
American Anti-Semitism

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The fact that a volume on the history of anti-Semitism includes a brief American perspective is itself noteworthy. Earlier surveys of anti-Semitism, whether found in the *American Jewish Year Book* or in as scholarly a volume as Koppel Pinson's *Essays on Antisemitism* (1946), studiously avoided including any mention of America in the context of worldwide Judeophobia. To speak of American anti-Semitism and European anti-Semitism in the same breath seemed almost blasphemous. Even to speak of American anti-Semitism on its own took courage. As late as 1947, a scholarly article dealing with anti-Semitism that appeared in the *Publications of the American Jewish Historical Society* began with an elaborate justification. "We can," it explained, "no longer dismiss anti-Semitism with a wave of the hand or a flourish of the pen. As an influence in American Jewish life—although a negative one to be sure—its study comes within the scope of this Society's activities."¹

Today nobody would think that undertaking a study of American anti-Semitism requires advance justification. Not only has the subject acquired legitimacy, but also it has now become one of the most intensely examined aspects of American life, the subject of innumerable books and monographs,² and the focus of full sessions at the annual meetings of such prestigious scholarly

associations as the American Historical Association and the Organization of American Historians. No consensus has emerged from all of these vigorous efforts, not even a clear definition of what anti-Semitism in the American context means. But two questions do seem to me to have emerged as central:

1. How important a role has anti-Semitism played in American life?
2. Is America different in terms of anti-Semitism, and if so, how?

The Role of Anti-Semitism

With regard to the first question, the significance of anti-Semitism in American life, there are, as might be expected, several divergent opinions. The most traditional one, which I label minimalist, considers anti-Semitism to be a late and alien phenomenon on the American scene: a post-Civil War development, linked to the rise of both “scientific” racism and anti-immigrant nativism, and then confined largely to the ranks of the disaffected. Earlier on in America, according to this view, such Judeophobic attitudes failed to take root. Jews were instead considered, as Oscar Handlin put it, “wonderful in their past achievements . . . still more wonderful in their preservation.”¹ Isolated incidents did occur—Peter Stuyvesant’s effort to keep Jews out of New Amsterdam, the recall of Consul Mordecai Noah from Tunis on account of his religion, or General Grant’s Order #11 ousting Jews from his war zone—but in the minimalist interpretation these serve only as exceptions that prove the rule. Since in every case the severity of the evil decree was somehow mitigated and Jews ultimately emerged triumphant, these incidents are not viewed as “incompatible with the total acceptance of Jews as Americans.”² Minimalists imply that hate would cease if Americans would only return to the virtuous ways of their forebears.

As against this view, there is another and diametrically opposite perspective on anti-Semitism in America, which I label maximalist. Maximalists, influenced by recent trends in American historiography, particularly the study of racism, find anti-Semites stalking the length and breadth of American history, from colonial times down to the present. They know, as minimalists do not, that anti-Jewish slurs, discrimination against Jews, even acts of violence directed against Jewish institutions have stained the pages of American history for over three centuries. Blood libels, professional anti-Semitic crusaders, and avowed Nazis have, at one time or another, also appeared on the American scene. The conclusion that maximalists draw from this is plainly stated by Michael Selzer in his *"Kike!": A Documentary History of Anti-Semitism in America*:

There is no reason to believe that from the vast reservoir of bigotry, and specifically of anti-Semitism, that exists in this country, a new wave of Jew-baiting, perhaps even of persecution and murder, may not arise.⁵

"It"—meaning the Holocaust—"could have happened here," maximalists often contend, and they darkly warn that "it" may happen yet.

Inevitably, a third view lies between these two polar extremes, and that is the middle ground or centrist position. Centrists have no quarrel with those who find manifestations of anti-Semitism throughout American history: The facts speak for themselves. Every kind of prejudice found in Europe can be found in America, *if* one searches hard enough. Centrists point out, however, that Jews have also enjoyed thoroughly harmonious relations with non-Jews throughout American Jewish history, and that ideological philo-Semitism forms at least as much a part of America's cultural heritage as its opposite. Anti-Semitism, centrists insist, must be seen in its proper historical perspective. It

is only one aspect of a larger and more complex dynamic that forms the true picture of Jewish-Gentile relations in the United States.

The Centrist Perspective

No full-scale history of American anti-Semitism written from a centrist perspective yet exists. In outline form, however, such a history can readily be sketched out.

Beginning in the colonial period, Jews faced rejection, prejudice, and even occasional violence in America, while anti-Jewish literary stereotypes abounded. "Jew" was still a dirty word," Jacob R. Marcus writes, "and it was hardly rare to see the Jews denigrated as such in the press."⁶ As early as the mid-seventeenth century a New Amsterdam Jew named David Ferrera, found guilty of insulting a bailiff, received an inordinately strict punishment on account of his religion. During the period of English rule, New York Jews suffered a violent mob attack against one of their funeral corteges and quite a few desecrations of their cemeteries, besides more regular cases of discrimination and defamation. Yet Jews also prospered in colonial America and maintained close, sometimes even intimate relations with their non-Jewish neighbors. After weighing the evidence as a whole, Marcus concludes that Jews found more acceptance in America "than in any other land in the world."⁷ The hostility of some colonial settlers toward Jews, he implies, cannot be ignored but must not be exaggerated.

After independence, the Jewish situation improved, but not so much as some would believe. Although non-Protestants received political rights, the baiting of Jews became an accepted part of political mud-slinging, even when—as in the case of John Israel of Pittsburgh—the candidate in question may not have been Jewish at all. Various recent monographs demonstrate that the range of anti-Semitic incidents in the young republic spanned the spectrum from literary and cultural stereotyping, social and

economic discrimination, attacks on Jewish property, all the way to blood libels and lurid descriptions of purported anti-Christian sentiments in classical Jewish texts. In 1820, New York's *German Correspondent* admitted:

The Jews are not generally regarded with a favorable eye; and "Jew" is an epithet which is frequently uttered in a tone bordering on contempt. Say what you will, prejudices against the Jews exist here, and subject them to inconveniences from which other citizens of the United States are exempt.*

James Gordon Bennett's widely read *New York Herald* displayed particular vehemence in its denunciation of Jews. Although Bennett enjoyed lambasting a host of targets and was quite capable of printing philo-Semitic articles as well, his most inflammatory rhetoric evoked the darkest days of medieval disputations:

Here are pictured forth, from their own sacred writings, the Talmud, which is considered a second part of the Bible, the real opinion of the Jews on the original and Sacred Founder of Christianity. . . . In the midst of Christians, surrounded by Christian usages, the Jews may conceal these terrible opinions and doctrines—may attempt to beguile and deceive those among whom they live, in order the better to crush all religion under the secret poison of infidelity and atheism, but their Talmuds and Targums are evidences against them."

Similarly medieval were characterizations of Jews in early American literature. Louis Harap, in his comprehensive book *The Image of the Jew in American Literature* (1974), finds "invidious stereotypes of the pawnbroker and businessman," along with such timeless motifs as the "Jew's daughter," the Jewish hunchback, and the Jewish criminal in popular ante-bellum fiction. George Lippard's best-selling *The 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 it must be emphasized that Jews rarely appear as lone villains in early American literature. Not only do they have Gentile accomplices, but also in many cases they give expression to a wise and sympathetic understanding of Jewish-Gentile relations ("The Christian plead humbly to the Jew ven he would have money, and curses him ven he no more needs him"), and of history too ("Under the despotic governments of the old world [the Jew's] political and personal rights have been the football of tyranny and cupidity"). Harap's summary seems apt:

Novels reveal attitudes and not necessarily behavior . . . probably actual relations were less acerbic than those reflected in [literature]. However, the reality must have been ambivalent at best."

Ambivalence is the appropriate word. Conflicting emotions, changing experiences, and divergent influences pulled people now one way, now the other. At times the lure of the exotic opened doors to Jews. Rural Americans traveled miles just to catch a glimpse of one of God's chosen people. Joseph Jonas of Cincinnati, for example, recalled:

Many persons of the Nazarene faith residing from 50 to 100 miles from the city, hearing there were Jews living in Cincinnati, came into town for the special purpose of viewing and conversing with some of "the children of Israel, the holy people of God," as they termed us."

As was true in the case of Asian immigrants, however, the lure of the exotic frequently gave way to fear of the unknown. Outsiders came to view Jews as an alien force, a people apart, "deficient," as Charles King (at one time the president of Columbia College) wrote in 1823, "in that single national attachment which binds the man to the soil of his nativity, and makes him the

exclusive patriot of his own country.”¹² As patronizing curiosity gave way to xenophobic delusion, doors closed and Jews were kept out.

A second, even more powerful source of ambivalence was the pervasive tension between 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 the stereotype.¹³ Usually, it was the mythical Jew—the unscrupulous moneylender, the eternal wanderer, the satanic Christ-killer—who was flayed by anti-Semites. If they sometimes realized that Jews of their acquaintance did not fit the mold, the mold was often too deeply ingrained to change; it was easier to live with the contradiction. “Them Jews—I don’t mean you,” is a phrase one upstate New Yorker still remembers having heard from her neighbors. Thomas Jefferson, in spite of having several Jewish acquaintances, continued to think Jews morally depraved. Henry Ford actually believed that all the “good Jews” of the country, including his friend Rabbi Leo Franklin, would rally to his crusade against the “international Jew.”¹⁴

“When a delusion cannot be dissipated by the facts of reality, it probably does not spring from reality,” Freud wrote.¹⁵ Dissonance between received wisdom and perceived wisdom was particularly strong in the case of Jews. From colonial days onward, Jews and Christians cooperated with one another, maintaining close social and economic relations. Intermarriage rates, a reliable if unwelcome sign of religious harmony, periodically rose to high levels. And individual Jews thrived, often rising to positions of wealth and power. Yet popular prejudice based on received wisdom continued nonetheless. Even some slight manifestation of a “typical Jewish trait” brought all the old charges back to the fore.

Ambivalence is a theme that emerges clearly during the Civil War. According to Bertram Korn, “anti-Jewish prejudice was actually a characteristic expression of the [Civil War] age, part and parcel of the economic and social upheaval effectuated by the

war.” Korn adduced evidence of anti-Jewish writings and activities both in the North and South; “the Jews were a . . . popular scapegoat in all areas.”¹⁶ Far from being an isolated exception, General Grant’s expulsion order was part of a larger pattern. Yet at the same time Jews rose in the ranks of both armies; rabbis won the right to serve as chaplains; Judah Benjamin became a key Confederate leader; and President Lincoln showed unprecedented concern for Jews’ civil liberties. In the Civil War as earlier, Jews in general 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 ever been before.

In the post-Civil War era, during Reconstruction and in the Gilded Age, many “Israelites”—as some called themselves to distinguish real Jews from mythical ones—prospered with the American business boom. Gaudy showpiece temples, the Jewish form of conspicuous consumption, testified to the community’s new status and wealth. Jews entered the upper class. The upper class, however, had at best mixed feelings about whether to welcome Jewish parvenus. In the words of the Boston *Saturday Evening Gazette*, quoted by John Higham, “It is strange that a nation that boasts so many good traits should be so obnoxious.”¹⁷ Ultimately, some individual Jews won acceptance, while Jews as a group continued to meet with considerable hostility. Long before Joseph Seligman made his trip to Saratoga and was turned away, complaints about discrimination and prejudice filled the pages of Jewish newspapers.

By all accounts, anti-Semitism crested in America during the half-century preceding World War II. During this era of nativism and then isolationism, Jews faced physical attacks, many forms of discrimination, and intense vilification in print, on the airwaves, in movies, and on stage. A series of highly publicized anti-Semitic episodes took place: the lynching of Leo Frank, the ravings of Henry Ford, the blood libel in Massena, New York, and anti-Jewish speeches by notables too numerous to list.¹⁸ Yet the same

period witnessed the growth of the interfaith movement, a great increase in the number of Jews on college campuses and in government service, and unprecedented cooperation between Jews and non-Jews in areas of social service. Once again, the historical picture is a mixed one, anti-Semitism forming only part of a larger story.

Professor Endelman has pointed to the theme of anti-modernism as a possible explanation for post-Emancipation forms of anti-Semitism. I think that this approach to anti-Semitism, viewing it as a cultural code, offers rich potential.¹⁹ As I read the paroxysms of America's Jew-haters, I am repeatedly struck by how frequently Jews receive blame for whatever happens to be wrong with modern society, from music to the movies to the New Deal. Jews can be condemned as capitalists and lambasted as communists in the same manifestos. Yet I fear that explaining anti-Semitism through anti-modernism is to forget that anti-Semitism is a *form* of anti-modernism. By changing the term we are not freed from the obligation to explain *why* anti-modernism comes and goes. Anti-modernism adds to our understanding by broadening our sphere of vision and stimulating new avenues of exploration. But it leaves the complex question of causality still unanswered.

Is American Anti-Semitism Different?

I now turn to the second question posed at the beginning: Is America different in terms of anti-Semitism, and if so, how? Such questions, demanding exhaustive research in comparative history, might with greater prudence be left unanswered. Nevertheless, I want to suggest five factors which, when taken together, do seem to me to lend a special color to American anti-Semitism, differentiating its history from the history of anti-Semitism elsewhere in the Diaspora. I realize, of course, that countries are subject to change. Furthermore, by saying that America is different, I am

not by any means implying that it is altogether different, but only in several—critical—respects.

1. In America, Jews have always fought anti-Semites freely. Never having received their emancipation as an “award,” they have had no fears of losing it. Instead, from the beginning they made full use of their rights to freedom of speech. As early as 1784, a “Jew Broker”—probably Haym Salomon—responded publicly and forcefully to the anti-Semitic 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.”²⁰ A few years later, Christian missionaries and their supporters faced Jewish polemics no less strident in tone. Where European Jews prided themselves on their “forebearance” in the face of attack, Rabbi Isaac Mayer Wise boasted that he was a “malicious, biting, pugnacious, challenging, and mocking monster of the pen.”²¹ Louis Marshall and Stephen Wise, early twentieth-century spokesmen of American Jewry, may have been more civil, but as readers of their voluminous letters know, they were no less bold. In defense of Jewish rights, they did battle even with the President of the United States.

2. American anti-Semitism has always had to compete with other forms of animus. Racism, anti-Quakerism, Anglophobia, anti-Catholicism, anti-Masonry, anti-Mormonism, anti-Orientalism, nativism, anti-Teutonism, anti-Communism—these and other waves have periodically swept over the American landscape, scarring and battering citizens. Because the objects are so varied, hatred is diffused and no group experiences for long the full brunt of national odium. Furthermore, most Americans retain bitter memories of days past when they or their ancestors were the objects of malevolence. The American strain of anti-Semitism 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.

3. Anti-Semitism is more foreign to American ideals than to

European ones. The central documents of the Republic assure Jews of liberty; its first president conferred upon them his blessing. The fact that anti-Semitism can properly be branded “un-American,” although no protection in the formal sense—the nation has betrayed its ideals innumerable times—grants Jews a measure of protection not found in Europe. There anti-Semites could always claim a legitimacy stemming from times past when the *Volk* ruled and Jews knew their place. American romantics could point to nothing even remotely similar in their own past. The Founding Fathers, whatever they personally thought of Jews, gave them full equality. “Who are you, or what are you . . . that in a *free* country you dare to trample on any sectary whatever of people?” Haym Salomon had demanded back in 1784. Half a century later, Isaac Leeser charged that it was “contrary to the spirit of the Constitution of the country for the many to combine to do the smallest minority the injury of depriving them of their conscientious conviction by systematic efforts.”²² Non-Jews could respond by pointing to America’s supposedly “Christian character”—a view of American society occasionally recognized by no less august a body than the Supreme Court. Nevertheless, the Constitution has proved to be a potent weapon in the Jews’ defense. German Jews could appeal to no similar document.

4. America’s religious tradition—what has been called “the great tradition of the American churches”—is inhospitable to anti-Semitism. Religious freedom and diversity, Church-state separation, denominationalism, and voluntarism, the key components of this tradition as described by Winthrop Hudson and Sydney Ahlstrom,²³ militate against the kind of “*Deutschtum-Judentum*” dichotomy that existed in Germany. In America, where religious pluralism rules supreme, there is no national church from which Jews stand apart. People speak instead of American Protestants, American Catholics, and American Jews, implying, at least as an ideal, that all three stand equal in importance.

5. American politics resists anti-Semitism. In a two-party

system where close elections are the rule, neither party can long afford to alienate any major bloc of voters. The politics of hatred have thus largely been confined to noisy third parties and single-issue fringe groups. When anti-Semitism is introduced into the political arena—as it has been periodically since the days of the Federalists—major candidates generally repudiate it. America's most successful politicians build broad-based coalitions, highly nebulous in their ideology. They seek support from respectable elements all across the political spectrum. Experience has taught them that appeals to national unity win more elections than appeals to narrow provincialism or to bigotry.

Of course, the fact that America has been “exceptional” in relation to Jews should not obscure the sad reality that there has always been anti-Semitism in America, and that it still continues to exist. Complacency is a luxury that Jews cannot afford—anywhere. But if America has not been heaven for Jews (and as we have seen it hasn't been), it has been as far from hell as any Diaspora Jewish community. History, as I read it, gives American Jews cause neither for undue celebration nor for undue alarm. Instead, it records both the manifold blessings that America has bestowed upon Jews, and, simultaneously, the need for Jews, even in America, to remain eternally vigilant.

NOTES

Portions of this essay first appeared in somewhat different form in *Commentary*. I am grateful to the editors of *Commentary* for permitting me to republish them here.

1. Leonard A. Greenberg, “Some American Anti-Semitic Publications of the Late 19th Century,” *Publications of the American Jewish Historical Society* 37 (1947): 421.

2. A recent research guide lists 219 items dealing with America alone; see Robert Singerman, *Antisemitic Propaganda: An Annotated Bibliography and Research Guide* (New York, 1982), pp. 355–376. An earlier guide, Melvin M.

Tumin's *An Inventory and Appraisal of Research on American Anti-Semitism* (New York, 1961), remains valuable.

3. Oscar Handlin, *Adventure in Freedom* (New York, 1954), p. 175.
4. *Ibid.*, p. 183.
5. Michael Selzer, "Kike!": *A Documentary History of Anti-Semitism in America* (New York, 1972), p. 6; see also Ernest Volkman, *A Legacy of Hate: Anti-Semitism in America* (New York, 1982).
6. Jacob R. Marcus, *The Colonial American Jew*, vol. 3 (Detroit, 1970), p. 1335; cf. 1113–1134.
7. *Ibid.*, p. 1336.
8. *The German Correspondent* 1 (1820): 6.
9. *New York Herald*, November 18, 1837; see Jonathan D. Sarna, *Jacksonian Jew: The Two Worlds of Mordecai Noah* (New York, 1981), pp. 119–25.
10. Louis Harap, *The Image of the Jew in American Literature* (Philadelphia, 1974), p. 71, and see pp. 46–81. See also Louise A. Mayo, "The Ambivalent Image: The Perception of the Jew in Nineteenth-Century America" (Ph.D. diss., C.U.N.Y., 1977), and Michael Dobkowski, *The Tarnished Dream* (Westport, Conn., 1979).
11. Morris U. Schappes, ed., *A Documentary History of the Jews in the United States, 1654–1875* (New York, 1971), p. 226.
12. *A Letter to Charles King From an American Jew* (New York, 1823), pp. 3–4; Sarna, *Jacksonian Jew*, pp. 179–180.
13. Jonathan D. Sarna, "The 'Mythical Jew' and the 'Jew Next Door' in Nineteenth-Century America," in David Gerber, ed., *Anti-Semitism in American History* (Urbana, Ill., 1986), pp. 57–78.
14. Robert H. Ruxin, "The Jewish Farmer and the Small-Town Jewish Community: Schoharie County, New York," *American Jewish Archives* 29 (Apr. 1977): 13; Andrew A. Lipscomb, ed., *The Writings of Thomas Jefferson* (Washington, 1904), vol. 10, p. 382; Lester J. Cappon, ed., *The Adams-Jefferson Letters*, vol. 2 (Chapel Hill, 1959), p. 383; Keith Sward, *The Legend of Henry Ford* (New York, 1972), p. 147.
15. Sigmund Freud, *A General Introduction to Psychoanalysis* (New York, 1953), p. 262.
16. Bertram W. Korn, *American Jewry and the Civil War* (New York, 1970), pp. 156, 187.
17. John Higham, *Send These to Me* (New York, 1975), p. 124.
18. Nathan C. Bellh, *A Promise to Keep: A Narrative of the American Encounter with Anti-Semitism* (New York, 1979), surveys the field.
19. See Jackson Lears, *No Place of Grace: Antimodernism and the Transformation of American Culture 1880–1920* (New York, 1981).
20. Jacob R. Marcus, *American Jewry Documents: Eighteenth Century* (Cincinnati, 1959), pp. 41–46.

21. Jonathan D. Sarna, "The American Jewish Response to Nineteenth-Century Christian Missions," *The Journal of American History* 68 (June 1981): 47.

22. Marcus, *American Jewry Documents*, p. 43; Sarna, "American Jewish Response," p. 46.

23. Winthrop Hudson, *The Great Tradition of the American Churches* (New York, 1963); Sydney E. Ahlstrom, *A Religious History of the American People* (New Haven, 1972), pp. 379–384.