regulations.⁹

Like Kendi, López sheds light on the political value that racist thinking has for groups advocating particular policies and points to the impacts those policies will have on people of color. Such strategies don’t create racism, of course; they channel existing racism into a political force.

Advocates for Jewish safety can learn from anti-racist thinkers who have demonstrated how racism is politically deployed. Thinking about

antisemitism in the way that Kendi and López do illuminates how antisemitism works within a larger economic and political system. Like racism, antisemitism wouldn't be useful as a political tool without the persistence in our culture of antisemitic notions about Jewish inferiority, superiority, Zionism, religious beliefs, clannishness, greediness, dual loyalty, etc. Such tropes continue to be passed down through generations because they are routinely employed to achieve political goals.

Unfortunately, some Jewish advocates against antisemitism, in the name of defending liberalism, seek to delegitimize anti-racist scholarship like Kendi's by claiming that his racial justice framing is inherently anti-Jewish. In an essay entitled, "Stop being shocked at bigotry" (October 2020), former New York Times Editor and self-described liberal Bari Weiss suggests there is a new progressive anti-racist ide-

ology that is challenging American liberalism. Because he argues (in her words) that "there are no meaningful differences between cultures," Weiss judges Kendi's views as "ridiculous" and "lethal" to Jewish people.¹⁰ Weiss is not alone in her attacks on Kendi's anti-racist thought as anti-Jewish; former head

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of Jewish Council on Public Affairs and founder of the Jewish Institute for Liberal Values David Bernstein calls Kendi's views "pernicious." By attacking the ideas that drive movements for racial and economic justice, critics like Weiss and Bernstein separate white Jewish interests from the struggles of other minorities for the benefit of authoritarian movements and consolidated power—both in Israel and in the United States. The impact of their efforts undermines the fight against unequal conditions in which antisemitism thrives and undercuts movements that might infuse our dying liberal institutions with the lifeblood of a more equal democratic society for all Americans. And this is ultimately bad for Jews and the just fight against antisemitism.

CREATING A MORE JUST SOCIETY WOULD REDUCE ANTISEMITISM

A different diagnosis calls for a different treatment. If Jewish leaders and institutions can understand antisemitism as an effective political weapon to fuel reactionary social movements, rather than as solely a

form of hatred of Jews, we can see why creating a more just society not only realizes the Jewish vision of a healed and repaired world but serves Jewish fundamental interests.

If a society provides for the general welfare of its community members, there is less justified anger at the conditions in which one lives and less opportunity to be mobilized into ethnic conflict. A more just society not only would ameliorate abhorrent conditions under which many poor white, Black, and brown people live, but it would undermine the claims of white supremacist reactionary movements in the United States and build trust in a truly inclusive multiracial democracy. American Jews spend far too much time being dragged through an emotionally exhausting rollercoaster of recriminations over antisemitism instead of focusing on the larger and far more impactful goal of realizing an American multiracial democracy rooted in liberal values.

To more effectively combat antisemitism, the Jewish community can and should take the following steps:

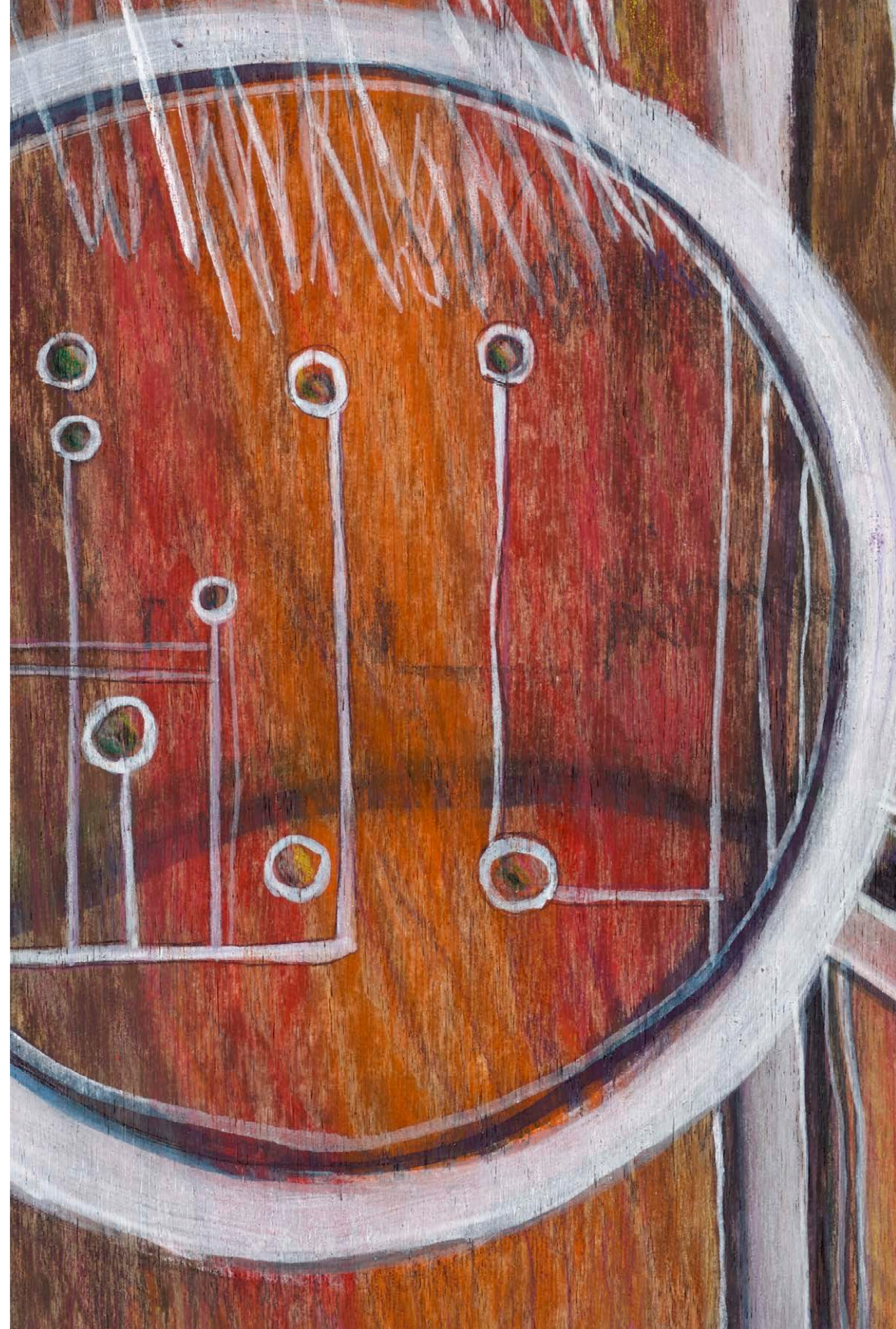
- **Pursue racial and economic justice.** Listen and learn from those in the Jewish community and outside of it that have been leading this work for decades. Devote a meaningful sum—perhaps as much as 50 percent—of our communal resources, attention, time, and political capital to building the political power of movements—especially those led by Black, Brown, and Indigenous people and flanked by all communities—that build thriving, just communities. This is not yielding power; it is attaching the Jewish community through our actions to the movements most likely to provide for our future thriving.
- **Call out antisemitism while avoiding racist tropes, language, and actions that delegitimize multiracial coalitions.** Challenge the Jewish voices that charge racial and economic justice movements with spurious accusations of antisemitism. Ground conversations about antisemitism in a structural understanding of how inequality becomes a breeding ground for reactionary movements that stoke antisemitism.

- **Work for just, democratic societies in Israel/Palestine.** Spend at least as much time working toward an Israel that lives up to democratic ideals, including ending the occupation of the Palestinian people, as we spend on “defending Israel.”

Even if the Jewish community took these steps tomorrow, antisemitism would by no means disappear. It is too enduringly useful for that. But we can drastically decrease the inequality and racial strife that feed it. By denying the flames oxygen, we can tamp down the fire. ■

Notes

- 1 Adopted in 2016, the IHRA working definition states that: “Antisemitism is a certain perception of Jews, which may be expressed as hatred toward Jews. Rhetorical and physical manifestations of antisemitism are directed toward Jewish or non-Jewish individuals and/or their property, toward Jewish community institutions and religious facilities.”
- 2 Paulina Neuding, “The Uncomfortable Truth About Swedish Antisemitism,” *New York Times*, Dec. 14, 2017.
- 3 Abraham Cooper, “Antisemitism in Japan: It’s a Mystery and a Dangerous Absurdity,” *Los Angeles Times*, Mar. 10, 2019.
- 4 Isaac Chotiner, “How Antisemitism Rises on the Left and Right,” *The New Yorker*, Jan. 3, 2020.
- 5 Ron Kampeas, “Breaking down the Im Tirtzu Report on New Israel Fund,” *Jewish Telegraphic Agency*, Feb. 10, 2010.
- 6 Stephen H. Norwood, Eunice G. Pollack, “White Devils, Satanic Jews: The Nation of Islam from Ford to Farrakhan,” *Modern Judaism*, May 2020, pp. 137–168.
- 7 In September 2020, the Justice Department unveiled an indictment against two Boogaloo Bois for “conspiring and attempting to provide material support to a designated foreign terrorist organization (Hamas).” www.justice.gov/opa/pr/two-self-described-boogaloo-bois-charged-attempting-provide-material-support-hamas.
- 8 Ibram X. Kendi, *Stamped from the Beginning: The Definitive History of Racist Ideas in America*, 2017.
- 9 Ian Haney López, *Merge Left: Fusing Race and Class, Winning Elections, and Saving America*, 2019.
- 10 Bari Weiss, “Stop being shocked at bigotry,” *Pittsburgh Post-Gazette*, Oct. 22, 2020.



SANDRA VALABREGUE, 'CIRCLE IN THE TREE' (DETAIL), 2018