

## Psychoanalytic Perspectives on “Old” and “New” Antisemitism<sup>1</sup>

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Undertaking the deconstruction of a phenomenon as vast and age-old as antisemitism in the short time span of a panel may properly count as a sequel to the “Mission Impossible” series. But the significance and value of discussing this topic at this time and in this psychoanalytic forum is incalculable. What has been written and said about antisemitism is tantamount to entire libraries and numerous disciplines. Yet what has been said about it psychoanalytically, while important, is of modest proportions. It famously and significantly preoccupied Freud and a few analysts after him, like Lowenstein and Fenichel. A PEP search reveals only about twenty entries featuring antisemitism in their title. Interestingly, they fall into two groups: the 1940-50s, immediately after WWII, followed by a significant hiatus, a resurgence in the 1990s, and several recent articles since.

Rather than review what has been said, I will concentrate on two topics: First, the contemporary upsurge of antisemitism, and second, using a psychoanalytic frame, an attempt to account for its stubborn perennial presence.

In making these remarks, I am aware of my identity and what it may imply and suggest to some: I am Israeli and a Jew. I have participated in controversial discussions on this subject (Erlich, 2025), and what I had to say was sometimes distorted and attacked by those who chose to misunderstand. It is obvious that in this treacherous area one’s identity and position is bound to be questioned, if not outrightly held

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responsible for one's views. It is indeed difficult, if not impossible, at this time to discuss antisemitism without stumbling into political pitfalls. Therefore, I want to introduce my remarks by stating that I do not represent the government or policies of Israel, many of which I am highly critical of and opposed to. At the same time, I find many of the opinions and judgments voiced in this area, even when well-intentioned, and whether innocent or tendentious, as not sufficiently aware of the enormous complexity of the current situation with all its antecedents.

Prejudice, bigotry, othering and projection are intrinsic aspects of the psyche and behavior. Antisemitism, as a manifestation of such psychological tendencies, is often subsumed together with other instances and its uniqueness questioned. Without prejudging this issue, the uniqueness of antisemitism consists of its inordinately long history and the ever-shifting ways it has reshaped itself in accordance with changing times, and being a conspiracy theory. Although it predates the advent of both Christianity and Islam, it appeared for centuries in the form of religious persecution by the two monotheistic religions that sprang from Judaism and had to differentiate themselves from it. This "old" religious antisemitism was later recast, with the advent of nationalism, from issues of faith to ethnic othering and financial usurpation, and still later to taking the blame for contradictory diverse phenomena like liberalism, capitalism, socialism and communism. Antisemitism is unique in its capacity to take on different colors, contents, and manifestations, while remaining unaltered underneath. Like a virus, it is constantly producing new mutations.

The current wave of “new antisemitism” demonstrates this. While it was present before, particularly on university campuses, it erupted furiously after the gradually ignored and downplayed October 7 massacre, with Israel’s aggressive retaliation in Gaza becoming its focus. It was fed by the conflation of prominent issues in contemporary socio-political discourse, which were readily, if erroneously, associated with Israel, the Palestinians, and the war in Gaza, such as colonialism, settlers colonialism, White Man supremacy, oppression of people of color, gender discrimination, etc. In a “one-size-fits-all,” it was made to account for a range of themes and conflicts dealing with oppressors and perpetrators vs. the victimized and oppressed. Anti-Zionism, anti-Israel, and anti-Israel’s current government indistinguishably fit into this.

Let me clarify, lest I be misunderstood: I am not saying that any criticism of Israel or its government is antisemitic. Such criticism is legitimate, should be, and is voiced both within and outside Israel. It becomes antisemitic when it is guilty of demonization, delegitimization, or displaying a double-standard. Thus the cry, “From the river to the sea Palestine will be free!” openly calls for the annihilation of Israel. The legitimacy of Israel’s right to exist has indeed been questioned by some writers and thinkers (Abunimah, 2000; Balibar, 2024). Israel’s aggressive response to the October 7 massacre, despite initial understanding and approval, was gradually demonized as completely one sided, while the perpetrators of the inhuman massacre have been hailed as freedom fighters. The double-standard is present in all of these, in the reluctance to see both sides of the conflict, and in the inordinate focus this conflict has received

while ignoring far more bloody and destructive current ones. Lastly, the demonization and antisemitic furor is evident in worldwide attacks on Jews who have nothing to do with the conflict.

The roots and causes of the conflict defy the frame of this brief presentation. Before moving on to the psychoanalytic considerations of antisemitism, I want to mention three specific areas that must be taken into account if we strive for a better understanding: the historical roots of the two national movements, Zionism and pan-Arabic nationalism, forged against the background of Middle Eastern religious and political conditions; the contribution of large group processes to current societal upheavals; and the role and impact of social media on the fulmination of these processes. Each of these requires its own deep study.

Any attempt to understand antisemitism must focus on the question: Why the Jews? A brief vignette from a patient who recently queued in Berlin for the national train pass may illustrate this. An old lady ahead of her walked up to the window and complained bitterly about the rising cost and how expensive the train pass has become, and then added: "And it's all because of the Jews!" To which the clerk responded, "But they are no longer here!" And the old lady said, "Yes, they stuck all the money in their pockets and left!" Marjorie Taylor Greene's 2018 claim that "Jewish space laser" caused the California wildfires is another illustration of these antisemitic conspiracy theories. A psychoanalytic explanation can point out the projection, even projective identification involved in such utterances. It can focus on the need for an external bad object to ease the pressure and pain of an internal one. It can point out the persecutory and

masochistic aspects of such externalizations. All these are pertinent from a psychoanalytic perspective. Granted, there is no lack of external objects that can and do serve this need: migrants, Muslims, people of color, homosexuals, transgenders, etc. The narcissism of minor differences (Freud, 1918) plays havoc in these areas. But the question remains: Why the Jews? Is there a psychoanalytic explanation for it?

[Otto Fenichel's warning in 1940 is still pertinent:

*"Please do not expect too much from me. Antisemitism is a very complex phenomenon. If one wishes to understand it, sociological, historical and political points of view must be employed as well as the psychological one, and opinions vary very much with regard to the relative significance which psychology has in the understanding of social phenomena"* (Fenichel, 1940).]

Based on Freud's formulation in *Moses and Monotheism* (Freud, 1939, Erlich, 2023), I suggest that the roots of antisemitism are in the sphere of *Geistigkeit*, a German word not accurately translatable to English. Depending on context, it is variably rendered as 'intellectuality' or 'spirituality'.

Freud's fictional recreation depicts Moses as introducing the belief in an invisible, abstract God to the Jewish people he led out of Egypt. Their murder of Moses and their subsequent ambivalence and guilt led to Moses' enduring, guilt-ridden introjection by the Jews, an unshakeable identification with him, and stubborn adherence to his teachings. The monotheistic belief introduced abstract spirituality, or *Geistigkeit*, to mankind that heretofore knew mostly animism and paganism. In this

transformative upheaval, the Jews became the willing or unwilling representatives of the *Geistig* for mankind. This abstract faith implies a degree of freedom from concreteness, from the dominance of sensuality and sense impressions. It therefore evokes the eternal conflict between the drives and what stands against them in the form of intellect and morality. Humanity cannot fully reject the *Geistig* because without it, it is not truly human. But it can hate, despise and express its ambivalence by hating, despising, rejecting, and persecuting those who stand for it, while also admiring, idealizing, and envying them.

Let me elaborate. The transition from paganism to abstract faith, from the concretism of animism to the dominance of the spiritual and the intellectual, is the crucial shift that enables the mind to imagine and think, to transform sense presentations to mental representations, to symbolism and abstraction. It is perhaps the single most important developmental step mankind has taken, breaking loose of the stranglehold of the senses and their compelling sense-presentations. The energy for this shift derives from Man's destructive capacity as well as his capacity to love and mourn, as in Freud's fictitious reconstruction of the murder of Moses. But the explosion set off by that murder, which created the Jewish people, has never subsided. Like a volcano, its ripples continue to rumble underneath the surface, erupting with horrendous irrationality and directing enormous energies of hatred and destruction against the surviving witnesses who bear testimony to the original explosion. The struggle that created *Geistigkeit* continues to erupt in the form of hatred of the Jews. Antisemitism is therefore forever intertwined with the story of mankind.

What also persists is the perverse wish to be free of the burden of morality and spirituality, of historical and interpersonal diversity and generational differences. Nazi ideology represents precisely this perverse solution. It is the perverse wish and its enactment – as in all perversions – to create a world free of Jews and the *Geistigkeit* they represent. It is the perverse psychotic wish to obliterate complex and differentiated civilization, painstakingly built upon the recognition of differences, diversity and otherness, and the respect accorded to them under the Law.

The struggle between spirituality and the enlightened intellect on one hand, the demands of drives and impulses on the other, and the hatred of those who signify it, is far from over. If antisemitism stems from the struggle between the drives and *Geistigkeit*, it will always be present in one form or another. Even where there are no Jews, they would have to be invented out of this deep struggle in our psyche, a struggle which represents much of what we cherish about our humanity, which is always at risk.

The current state of our culture and civilization is a fertile ground for the unprecedented spread of antisemitism, stemming from projections, fantasies, and powerful emotions more than from any historical and social facts which can always be called upon to serve as reasons. It is a perspective that can only be gleaned through psychoanalysis.

[One of the most prominent agencies mediating this conflict is social media, presently augmented a thousand-fold by Artificial Intelligence.] Rising antisemitism is often a sign of social and cultural discontent and the precursor to attacks on humanism

and democracy, hence it should be of concern to all. To quote Vassily Grossman:

“Antisemitism is always a means rather than an end; it is a measure of the contradictions yet to be resolved. It is a mirror for the failings of individuals, social structures, and State systems. Tell me what you accuse Jews of—I’ll tell you what you’re guilty of” (Grossman, 1959).

In conclusion, the psychoanalytic exploration of the tragic current events in Israel and Gaza and the global rise of antisemitism must answer the question: For all its tragic aspects, how can we understand the inordinate, disproportional, controversial emotional arousal and focus, centered on this conflict as if it is - if not the only one - certainly the most important and volatile one the world is currently experiencing?

The explanation I offered for this exceptionalism is that it must have to do with antisemitism, the fact that it is the one Jewish state that is accused and attacked, as witnessed by non-Israeli Jews all over the world being threatened and persecuted, even though they have nothing to do with the situation in Gaza or the actions of Israel. All of this needs to be viewed against the background that for many years Israel has been the focus of an inordinate amount of projections and idealizations, far outstripping its size and place. It appears that the current situation is but a link, albeit an especially prominent one, in this chain.

My discussion of antisemitism seeks to offer a *psychoanalytic* interpretation for that ancient yet ongoing social malady, as representing the inherent struggle between drives and concrete sense impressions against enlightened rationality, differentiation



and thoughtfulness. As such, it may resonate with psychoanalysts, but it is not meant to displace or diminish other explanations.

Thank you.

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