

What to Do about Anti-Semitism?

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The Anti-Defamation League of B'nai Brith (the ADL) was founded in 1913, a time not unlike our own, when the response of many American citizens to an influx of immigrants was a rise in bigotry. The ADL's goals were to stop the defamation of Jews and to secure justice and fair treatment for all Americans "by appeals to reason and conscience and, if necessary, by appeals to law." The immediate impetus for the founding of the ADL had been a unique and frightening episode in American history—the Atlanta lynching of Leo Frank.

Until the great wave of immigration between 1880 and World War I, America's response to Jews had been benign. Yes, it took 50 years after the writing of the U.S. Constitution for the state of Maryland to finally give Jews the right to vote, and, yes, another half-century passed before the final state dropped the requirement that the oath of office must be taken on a Christian Bible. With the exception of the famous case of General Grant's Order #11 during the Civil War, however, there was no government sponsored anti-Semitism and few social limitations on Jews. For the most part, both the colonial Sephardic community and the 19th century German Jewish community were accepted as Americans and assimilated comfortably into society.

But in the late 1800s, with the influx of Eastern European Jews, many of whom settled together in the cities of the northeastern seaboard, the accusation was made that the Jews, as well as other immigrants of that time—particularly the Italians and Irish—could never become true Americans. Jews were accused of being criminals, of not learning English, of sticking to their own kind. Crude stereotypes, the re-emergence of anti-Semitic conspiracy theories, and, by the 1920s, limitations on Jewish participation in American life abounded. Such limitations included quotas at colleges, restricted access to some hotels and clubs, and homes with deeds that stipulated they could not be sold to Jews. Restrictions on employment provided impetus for Jews, well into the 1960s, to change their names in order to get jobs and to alter their appearance through cosmetic surgery.

The ADL did important work: monitoring the media for objectionable or vulgar references, fighting overt discrimination, exposing extremist groups, and challenging propaganda by publishing informational pamphlets. Despite the ADL's efforts, however, anti-Semitism and the new scientific racism continued to proliferate in the 1930s and well into the 1940s.

Even after the United States entered World War II, anti-Semitism was prevalent. For example, World War II U.S. Army training manuals explained that Jews were more likely to be malingerers than the native-born. A 1943 government study found that a fear of Jews existed in half of the 42 states studied. A 1944 study found that 60% of Americans had heard criticism or talk against Jews over the previous six months.

The ADL was not alone in trying to fight anti-Semitism in the first half of the 20th century. The 1920s also saw the formation of the National Council of Christians and Jews. The NCCJ sent teams consisting of a rabbi, a minister, and a priest barnstorming around the country, giving speeches, and working to promote round-table conversations within communities. NCCJ's Brotherhood Day was established in 1927 and was then turned into a Brotherhood Week in the 1940s.

But the publicity campaigns with accurate information about Jews and stories of interfaith heroes, such as the chaplains who gave up their lives together in order to save others on the sinking *Dorchester*, could not move the needle of anti-Semitic feeling. It was not until the years 1946–1950 that anti-Semitism significantly decreased as it became un-American. The connection of anti-Semitism with America's enemy, the Nazis, and the creation of an ingroup identity publicly supported by thought leaders in all areas of American society, were powerful transforming forces.

Most of us came of age during this new era of interreligious comity, which was helped along by changes in the Catholic Church, by the increasing affluence of the middle class, and by the assimilation of American Jews once the gates of immigration were closed and second and third generation Jewish Americans began to predominate. Many of us here at services may have heard about Henry Ford and Father Coughlin, but we didn't grow up with anti-Semitic sermons on the radio. For us, the events last year in Charlottesville and the shooting at the

Tree of Life synagogue in Pittsburgh violate our sense of what America is and has been.

In response to the shooting, Professor Jonathan Sarna, one of the most respected of American Jewish historians, wrote an article reminding us of aspects of history that are often overlooked and that, in some ways, parallel our situation today. What I noticed in his history was that while in other societies anti-Semitism stands alone, in the United States it can best be understood as a part of other dynamics of the time.

Previous to Saturday, October 27, 2018, the most famous act of anti-Semitic violence was the 1958 bombing of The Temple in Atlanta. Fifty sticks of dynamite were placed, thankfully early in the morning so no one was killed, but the incident was still considered one of the worst acts of anti-Semitism in America. The “Confederate Underground” took credit, but even so, much like today, the bombing was considered by some to be an attempt to besmirch segregationists. Two separate jury trials were held, but no one was ever convicted, and it is still officially considered an unsolved crime.

Melissa Fay Greene, author of *The Temple Bombing*, which our book group read several years ago, reminds us that in that same year, 1958, dynamite was placed in temples in Charlotte and Gastonia, North Carolina; in Miami and Jacksonville, Florida; in Nashville, Tennessee; and in Birmingham, Alabama. Thankfully, all but three bombs failed to detonate, and all of the explosives were placed during the night in order to avoid detection, thus putting no lives at risk. It was a period of

extremist violence in America, one in which 90% of the targets were African-American institutions and 10 percent were Jewish institutions—synagogues, rabbis' homes, and community centers.

In response to these bombings, the Rev. Billy Graham and then Senator John F. Kennedy formed an organization called Americans against Bombs of Bigotry. Despite their efforts, homegrown terrorist attacks continued in the 1960s, including attacks on Jewish institutions. The deadliest violence occurred in 1965, and, though never proven to be an act of terror, it resulted in twelve deaths and eight injuries in a suspicious fire in the Yonkers, New York, Jewish Community Center. Other Jewish institutions suffered attacks during this period as well, including most notably, an incident in Jackson, Mississippi, in which Rabbi Perry Nussbaum's temple and home were bombed by white supremacists. Rabbi Nussbaum, a Reform rabbi, has spoken out about his experiences in the recent decade.

Professor Sarna ends his article by pointing to similarities between the social atmosphere and actors in these earlier attacks and the situation today. Other hatreds—of African Americans and of other ethnic and national groups—sometimes distract from anti-Semitism but often combine with it. He comforts us, on this Shabbat of Kristallnacht, with his insistence that even with these anti-Semitic attacks, America is different. He notes that in America, Jews have always been able to fight back against anti-Semitism freely. Furthermore, he argues that anti-Semitism is more foreign to American ideals than to European ones, where the European sense of folk excluded the Jews while, in contrast, important

American figures such as President George Washington spoke out against bigotry. In addition, with Jews part of the voting citizenry in the U.S., both parties have historically competed for Jewish votes, thus preventing either party, at least to date, from being overrun by anti-Semitism. Finally, Professor Sarna concludes that America's religious tradition—what has been called “the great tradition of the American churches”—is inhospitable to anti-Semitism. We certainly saw that in the reaction of the religious community to recent events.

So what works against anti-Semitism? That is what I promised to talk about.

First, what doesn't help combat anti-Semitism? We know that what psychologists call “mortality salience”—making people more fearful and stressing threats—is not helpful in combatting anti-Semitism or any prejudice.

On the positive side, we know that education plays a role. There is a lot about anti-Semitism that even our non-Jewish allies haven't been exposed to and don't understand or which we as Jews have difficulty explaining to others. That is why a group of members from Shir Hadash and Temple Emanu-El will be spending all of this Sunday afternoon and evening in a training with local Christian and Muslim leaders exploring racism, anti-Semitism, and Islamophobia. “Implicit Bias” training is becoming more available and can provide real insight. Our Shir Hadash Organizing Committee has been discussing ways of getting more of this kind of education into schools throughout the county, at all levels of education.

Anti-Semitism is hard to address because for some people it is not an odd quirk but rather a core element of their thinking, what psychologists call their “elemental intellectual architecture.” This kind of thinking is evident in much of the anti-Semitic material on Facebook and Twitter and is almost impossible to combat with rational argument.

Personal contact works under many circumstances, but it can also backfire. Programs that provide an opportunity for such personal contact must do more than just throw people into the same space; such programs need to be thoughtfully organized and planned. Especially when a program is short-term, there needs to be follow-up. Working together in sustained ways is what creates deep relationships that can weather differences. Those who were at the rally last Tuesday or who have been to the Jewish Film Festival got a taste of the dividends from these investments.

Finally, the support and participation of those with authority and power have been shown to have a very significant impact. This is what changed America in the post–World War II era and created a common identity. This is why rallies with respected public officials and community leaders do matter. Building positive identity as Americans—an identity that comes from a sense of shared mission and values, and not from denigrating others—will help overcome prejudice of many types.