

The Re-Emergence of Anti-Semitism:
Inverting “The Lessons of the Holocaust” Before and after Gaza

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In an essay I published last year, entitled “The Return of Antisemitism,” we developed a new explanation of the disturbing renewal of publicly antisemitic beliefs and actions in contemporary Western societies. We argued that these new explosions of anti-Jewish hatred have been caused, less by dramatic increases in antisemitic feelings – a bedrock Western prejudice – than by the weakening of prohibitions against their public expression.

Since Western civil spheres began to introduce such prohibitions in the early nineteenth century, there have been waves of cultural and political movements stigmatizing antisemitism -- “societalizing” movements, in my terminology -- along with continuous backlash movements against them. The Nazi backlash culminated in the Holocaust, and its defeat triggered an enormous societalizing reform that decisively opened up Western societies to Jewish incorporation.

Post-Holocaust societalization was, however, highly variable -- both temporally (*when* it occurred) and spatially (*where* it occurred). That was the major, empirically substantiated finding of our essay. The other propositions we advanced were more in the nature of speculative propositions. We argued that the deleterious effects of “uneven societalization” – deleterious in that they have facilitated the return of public antisemitism -- have been exacerbated by a series powerful social and cultural developments: (1) declining Holocaust memory; (2) tarnishing of Israel as a civil-democratic symbol; (3) and shifts in Left ideology toward (a) a focus on race,

gender, and post-coloniality and (b) an increasing identification with the Palestinian struggle against Israel.

While sociological theory is far from scientific explanation, these four propositions now seem eerily prescient, almost to have predicted the patterned eruption of meanings and emotion triggered by the war in Gaza. It is in the shadow of this catastrophe that I take the opportunity to deepen and complicate those arguments today.

It was because the “Holocaust” came to be construed as the most heinous evil ever perpetrated in the history of humankind that antisemitism was forced underground. Yet, memories fade, whether collective or individual. Germany and Japan are no longer vicious military dictatorships but thriving democracies at the heart of new Western wars, hot and cold, against Russia and China. The anti-Nazi sentiment that fueled public prohibitions against anti-Jewish expressions was once spontaneous and ferocious; it seems now almost labored and, while highly organized and well-funded, more ratiocinative effort rather than gut reaction. In Europe, leaders of “post-Fascist” parties are becoming Prime Ministers. In America, once and possibly future Presidents meet with demagogues who whitewash Nazism and deny the Holocaust ever happened. No matter the centrality of the Holocaust in textbooks and museums, neither the brutal murder of six million nor the vicious regime that conceived it have much to do with lived experience three generations on.

But it is not only that Nazism and its primary victim are no longer vivid memories. It is also that they have long ceased to be central actors in the collective traumas that animate and define the liberal consciousness of Western societies. In the middle and later postwar period, new social movements powerfully projected traumas of their own, creating wrenching dramas about

forms of human suffering that had nothing to do with Nazis and Jews, at least not literally, not in the historical sense of who did what to whom in the years between 1933 and 1945.

Courageous struggles against Western colonialism captured the world's attention, creating new categories of historical actors who gradually morphed into contemporary activists fighting globalization today. There has been the riveting struggle against *internal* colonialism, decades of anti-racism movements on behalf of black victims of slavery and indigenous peoples. There has been a revolutionary feminist movement, which also triggered explosive struggles against heterosexual normativity. Not to mention an apocalyptic environmental movement against climate change.

Finally, and more directly relevant to the story I am telling here, there has been the creation of two new historical actors. First, the establishment of Israel, whose violent creation sharply exacerbated anti-Jewish hatred in the Arab Muslim world. Second, the emergence of the "Palestinian," a newly defined category of Arab people that, over the last five decades, has struggled, sometimes violently, sometimes politically, and always symbolically, for recognition of its right to exist as an independent territorial entity, not only *alongside* but often *in place of* the Israeli state.

The "lessons of the Holocaust" that crystallized in the middle of the 20th century not only significantly undermined antisemitism in the Western world but created a hypersensitivity to ethnic-cum-religious violence more broadly, a structured repulsion, a demand for immediate intervention that expanded and imaginatively upgraded the civil sphere to a putatively global level. While the phrase "never again" initially emerged in response to the anti-Jewish mass murder, it quickly took on a broader meaning, demanding that the moral consciousness of the so-

called “civilized world” more closely approximate Kant’s utopia of a supra-national cosmopolitanism that could ensure perpetual peace.

It's critical to understand that the creation of such a striking moral upgrading had little to do with the process of rational judgment at the heart of Kant’s philosophy, which such philosophers as Rawls and Habermas extended into the late 20th century. The shift happened because of an aesthetic-cum-moral experience, the outcome of participating in a “trauma drama” that triggered catharsis and moral growth in the manner of Aristotelian tragedy. The killing of the Jews was, in the beginning, viewed “merely” as one more, if enormously larger, mass murder, subsumed with other vicious atrocities that Nazis had committed during WWII. In the years that followed, as the Nazis’ mass murder became transformed into the “Holocaust,” the genocide of the Jews came to be defined as the major takeaway event of the war itself.

The trauma drama was achieved by personalizing the victims of the mass murder, a process that, not only allowed in a rational sense, but emotionally compelled identification with the suffering Jewish victims. The bathetic photographs of concentration camp survivors in their striped uniforms became icons of human suffering. The melodramatic story of a girl named Anne Frank broke the collective hearts of parents and children around the Western world, becoming required reading in grade school classrooms, communicating the searing tragedy of ethnic violence in an aesthetic manner infinitely more powerful than logical argument. The thousands of televised documentaries, mini-series, and Hollywood movies, from *Exodus* to *Sophie’s Choice*, transformed an historical event into an epochal evil. The Holocaust became, not just an episode in history, but a legendary myth about human suffering, a spool of film continuously replayed, a tragedy that demanded what Nietzsche called an “eternal return.”

Paradoxically, this very process of dramatic *personalization* had the effect of *generalizing* and *abstracting* the “Holocaust.” The legend became a free-floating culture structure of injustice, directing public attention beyond the experience of specifically Jewish suffering to ethnic and racial violence *as such*, wherever and whenever to applied. When this narrative of injustice was applied to the suffering group, it created, in the minds and hearts of global audiences, an experience of heinous and genocidal evil. Triggering overwhelming feelings of pity that compelled identification, it created new victims and perpetrators of a heinous moral crime that could “never again” be denied or overlooked, but rather demanded conscience-bound attention and righteous intervention.

What this generalizing process meant was that, in a figurative and cultural sense, the “Holocaust” was *taken away* from the Jewish people. It became a universal trope that other non-Jewish groups, even anti-Jewish groups, now evoked to demand protection and justice -- for themselves. Jews were no longer in the privileged position of being the only victims of a Holocaust, and Nazis were no longer the only perpetrators of genocide. For the 1960’s antiwar movement in the U.S. and Europe, “AmeriKa” – spelled with a German-phonetic “K” -- was committing genocide with its napalm bombing war against the Vietnamese. Today, the Russians are widely accused of committing genocide in the Ukraine. The U.S. and Russian nations are not indicted merely for making war but more broadly, for committing war crimes, crimes against humanity, genocidal crimes that require universal condemnation, intervention, reparations, and restitution.

The lessons of the Holocaust had allowed Jewish people, for the first time in Western history, to be incorporated into Western civil spheres, yet the very success of this process meant that Jewish people were no longer able to persuasively occupy the cultural category of victim.

The trauma drama moved on, naming and shaming violent ethnic and religious oppression elsewhere, and demands for recognition and civil incorporation proceeded apace. Audiences around the world were repulsed by the colonial persecution that the British unleashed against Gandhi and the French against Algerians and Vietnamese; by the gross brutality of racist southern white sheriffs against Black civil rights demonstrators; by the sadistic crucifixion of gay men; by the dead bodies of migrant children washed ashore when their overcrowded and leaking ships capsized on the open seas.

There is more to the paradoxical nature of the “lessons of the Holocaust” than the fact that its universalization generated new, non-Jewish categories of suffering victims. While the lessons of the Holocaust are universalized for the audience looking on, they are particularized for the victims. Groups who occupy this newly universal victim category understand their *own* situations in an *anti*-universalistic. Subjected to despotic oppression because of their ethnic and religious identity, they have the right to fight back “by any means necessary” – as the Black Panthers put it -- to dislodge the perpetrator and protect themselves. Savagery can, and must be, practiced on both sides. Thus the nihilistic morale of Quentin Tarantino’s 2009 Holocaust revenge movie *Inglourious Basterds*. Generalizing the morale of the Holocaust triggers a sense of particularistic entitlement, generating the kind of relentless tit-for-tit violence that undermines cosmopolitan solidarity, incites depersonalizing animosities, and undermines, rather than reinforces, prospects for perpetual peace.

Such an inversion of universalism has, in my view, been etched into the collective identities of both the Israeli and the Palestinian peoples.

Jewish settlements remained in the centuries that followed Muslim conquest of the Middle Eastern region that the Romans had named Palestine. This Jewish remnant grew

exponentially in the later 19th and early 20th centuries, in reaction to the burgeoning backlash against Jewish incorporation in Europe and Russia. Organized Zionism, which emerged in the wake of the Dreyfus scandal, called for the creation of a Jewish state, and the Balfour Declaration in 1917 made it official imperial policy: There were to be two states, one Arab-Muslim, the other Jewish, side by side.

After WWI, the Ottoman Empire was dismantled, its provinces transformed into French and British colonies. Muslims were traumatized by their dwindling power and felt extraordinarily vulnerable to what seemed to be yet another, this time more definitive crusade. On the very day that the UN designated for the birth of the two states, Israel was attacked by four massively larger if organizationally weaker Arab armies. Amid the chaotic conditions and competing political, ethnic, and religious ambitions, Israel declared its independence; Zionist fighters fought pitched battles against local Palestinians and Arab solidiers; by the end, 700,000 thousand Palestinian Arabs evacuated their ancestral home.¹

Jewish soldiers individually, and the emerging Jewish nation collectively, experienced this birth struggle as a matter of life or death. “We, the Jewish Israelis,” the Israeli psychiatrist Dan Bar-on recalled, “saw ourselves as surrounded by enemies and having to struggle, physically and mentally, for our lives and survival. Feelings of compassion for displaced Palestinians – who were equally endangered – were cast aside.” Experiencing mass extermination in Europe energized the struggling Jewish nation’s sense of itself as uniquely the victim. According to the

¹Facing persecution in North Africa after the creation of Israel in 1948, about the same number of Jews, nearly the region’s entire population, emigrated to the just established state of Israel.

trauma drama frame, a military response to the Palestinian problem was the only way out. Only military strength could prevent Jewish defilement and death from ever happening again.

The tit-for-tit, anti-cosmopolitan mentality is revealingly displayed in the dark and self-justifying elegy that Israeli army leader Moishe Dayan composed on the eve of the 1956 war. The speech, only recently recovered in full, that has become memorialized as a synecdoche for the depersonalizing brutality of that time, and ours. These were Dayan's words.

A generation of *settlement* are we, and without the *steel helmet and the maw of the cannon* we shall not plant a tree, not build a house. Our children shall not have lives to live if we do not dig shelters; and without *the barbed wire fence and the machine gun*, we shall not have a path nor drill for water. The millions of Jews, annihilated without a land, peer out at us from the ashes ... and command us to ... build a land for our people.

This post-Holocaust apologia for violent settlement ends with the chilling recognition defending the new Israeli nation would undermine any chance for peaceful resolution. "Beyond the furrow that marks the border," Dayan declared, "lies a surging sea of hatred and vengeance, yearning for the day ... that we heed [those] who call for us to lay down our arms."

Israelis' sense of entitling victimhood deepened after the near-death experiences of the 1967 and 1973 Arab-Israeli wars. After the first of these, the leading Labor liberal Abba Eban equated returning the newly captured West Bank territory with returning to the barbed wire enclosures of Auschwitz. After the second, Likud Prime Minister Menachem Begin made even more prominent use of Holocaust imagery, warning time and again about the "return of Auschwitz" in response to threats from Palestinians and Arab nations. "No one came to save us,"

declared Begin, referencing the historical Holocaust, “neither from the East nor from the West.”

The lessons he drew from this experience were ominous:

We have sworn a vow, we, the generation of extermination and rebirth: Never again will we put our nation in danger, never again will we put our women and children and those whom we have a duty to defend – if necessary at the cost of our lives – in range of the enemy’s deadly fire.

Such anti-universalizing “lessons of the Holocaust” inspired the settler movement that colonized the West Bank, erecting roadblocks and barbed-wire fences around the living spaces and lives of the native Palestinian people. In 2005, when Israel dismantled 25 settlements in Gaza, IDF soldiers were met by sobbing children wearing yellow starts, asking with raised hands, “Have you come to take us to the gas chamber” – and by settler activists wearing Auschwitz-like striped uniforms. In 2009, Yad Vashem, the Jerusalem museum dedicated to memorializing Holocaust memory, fired an employee who publicly compare the trauma of Jewish Holocaust survivors with the trauma experienced by the Palestinian people. Acknowledging “there are people who *lived* on this land” before us, the employee had explained to visitors that, just as “the Holocaust moved *us* to establish a Jewish state,” so “the Palestinian nation’s trauma is moving *it* to seek self-determination.”

The construction of this particularistic, dehumanizing dimension of Israeli collective identity did not happen in a vacuum. The universalizing ambitions of post-Holocaust morality were just as strikingly inverted on the Palestinian side.

A few months after the highly publicized incident at Yad Vashem, the United Nations Relief Agency announced plans to introduce Holocaust history lessons in some of the 221

schools it administered in Gaza. Palestinian political and religious immediately denounced the plan an effort to spread Jewish propaganda. One Hamas leader described the effort as “marketing a lie and spreading it,” declaring that teaching Palestinian children that the Nazis’ murdered six million Jews would be nothing less than a “war crime.”

In fact, anti-Jewish feeling among Arab Muslims was inflamed long before the Nazi mass murder had become transformed – in the West -- into a world-historical event. After the defeat and dismemberment of the Ottoman Empire in the aftermath of the First World War, fantastical images of Jews as perpetrators of Arab devastation began to widely circulate. Beyond the perfidy of the region’s new British and French colonizers, Arab Muslims saw the Dracula-like power of money hungry and blood seeking Jewish puppeteers. Out of the pride and prejudice of traditional Islam, Islam***ism*** emerged, the Western-hating, Jew-defiling ideology that first formed in the perfervid and paranoid imagination of Sayyid Qutb, who in the early 1950s published his pamphlet entitled “Our Fight with the Jews,” eerily echoing Hitler’s *Mein Kampf*.

With the rise of Nazism and the massive new influx of Jewish emigrants into Arab lands, influential Muslim leaders eagerly embraced the seemingly salvational nostrum pitched by Hitler, the Nazi promise that the Jewish infection would be finally and fully cauterized. The Mufti of Jerusalem, Amin al-Husaini, reached out to Adolph Hitler, spending the years 1941-1945 as the Fuhrer’s feted guest in Berlin. The Mufti broadcast radio speeches back to the Arab homeland, intertwining the Jewish hatred inspiring German Nazis and Arab-Muslims and heralding Nazi military triumphs in North Africa and the Middle East. Nazi *Einsatzgruppen* technocrats worked with Isalmist leaders in Berlin and North Africa to design concentration where, after the Nazi victory, a second “final solution” to the Jewish question would be carried out in the Muslim world.

When the Nazis were defeated, and the dream of exterminating the Jews was lost, the victim position of Arab Muslims was confirmed. The victorious Israel army became framed as perpetrators of the “Destruction,” or *Nakba*, a trope that henceforth would allow Palestinian Arabs to experience the creation of Israel as their own Holocaust. After their Nakba, and the Israel expulsions, a diaspora of Palestinian exiles carried their story of genocide into Europe.

The universalization of the Holocaust trope had, for both Israelis and Palestinians, a devastatingly particularistic effect, helping shape two tensely antagonistic experiences of trauma drama. Two peoples with claims to the same land, each fighting for its very life, each sharing the same story of suffering, extermination, and revenge.

The Islamist revolution in Iran fervently carried forward this anti-Jewish, Israel-hating version of the Holocaust story, organizing violently antisemitic appendages in Hamas and Hezbollah, radical political and military organizations dedicated to cleansing the Muslim Holy Land of Jews, from the river to the sea.² Supported by the cultural labor of intellectuals like Edward Said, novelists like Elias Khoury, and film makers like Mohammad Bakri, the identity of the orientalized, denigrated, despised, outcast, and terrorized “Palestinian” subject defined a new kind of post-Holocaust morality.

² The Islamization of the Palestinian struggle was not inevitably determined by the growth of Islamism and the rise of Iran. It was also a product of the failure of the 1993 “Oslo Accords.” The latter not only initiated mutual legal recognition between the PLO and Israel, but generated idealistic hopes for a widened, civil form of solidarity that would become the basis for an enduring, cosmopolitan peace. Immediately upon the signing of the Accords, Palestinian intellectual Edward Said denounced them as a “Palestinian Versailles,” and over the next two years there unfolded a tragic skein anti-civil tit-for-tat violent massacres, committed by Israeli extremists against Palestinians and Muslim Jihadists against Israelis. In 1995, Israel Prime Minister Yitzhak Rabin, who had initiated the Accords, was murdered by a Jewish religious extremist, and Benjamin Netanyahu shortly later was elected Israeli Prime Minister for the first time.

Even as Israel deepened its aggressive occupation of the West Bank, the Palestinian version of its own Holocaust – about its struggle for anti-colonial, anti-white, anti-European-American-Christian, and above all anti-Jewish liberation -- gradually gained hegemony over the Jewish version of their own historical experience. The Palestinian liberation story began to powerfully appeal to significant segments of the Western audience, especially to progressive activists in the third generation. It was laminated onto the series of earlier heroically progressive struggles against religious, racial, sexual, and colonial domination, struggles that themselves had been framed inside the trope of genocide and had gradually displaced the historical memory of Nazism and its Jewish victims.

That memory of the original, historical Holocaust was briefly recalled on October 7, 2023, by the Hamas massacre of almost 1300 Jewish innocents on the Israeli side of the Gazan border. It was swiftly displaced by the tens of thousands of Palestinian innocents killed in the months of ferocious Israeli revenge that followed. Corpses of encaged Gazans filled the television screens. Wailing mothers holding their dead and bleeding children, recalling Anne Frank, personalized Palestinian suffering, triggering sympathetic identification with the victims of mass murder and angry indignation against Israeli perpetrators.

Western liberals were conscience stricken, as their parents and grandparents had been 75 years before; they were imaginatively reliving the terror of the Holocaust story, extending its universalizing moral frame. For majorities in Israel and the Arab Muslim world, and a growing segment of the Western liberal conscience, no extension could be made. The warring sides had become desensitized to one another's suffering, each living out their collective nightmares of singular oppression and violent entitlement. On the left, a consensus emerged that Israeli was committing genocide against a polluted, powerless, and excluded minority. No matter that the

Palestinian innocents had been placed in harm's way as human shields for Hamas fighters hiding in tunnels below. Once again, anti-Jewish violence comes to be experienced as liberation. Judith Butler protested against the very idea that October 7th was a "terrorist [or] antisemitic attack," insisting that what Hamas did must be understood as "an uprising," an "act of armed resistance." In a lawsuit challenging his suspension from Columbia University – not for leading provocatively disruptive pro-Palestinian demonstrations but for declaring, during the protests, that "Zionists don't deserve to live" – the student alleges that Columbia "privileges a class of self-described 'Zionist-Jewish' people over everyone on campus'."

Is it surprising that, in the midst of this consternating and mind-numbing pathos, observant Jews, especially in Europe, have become afraid to display their religious identities in public? That in the midst of militantly anti-Israel demonstrations, Jewish students in America have bunkered inside their dormitories rather than face taunts, bullying, and sometimes even physical abuse walking through the public spaces of their college campuses? That the categories of "Israeli" and "Jew" are becoming increasingly conflated? That left and rightwing antisemitic shibboleths about Jews, shutdown for decades, have begun entering into the Western mainstream?

A significant segment of today's left has been deeply compromised by its stridently anti-Zionist discourse, which, during this year of Gaza, has frequently been seen as implicitly pro-Hamas. But in the West today the liberal left is on its back foot, while it is the far right that is gathering steam. If this rightwing backlash were to triumph, Jews would be in deep trouble, along with other minorities and liberals too. Feelings of solidarity would become further shredded, and the civil sphere of Western societies would be destroyed. There would be no place to hide. In the meantime, Jews committed to the continued existence of a democratic if flawed

Israel must hold their tongues, and Jews who wish to publicly display their religious loyalties have no place to hide.

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