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WHY DO JEWS THINK ANTI-SEMITISM IS RISING?*

Why do Jews think there is a rise in anti-semitism? There is, of course, the possibility that there *is* a rise in anti-semitism and that Jews are simply acute observers. But there is also the possibility that Jews are over-estimating the rise of anti-semitism, and then the question would be, why? Is it paranoia or some other phenomenon?

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The problem, of course, as befits a Jewish issue, is that none of these questions has a simple answer. 1) The objective situation gives off *mixed* signals. 2) The Jews may be over-estimating the *current rise* of anti-semitism, but they may not be over-estimating the *danger* of anti-semitism. 3) In that case, the Jewish state of mind on that subject should be called something other than paranoia.

On the question of the objective situation, let's quickly look at the possible measurements. First: What do Americans actually think about Jews? On that narrow subject there are some conclusive findings. The cumulative evidence of Gallup, Roper, NORC, Cambridge and Yankelovich, and their fellows is overwhelming: the traditional negative attitudes towards Jews, the prejudiced stereotypes among Americans, have diminished steadily from the end of World War II until the present day. In general, there are more Americans who profess favorable images of Jews, fewer who profess unfavorable images.

The usual explanation for this transformation is generational. There were more committed anti-semites among the younger generations in the 1930s than among the same age group in the 1950s; and more committed anti-semites among the younger generations in the 1950s than among the same age group in the 1980s. The implication is that committed anti-semites do not fade away, they just die. Anti-semites are not swayed to virtue by events or good-will messages. But, since the end of World War II, each generation has had fewer of these committed anti-semites.

Over the past 40 years or so, the *same* questions have been asked often enough by so many different interviewing agencies to validate the diminishing trends noted. By the same token, those questions have been asked in many different time-frames, before and after many different kinds of events.

Of course, that may merely mean that the kinds of events which might reverse the diminishing trend have not yet taken place. Nevertheless, the indications are that as of today there is a very small percentage of hard-core anti-semites -- that is, people for whom anti-semitism has some active role in their belief systems. There is a larger group of soft-core anti-semites, who don't normally think about it, although they have some negative opinion when queried. And there is an even larger group of "indifferents," who really don't have any opinions on Jews one way or another. Presumably, both the hard-core and the soft-core ranks have diminished over the years; and even the "indifferents" have lost some of their ranks to the group which feels rather positive about Jews, or at least more actively opposed to any acting-out of anti-semitism.

But active anti-semitic ranks are subject to *expansion* by changing conditions. We have learned that not only the soft-core anti-semites but even the larger neutral and indifferent population can be activated into anti-semitic expressions or movements by certain objective conditions.

If anti-semitic prejudice has been diminishing, what's the state of affairs with respect to anti-semitic *incidents*?

There is no evidence that economic discrimination against Jews is on the increase. Indeed, the scattered evidence, including some recent examination of Jewish presence in the higher reaches of local banking circles, suggests that economic anti-semitism has also been diminishing.

By the same token, there is evidence, as in the last Congressional elections, that more Jews are being elected to public office than ever before in jurisdictions with thin Jewish populations -- another inescapable index of behavioral anti-semitism or its lack.

However, it would be difficult to gainsay the strong impressionistic evidence of those who span a couple of generations that public expressions of anti-semitism -- such as public statements, anonymous graffiti and vandalism -- while markedly less frequent than in the 1930s, are clearly more frequent than in the 1950s.

Today we are more likely to hear a U.S. Senator refer publicly to a Jewish colleague as the "Senator from B'nai B'rith." And we see a California State Senator write publicly about the "hard, Jewish" faces he saw in an opposition audience. Such references are heard more often than they were in the two "sanitary" decades after World War II.

One could also safely guess that there is a parallel momentum with respect to the matters mainly featured in the ADL audit: Although the last ADL audit showed some decline, there are more swastikas scrawled and more Jewish buildings vandalized with prejudice than there were in the 1950s -- although, again, fewer than in the 1930s.

Given that the proportion of Americans holding anti-semitic attitudes has continued to shrink during this period, how can we explain the rise in level of these particular acts and expressions?

It has been noted before that the apparent contradiction is not difficult to penetrate. The clear evidence is that there are fewer committed anti-semites in America, but that there is greater license for those who *are* anti-semites, or for those who find anti-semitism useful.

The distinction is of real and practical importance. It would mean that the problem is one of shrinking control, rather than a cancerous growth of anti-semitism *per se*. For example, the evidence is that membership in neo-Nazi groups has not significantly grown -- but these groups are more likely to express themselves than they were two decades ago.

This kind of social decontrol has to do with a loss of general civility; an increased license to flout the laws and ideals in general, without any necessary reference to anti-semitism. But there is a direct relationship between this general breakdown of constraint and active anti-semitism. American Jews felt that shock of recognition during the open social ruptures of the late 1960s and early 1970s. In the American society a general loss of social control is a necessary but not sufficient condition for virulent anti-semitism.

At some stage of such a climate of decontrol, the hard-core anti-semites will come out of the closet. The increased license is itself a danger signal. It

is compounded by the fact that fringes of the indifferent take advantage of the license to engage in certain anti-semitic acts. So far, those "fringes" of the indifferent have consisted of the juveniles here and there who commit most of the acts of vandalism in this country. According to the evidence, most of these juveniles do not have strong feelings about Jews one way or another, but feel license to use anti-semitism as an instrument of outrage.

However, we also know that those who will chiefly make or break the success of any dangerous anti-semitic movement are the soft-core or mainstream indifferent; we have learned nothing in the last 50 years if we have not learned that. However, the soft-core and the mainstream indifferent will not be dangerously rallied unless they are *triggered* by specific historical and social events.

It is significant that the "sanitary" decades after World War II were broken by two different kinds of triggers: a social upheaval in the American society and a crisis in American-Israeli relations.

The first, social and economic breakdown, is one with which the Jews have been long acquainted. Pre-Nazi Germany was the monstrous prototype, but every mass political movement in America which featured anti-semitism -- from the Ku Klux Klan to Father Coughlin's Social Justice movement -- was built on mass dislocations related to objective conditions in the society.

What lies in America's future on this score is unpredictable. American Jews are always vaguely uneasy about the possibility of some major economic and social breakdown, but no pertinent extremist movement is yet on the horizon -- and American Jews are more actively concerned about *another* anti-semitic *trigger*: a breakdown in American-Israeli relations.

Strains in American-Israeli relations have not yet triggered any measured anti-semitic trends. There is no automatic relationship between feelings towards American Jews and feelings towards Israel. It is part of the survey literature that many Americans who are prejudiced against Jews are sympathetic to Israel; and many Americans who are unprejudiced against American Jews are hostile towards Israel.

Of course, one quarter to one third of the American people has long believed that American Jews felt closer to Israel than to the United States. In at least one survey that figure seemed to be rising.

But, as long as Americans are themselves more sympathetic to Israel than to the Arab cause, most of them do not feel hostile towards a special Jewish attachment to Israel. And since 1967, even after Lebanon, Americans have been more sympathetic towards Israel than towards the Arabs because Israel is the only western society in the Middle East, and because they were told that Israel is a significant partner in America's venture to keep the Soviet Union from dominating the area.

In another apparent paradox, Israel was getting increasing measures of support from the American people at the same time that Americans were reacting more critically to specific actions by the Israeli government. The American people,

by and large, were not allowing their passive beliefs that Israel was behaving badly in some instances to interfere with their more active belief that support of Israel was important for American national interest. And that belief was heavily based on what they heard from Washington, D.C., as corroborated by the recent Congressional vote on aid to Israel.

Of course, that is not an immutable belief, any more than are the levels of anti-semitic belief immutable. It is entirely conceivable that a series of hostile exchanges between Israel and the United States, exacerbated by prolonged and explicit statements by American officials that Israel was standing in the way of oil, jobs, and American national interest, generally could lead to a downward spiral in American public opinion.

The tragic events in western Europe during 1982 provided some sharp clues in that direction. The outbreak of European anti-semitism corroborated the proposition that anti-Israel sentiment can serve as a primary "trigger factor" for anti-semitism.

In October, one Jewish agency pointed out that since Mitterand had come to power, there had been 115 terrorist acts in France, 29 of which had been directed against the Jews. The number of terrorist acts suggested a general decline in social control. In such a climate of diminishing self-restraint, the Jews are traditionally in the way of harm. Indeed, while most of the terrorism was not directed against Jews, a disproportionate amount was. And furthermore, the violence against the Jews was triggered not so much by economic conditions, as in the 1930s, but by their connection to Israel.

The anti-Israel bias in significant quarters of continental Europe, connected with both a pro-Palestinian bias and an anti-American bias, seemed to spill over onto the Jews in general. It was more a case of anti-Israel sentiment turning into anti-semitism, than of anti-semitism turning into anti-Israel sentiment.

Of course, it is possible to over-simplify the nature of European anti-semitism as well. One reliable source has suggested that 75 per cent of the violent anti-semitic acts in western Europe were actually committed by small Palestinian terrorist groups, not by the indigenous populations. Although the nature of the violence is quite different, there is some rough parallel between that situation and the situation in the U.S., which features more apparent license for a small and constant group of hard-core anti-semites, as well as for the fringes of the indifferent. Even so, it is proposed that the spilling-over of anti-Israelism into anti-semitism has not widely taken place in the United States because Americans are still largely supportive of Israel as an ally; but the spilling-over has somewhat more often taken place among Europeans, intolerant of Jewish activity on behalf of Israel because of a more prevalent antipathy towards Israel.

It is against that background that the "foreboding syndrome" prevalent among American Jews must be seen.

A 1982 regional study researched by Joseph Buckley in California illustrates the phenomenon. In this large random sample of Jews, about 9 out of 10 agreed that "anti-semitic acts are increasing in the United States." And about 6 out of 10 agreed that "the neo-Nazi movement in America is today a major threat to the Jews of this country."

However, there were some apparent internal contradictions. Only one quarter of those who believed strongly that the neo-Nazis were a major threat, felt that Americans were becoming "more and more negative about Jews." And only a few agreed strongly that the anti-semitic acts taking place in this country were being committed by organized groups.

When asked *why* they thought the neo-Nazis were a major threat, only 1 out of 10 who thought so gave as their prime reason that the neo-Nazis or any Nazi-like group was actually becoming stronger in this country. Rather, most of them indicated that what they *really* meant was that they were afraid of the *possibility* that under certain circumstances an organized anti-semitic movement *could* grow strong.

These kinds of answers don't jibe, unless you translate that question about neo-Nazis so that it asks about the *potential* rather than the present actuality of the danger.

The tendency of contemporary American Jews to translate the actual in terms of the potential, and the concomitant tendency to interpret that potential in *pessimistic* terms, is of such striking prevalence that it might fairly be called a foreboding syndrome.

"Foreboding" is not to be automatically equated with "paranoid." A person lost in an endless desert would be a fool not to be filled with foreboding about future thirst. It would be a different matter if Noah had been filled with foreboding about future thirst.

So, any evaluation of this Jewish sense of foreboding depends partly on an evaluation of the degree to which that characteristically *pessimistic* assessment of the potential for future anti-semitism is realistic.

There are two sharply different streams of Jewish thought about the nature of that anti-semitic potential. One group's foreboding primarily is based on the expectation that, if society breaks down (or if American/Israeli relations radically break down), then it is quite likely that political anti-semitism will emerge.

The other group's foreboding is based primarily on the expectation that under *any* social conditions it would only take some active propaganda to rouse the innate anti-semitism dormant in most non-Jews. The first group emphasizes *situational* anti-semitism. The second group emphasizes the prevalence of *innate* anti-semitism.

These are two radically different views of the nature of anti-semitism. The first foreboding thesis -- the situational approach -- is well-documented in our modern history. It is a foreboding well worth holding onto. The critical majority of the people who make a mass anti-semitic movement successful are not hard-core anti-semites, for whom anti-semitism is of prime importance. They are largely made up of the indifferent, the amoral, if you will, who don't join a movement because of its anti-semitism -- but who are willing to embrace it as part of a larger political platform.

On the other hand, the foundation of the second foreboding thesis, related to the universally innate character of anti-semitism, is not so well documented. To the contrary, the evidence is that fewer and fewer Americans have had anti-semitism at the forefront of their consciousness.

There is no reason for complacency to be found in either foreboding thesis, but as a basis for Jewish action against anti-semitism, there are significant differences between them.

The foreboding thesis based on innate anti-semitism engenders a Jewish Fortress approach: everyone is out to get us; we have to pull up the bridges over the moat, and defend ourselves against the world from the parapets. That is a frame of mind which is not only flawed in its perceptions, but self-destructive. At times, it gives the illusion of putting us on the offensive -- but in fact it puts us on the defensive, and takes our chief offensive weapons away from us.

In summary -- to come back to the original question: There are three identifiable categories of Jews who are actively worried about anti-semitism. There is a relatively small minority of Jews who think that anti-semitism is on the rise in traditional terms, who think that anti-semitic groups are growing considerably, or that the number of committed anti-semites is growing considerably. They are probably just misinformed.

Second, there is a group of Jews, also a relatively small minority, who automatically associate any negative sentiment about Israel as anti-semitism. They may be miscalculating the depth of the negative sentiment about Israel -- and are certainly mistaken about the automatic relationship between that and anti-semitism.

But there is a large bloc of Jews -- probably a majority, certainly the largest single bloc -- who tend not to believe that anti-semitism is actually on the rise, but that *conditions conducive* to anti-semitism are on the rise, who believe that the *danger* of anti-semitism is on the rise -- and who have a sense of foreboding about that.

That foreboding and that foreboding group are not to be dismissed. There is good reason for that foreboding. That group is on more solid ground than a fourth group of Jews, perhaps a substantial minority, who blithely have no sense of foreboding at all.

But it is critically important to make the distinction between a foreboding which says that it *is* happening, or that it *certainly* will happen; and a foreboding which says it might well happen if we don't try to control certain situations which are on the horizon.