

Will Jewish Tradition Outlive Antisemitism?

By **Brigitte Battat**

This article attempts to delve into the survival of Jewishness/Judaism in a perennially antisemitic world, as described by various writers and journalists.

So, how did antisemitism start? Where, why, and when did it begin? Can one claim that it started with Abraham who believed in one God, unlike the rest of the Chaldean population that worshipped a multitude of idols? Is this the reason why Abraham took his large family, his flocks, and his herds and moved to a place called Canaan, far away on the edge of the Mediterranean Sea? Is that what induced 20th century Jews to move to Abraham's land?

Introduction - Post World War II Period

Modern antisemitism is a term paradoxically coined by an antisemite, [Wilhelm Marr, in 1879](#). To this day, "antisemitism" is described as dislike of Jews, and may date as far back as the days of Manetho, the Egyptian priest of about 300 B.C., whose comments on the Jews were a combination of contempt and hatred, probably corresponding with the settlement of Jews in Alexandria. Nevertheless, the term "antisemitism" refers exclusively to Jew hatred from about the middle of the nineteenth century.

Since 1945, there have been three waves of antisemitism (a translation of the original Antisemitismus). [Dr. Simcha Epstein](#), a researcher of antisemitism at Hebrew University, Jerusalem, identifies the current (fourth) antisemitic wave as follows:

The first was between 1959-1960 with the rise of neo Nazism; the second at the end of the 1970s/beginning of the 1980s with Palestinian terrorism; and the third towards the end of the 1980s/beginning of the 1990s with the rise of the ultra right in France. The latest wave is comprised of three peaks: October 2000-the outbreak of the Intifada, September 2001-coinciding with terrorist activities in the United States, and March/April 2002-connected to the exacerbation of the security situation in Israel.

[Dr. Ilan Michel](#) makes the following comment on present-day antisemitism:

Since the outbreak of the "Al-Aqsa" Intifada (October 2000), the number of incidents perpetrated against France's 600,000 Jews and Jewish institutions has dramatically increased; Interior Ministry statistics cite over 360 anti-Jewish assaults in the first half of April 2002 alone. Synagogues in Lyon, Marseille, and Strasbourg were damaged or destroyed by arson and Molotov cocktails. In Strasbourg, vandals painted Nazi swastikas on Jewish tombstones. Jewish school buses were torched in Paris. Shots were fired at a kosher butcher shop in Toulouse.

The Maccabi sports club was set ablaze in one Paris suburb and in another, 15 hooded assailants attacked an amateur Jewish youth soccer team.

Ron Jager, a 25-year veteran of the IDF who served as a field mental health officer and Commander of the Central Psychiatric Military Clinic for Reserve Soldiers at Tel-Hashomer, has written a multitude of articles on the topic of antisemitism. In his most recent publication entitled *Applying the "Broken Windows" doctrine to Fight Anti-Semitism*, Ron Jager summarizes the phenomenon of antisemitism in the United States of America as follows:

Anti-Semitism is spiraling out of control throughout the United States with a precipitous rise in anti-Semitic attacks on the streets, on campuses, on social media, Synagogues, JCC's and other Jewish Institutions, wherever Jews are visible. The tsunami of Jew hatred comes from all corners of the political spectrum; the extreme Right, the progressive Left, radicalized Black and Muslim Americans, and the Muslim world. It has crept into the educational system, the corporate world, the political echelon, and the celebrity sphere. Brazen anti-Semitic attacks are being carried out daily without inhibition or hesitancy on the streets of America as if attackers are granted immunity from punishment or accountability. A general sense of fear and intimidation has become the norm for American Jews. For many Jews in the United States, zero tolerance for anti-Semitism is further than ever from being a reality.

Hatred starts with the Jews, but never ends with the Jews. The first airplane hijacked by Jew haters and anti-Semites was an Israeli airplane, and today at every airport at every country in the world, everyone lines up for security checks, so all Americans should be concerned. The danger of dismissing the inherent threat of today's anti-Semitism lies in its danger for all Americans.

Today's rise of this hatred is disconcerting, frightening, reminiscent of a world that enabled the Holocaust. And is the sort of hatred that should be fought on a global scale if Homo Sapiens wishes to preserve its characteristics.

Back in Time

Turn-of the-century [American literature](#) is rife with unapologetic anti-Semitism, often voiced during trips by American writers to Europe. On a 1901 visit to Russia, for example, as Louis Harap reminds us in *The Image of the Jew in American Literature*, Henry Adams writes that the first sight he saw as he looked out of his sleeping car window one morning was "a Polish Jew ... in all his weird horror"; writing home from Warsaw on that trip, Henry Adams noted that the Jew "makes me creep".

In an 1896 description of vacationers at a fashionable English resort, [Henry James](#) writes:

There were thousands of little chairs and almost as many little Jews; and there was music in an open rotunda, over which the little Jews wagged their big noses. We

all strolled to and fro and took pennyworths of rest; the long, level cliff-top, edged in places with its iron rail, might have been the deck of a huge crowded ship.

Henry James was as repulsed by Jews in New York as Henry Adams had been by Jews in Poland and Russia. In [The American Scene](#) (1907), for example, Henry James wrote about his disgust with the "swarming" Jews of New York:

... makes the individual Jew more of a concentrated person, sparingly possessed of everything that is in him, than any other human, noted at random—or is it simply, rather, that the unsurpassed strength of the race permits of the chopping into myriads of fine fragments without loss of race-quality? There are small strange animals, known to natural history, snakes or worms, I believe, who, when cut into pieces, wriggle away contentedly and live in the snippet as completely as in the whole.

So the denizens of the New York Ghetto, heaped as thick as the splinters on the table of a glass-blower, had each, like the fine glass particle, his or her individual share of the whole hard glitter of Israel. This diffused intensity, as I have called it, causes any array of Jews to resemble (if I may be allowed another image) some long nocturnal street where every window in every house shows a maintained light. The advanced age of so many of the figures, the ubiquity of the children, carried out in fact this analogy; they were all there for race, and not, as it were, for reason: that excess of lurid meaning, in some of the old men's and old women's faces in particular, would have been absurd, in the conditions, as a really directed attention—it could only be the gathered past of Israel mechanically pushing through.

Mark Twain

[As a young man](#), Mark Twain held the same negative stereotypical ideas of Jews that his neighbors embraced, declaring that they were all acquisitive, cowardly, and clannish. Hannibal, Missouri, his hometown, had only one Jewish family, the Levys, and Twain joined the community in ostracizing the young Levy sons. [In 1857](#), Twain wrote a humorous but uncomplimentary newspaper article about Jewish coal dealers, for a Keokuk, Iowa newspaper.

Twain appears to have had a change of heart about Jews around the time of the [Civil War](#). He confided to his daughter Suzy that "*the Jews seemed to him a race to be much respected . . . they had suffered much, and had been greatly persecuted, so to ridicule or make fun of them seemed to be like attacking a man when he was already down.*" In a 1879 private communication, Mark Twain wrote the following lines:

Sampson was a Jew – therefore not a fool. The Jews have the best average brain of any people in the world. The Jews are the only race who work wholly with their brains and never with their hands. There are no Jewish beggars, no Jewish tramps, no Jewish ditch diggers, hod-carriers, day laborers or followers of toilsome, mechanical trades. They are peculiarly and conspicuously the world's intellectual aristocracy.

Against the backdrop of Jew hatred in Europe and the USA, Mark Twain's efforts to challenge anti-Semitism stand out in sharp relief. In 1899, Mark Twain's published an essay entitled [Concerning the Jews](#), a work which has eclipsed other

texts by Twain related to this topic. But despite his good intentions, some of his arguments in *Concerning the Jews* have led Jewish readers to ask, "with friends like this, who needs enemies?" The paragraph below is a letter received by Mark Twain from an American lawyer, which appears in the aforementioned essay. It reads as follows:

I have read "Stirring Times in Austria." One point in particular is of vital import to not a few thousand people, including myself, being a point about which I have often wanted to address a question to some disinterested person. The show of military force in the Austrian Parliament, which precipitated the riots, was not introduced by any Jew. No Jew was a member of that body. No Jewish question was involved in the Ausgleich or in the language proposition. No Jew was insulting anybody. In short, no Jew was doing any mischief toward anybody whatsoever. In fact, the Jews were the only ones of the nineteen different races in Austria which did not have a party they are absolutely non-participants. Yet in your article [article by Mark Twain] you say that in the rioting which followed, all classes of people were unanimous only on one thing viz., in being against the Jews. Now will you kindly tell me why, in your judgment, the Jews have thus ever been, and are even now, in these days of supposed intelligence, the butt of baseless, vicious animosities? I dare say that for centuries there has been no more quiet, undisturbing, and well-behaving citizen, as a class, than that same Jew. It seems to me that ignorance and fanaticism cannot alone account for these horrible and unjust persecutions.

Tell me, therefore, from your vantage-point of cold view, what in your mind is the cause. Can American Jews do anything to correct it either in America or abroad? Will it ever come to an end? Will a Jew be permitted to live honestly, decently, and peaceably like the rest of mankind?

In the subsequent paragraphs, Mark Twain attempts to respond to the lawyer's letter by expressing the following poignant opinions:

I feel convinced that the Crucifixion has not much to do with the world's attitude towards the Jew; that the reasons for it are older than that event, as suggested by Egypt's experience and by Rome's regret for having persecuted an unknown quantity called a Christian, under the mistaken impression that she was merely persecuting a Jew. Merely a Jew - a skinned eel who was used to it, presumably.

I am persuaded that in Russia, Austria, and Germany nine-tenths of the hostility to the Jew comes from the average Christian's inability to compete successfully with the average Jew in business - in either straight business or the questionable sort.

In Berlin, a few years ago, I read a speech which frankly urged the expulsion of the Jews from Germany; and the agitator's reason was as frank as his proposition. It was this: that eighty-five per cent. of the successful lawyers of Berlin were Jews, and that about the same percentage of the great and lucrative businesses of all sorts in Germany were in the hands of the Jewish race! Isn't it an amazing confession? It was but another way of saying that in a population of 48,000,000, of whom only

500,000 were registered as Jews, eighty-five per cent of the brains and honesty of the whole was lodged in the Jews.

In his essay, Mark Twain stated that Jews did not do their part in terms of fighting in America's armed forces: "*He is a frequent and faithful and capable officer in the civil service, but he is charged with an unpatriotic disinclination to stand by the flag as a soldier – like the Christian Quaker.*"

However, when War Department figures revealed that Jewish Americans were actually represented in the nation's military in a larger percentage than their share of the population, Twain issued a retraction and an apology, entitled *Postscript – The Jew as Soldier*.

Ahad Ha'am – Slavery in Freedom

Ahad Ha'am, "[One of the People](#)"—the pen name of Hashiloah's founder and first editor Asher Ginzberg—had emerged in the 1890s as a foremost Hebrew essayist and Zionist thinker. Born in the Ukraine in 1856 and a resident of Odessa since the mid-1880s, he was at once a highly private and public figure, a naturally aloof man whose intellectual distinction and sense of Jewish mission propelled him to a prominence that he both basked in and felt uncomfortable with.

Initially, Ahad Ha'am declared that the "problem of the Jews." could not be alleviated by Zionism. The "problem of Jewishness" had to do not with anti-Semitism but with assimilation, which was most severe where anti-Semitism was weakest. *In an increasingly secular age, [Jewish religious tradition](#) was losing its hold; with nothing to replace it, Jews, if not forced back on themselves by Gentile rejection, were rapidly forsaking their cultural and national identity.* He concluded that this was where Palestine could matter:

... after several generations, it will have achieved its goal: the creation in the Land of Israel of a national spiritual center for Jewishness that is loved by the entire Jewish people and binds it together—a center of knowledge, of Torah study, of the Hebrew language and its literature, of the purest of bodies and souls: a true miniature of the Jewish people as it should be.

Ahad Ha'am wrote various essays on the topic of Zionism. The focus of the present write up, however, is on the issue of antisemitism as mentioned in various papers. *Slavery in Freedom* is one such write up. This essay, published in 1892 in Ha-Meliz, was a reply to an article entitled "*Eternal Ideals*," which had appeared in the Russian *Voschod*, from the pen of a prominent Jewish writer. The *Voschod* was a Russian Jewish monthly, since defunct. *Slavery in Freedom* was written many years before the Dreyfus case, which was the first practical revelation of French anti-Semitism.

In the essay *Slavery in Freedom*, Ahad Ha'am contrasted the Jews of Eastern Europe, who were inwardly free to be themselves despite outward oppression, with their emancipated West European counterparts, who slavishly internalized the culture

of their emancipators. According to Ahad Ha'am, Herzl was a mental and spiritual slave.

The essay starts by confronting the ideology of Russian Jews who believe that the culture of Western Jews is superior to the one practiced by the Jews in Russia:

Thus, these opponents of ours [Russian intellectual Jews] try to make us see, for our own good, to what a pitch of spiritual exaltation our people have risen in France, where even anti-Semitism has not made them narrow." Anti-Semitism! To the French Jews, with their "breadth of view," it is as though it did not exist: they go securely and calmly on their way towards those "eternal ideals" which their predecessors, the Jewish scholars of the last generation, set before them. But we, the small of soul, we have lost the way and turned back. Such, at least, is the opinion of our opponents.

And yet I for one am bold enough to doubt the "calmness" of the Jews of France in the face of anti-Semitism; to doubt even their "spiritual exaltation," and the value of those "eternal ideals" which they pursue. And, indeed, I find ground for these doubts in the very words of those "distinguished" people who are held up to us in terrorem.

Four years ago, at a meeting of the Societe des Etudes Juives in Paris, Theodore Reinach, the secretary of the society, drew the attention of his hearers to the danger which threatened the Jews in France through the growth of anti-Semitism. " Ah!" he cried, "anti-Semitism, which was thought dead in this beautiful France of ours, is trying to raise its head.

*Being, as we are, the smallest religious sect; being, as we are, strangers newly arrived in the French household, we are especially subject to jealousy and criticism." Even our abilities and our successes in every field are no protection for us. On the contrary, "it is just these that inflame jealousy." **There is, therefore, but one remedy for us. We must be very circumspect in all our actions, so as not to give an opening to our enemies.***

Ahad Ha'am evaluates the situation of the French Jews, with the view to establish whether their condition as French citizens is improved vis-à-vis the fate of the Russian Jews. Thus, he gives an account of the Jewish achievements in France, by mentioning that in the year 1840, *fifty years after the promulgation of the principles of 1789, the Jews possessed rights on paper; but in practice their rights were non-existent.*

Ahad Ha'am also tackles the topic of Jewish efforts to fight prejudice, in parallel with the battle against social assimilation (la fusion sociale) with all its corollaries. In essence, hatred of the Jews was revived even in France, despite the principles of 1789, and despite all the battles against prejudice and all efforts to promote assimilation. Ahad Ha'am continues with the following statement:

Is not this a sure indication that this accursed question [anti-Semitism] fills their whole horizon, so that they cannot turn their attention from it even for a moment, but it must needs force itself to the front, of whatever subject they may treat?

After a thorough analysis of the French Jewry vis-à-vis the Jews of Russia, Ahad Ha'am provides the following conclusion:

To-day, while I am still alive, I try mayhap to give my weary eyes a rest from the scene of ignorance, of degradation, of unutterable poverty that confronts me here in Russia, and find comfort by looking yonder across the border, where there are Jewish professors, Jewish members of Academies, Jewish officers in the army, Jewish civil servants; and when I see there, behind the glory and the grandeur of it all, a twofold spiritual slavery—moral slavery and intellectual slavery—and ask myself: Do I envy these fellow-Jews of mine their emancipation?—I answer, in all truth and sincerity: No! a thousand times No! The privileges are not worth the price! I may not be emancipated; but at least I have not sold my soul for emancipation.

I at least know why I remain a Jew—or, rather, I can find no meaning in such a question, any more than if I were asked why I remain my father's son. I at least can speak my mind concerning the beliefs and the opinions which I have inherited from my ancestors, without fearing to snap the bond that unites me to my people.

The year 1895 was marked by the first Dreyfus trial. It was against the background of this event that the Jewish Congress convened in Basel, where Ahad Ha'am and Herzl met. Their opinions regarding Zionism as a solution to the future of the Jewish people diverged. [Ahad Ha'am](#) postulated the following thesis:

Herzl's Jewish state were to come into being—what purpose could it serve without the Jewish content that Herzl had no interest in? What stood to be gained by the existence of one more small country that would be tossed back and forth between stronger neighbors like a ball, surviving by “the guiles of diplomacy” and groveling before the powers of the day? There is no way in which an ancient people that has been a light unto the nations can, in recompense for all of its tribulations, make do with such a bare minimum.

Ahad Ha'am wrote: *Herzl's Jewish utopia had nothing Jewish about it. It was simply a replica of Europe transplanted to the Middle East.*

In response to Ahad Ha'am's position on the topic of Zionism, [Max Nordau](#), Herzl's colleague and confidant, made the following comments:

Ahad Ha'am was no Zionist. He is the opposite of one. It's a cheap trick to attack “political Zionism” as if there were some other, mysterious kind of Zionism, his own, to believe in. Zionism must be political. A Zionism that isn't political and doesn't strive to create a homeland for that part of the Jewish people that won't or can't adjust to life in the Diaspora is not Zionism at all, and the [true] illusionist is he who uses the word in a sense other than that of the Basel program. We have no choice but to make this clear to the Jews of Russia who are good Zionists, or at least want to be, and who don't realize the game Ahad Ha'am is playing.

Ahad Ha'am's position on how to free the Jews from the yoke of antisemitism cannot be easily dismissed. His approach to Zionism was more comprehensive than the one presented by Western intellectuals of Jewish origin. He had thought more

deeply about the importance of the Hebrew language as a component that would cement Jews as a nation in a new land. Ahad Ha'am wrote the following in an essay on the subject:

Language functioned like a physiological organism, processing experience on an unconscious level and making it available on a conscious one. It did so for peoples no less than for individuals, the difference being that the individual mind has no choice but to submit to the linguistic usages of its times...

The Hebrew-less inhabitants of Herzl's Altneuland were amnesiacs.

Nevertheless, many Jewish writers and journalists considered that in a rapidly changing (antisemitic) Europe, a Jewish state had to be built quickly. Time was of the essence. *This was what Ahad Ha'am failed to realize.* Zionism had to become political in order to materialize into a practical solution for Jews existing in an antisemitic world.

[Ahad Ha'am's](#) paradigm for the Land of Israel, on the other hand, was to create a country which would be a source of strength for Diaspora communities that chose not to live in it; he perceived Judaism, or Jewishness as an organically evolving body of tradition and behavior selectively adapting to its environment; his view of Tradition as the creation of a "national spirit" deserving of being valued and preserved for its own sake even if not God-given. And he considered the Hebrew language to be a vital ingredient.

Conclusion

Today, many Jews insist to live in an increasingly antisemitic Diaspora. A salient example is the Jewish presence in the United States of America, where discrimination against Jews is on the rise. A recent article in the [Tablet](#) magazine publishes the following comment:

Suddenly, everywhere you look, the Jews are disappearing. You feel it like a slow moving pressure system, an anxiety of exclusion and downward mobility. Maybe you first noticed it at your workplace. Or maybe it hit when you or your children applied to college or graduate school.

Today American Jews watch with Solomonic bemusement as Students for Fair Admissions v. Harvard is argued before the Supreme Court. On some level we sympathize with the Asian American plaintiffs, who are suing Harvard for using admissions criteria that discriminate against them on the basis of their race. Maybe they really are the new Jews, facing the same barriers—insidious racism, personality scores, rural geographic preferences—that we once did.

In my humble opinion, the solution to the problem is a united Israeli nation that realizes the importance of being at home in a country inhabited by citizens who have (hopefully) discarded their Diaspora mentality and have become proud of having a national identity.