

## DEFINING ANTISEMITISM

It is universally recognized that the focus and character of antisemitism has mutated significantly over its long history. For centuries, Christian antisemitism emphasized the claim that a “new covenant” had replaced God’s covenant with the Jews, that Christianity had consequently “superceded” Judaism. Supposed Jewish resistance to the new covenant made it possible to demonize Jews as destructive enemies of religious truth. A whole series of antisemitic myths and tropes evolved over time to promote the resulting hatred.

Christian antisemitism justified not only discrimination against Jews, their periodic exile from European counties, and repeated homicidal violence directed at them, but also denying European Jews their civil and political rights. As the European Enlightenment movement took shape in the late 17<sup>th</sup> and 18<sup>th</sup> centuries, a movement to grant Jews those rights gradually took form. It gained force in the 19<sup>th</sup> century but simultaneously provoked a counterreaction. New secular, rather than religious, arguments favoring antisemitism gained prominence. In the late 19<sup>th</sup> century a race-based antisemitism was articulated and became influential. It had its zenith under Nazism, culminating in the Holocaust.

After a Jewish nation was recreated in 1948, yet another focus for anti-Jewish hatred came to the fore. Israel became a primary target of antisemitic passion, and definitions of antisemitism eventually had to adjust as a result.

There are continuing features of antisemitism, conspiracies about Jews among them, evident throughout this history, even though those elements undergo change as well, but no concise definition of antisemitism—even “hatred of Jews”—can be expected to adequately capture this long history. We therefore provide examples of several complimentary modern definitions. The most widely adopted effort to capture contemporary examples is the Holocaust Remembrance Alliance Working Definition of Antisemitism.

Helen Fein’s well-regarded concise 1987 definition is a good place to start:

Anti-Semitism is a persisting latent structure of hostile beliefs towards Jews as a collectivity manifested in individuals as attitudes, and in culture as myth, ideology, folklore, and imagery, and in actions—social or legal discrimination, political mobilization against Jews, and collective or state violence—which results in and/or is designed to distance, displace, or destroy Jews as Jews (p.67)

The Anti-Defamation League provides a practical, functional definition of antisemitism:

Antisemitism is the marginalization and oppression of people who are Jewish, based on the belief in stereotypes, myths and disinformation about Jewish people, Judaism and Israel. Parallel to all systems of oppression, antisemitism manifests as the dehumanization or exploitation of, or discrimination or violence against Jewish people.

Antisemitism sometimes targets Jews not as individuals but as a collective — whether that's Jewish organizations, movements like Zionism or the Jewish State of Israel.

The well-known pro-Israel blogger Elder of Ziyon offers an alternative definition of antisemitism that works almost as an algorithm, a definition one could reliably use to determine whether a statement is antisemitic. It is less helpful in understanding complex bodies of antisemitic theory. He offers it as an elaboration of Natan Sharansky's famous "3D" definition of the forms that antisemitism takes—Delegitimization, Demonization, and Double Standards. It has two columns. On the left are four types of antisemitism; on the right are their multiple targets:

Antisemitism is

- |                                   |                               |
|-----------------------------------|-------------------------------|
| (1) hostility toward Jews;        | (a) as individual Jews;       |
| (2) denigration of Jews;          | (b) as a people;              |
| (3) malicious lies about Jews; or | (c) as a religion;            |
| (4) discrimination against Jews   | (d) as an ethnic group; or    |
|                                   | (e) as a nation (i.e. Israel) |

Each of the four categories of aggression on the left can be combined with any of the five Jewish targets on the right, so there are a total of twenty possible combinations. It's a pretty good test, which is one of the things a definition can be.

How adequate a definition appears to be depends on how much one expects it to accomplish. Kenneth Marcus sets a high bar, one that a concise dictionary definition cannot meet:

A theoretically sophisticated definition of this term must fully account for antisemitism's ideological, attitudinal, and practical qualities; its

persisting latent structure within Western cultures; its continuities and discontinuities with analogous phenomena; its chimerical quality; its potentially self-fulfilling character; and its role in the construction of Jewish identity. Most importantly, the definition must account for the participation of antisemitic discourses and practices in the construction of the individual and collective “Jew,” both as false image and as actual being (97).

The most concise definition—hatred of Jews—thus falls short on a number of counts. One limitation may be central. Claiming that antisemitism always takes the simple form of an irrational dislike or hatred of Jews identifies it as an attitude that shapes both perception and behavior. But, as Bernard Harrison argues in “In Defense of the IHRA Definition,” that hatred is frequently based on and rationalized by an integrated body of political theory, many elements of which are unique to Jews. He defines this contemporary version of antisemitism as “a delusive political theory concerning the allegedly crucial role played collectively by ‘the Jews’ in the direction of world affairs,” then identifies its five main beliefs:

- (1) the Jews are a people given to the pursuit of evil, and are behind every evil that besets the non-Jewish world, including all wars;
- (2) the Jews are gifted with quasi-demonic powers of conspiratorial organization;
- (3) these extraordinary powers have allowed them to assume control of a vast range of supposedly non-Jewish organizations (the banks, the US Presidency, Hollywood, &c., &c.) and to subvert them to the service of Jewish goals;
- (4) because of the impossibility of negotiating with what is in effect a hidden and secret power, the only solution to these problems lies in the complete elimination of the Jews;
- (5) once the elimination of the Jews is achieved, all problems will cease, and the non-Jewish world will return to the state of unbroken peace and happiness to which its manifest virtues evidently entitle it, and from which only the machinations of the Jews have been able to expel it. (53)

## REFERENCES

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