



ANTISEMITISM IN AMERICA TODAY:

Outspoken Experts Explode the Myths

EDITED BY
JEROME A. CHANES

A BIRCH LANE PRESS BOOK
PUBLISHED BY CAROL PUBLISHING GROUP

ספרית הר הצופים
למדעי הרוח והחברה

· 2 ·

Antisemitism in the United States: A Historical Perspective

JACK WERTHEIMER

Jack Wertheimer is the Joseph and Martha Mendelson Professor of American Jewish History at the Jewish Theological Seminary of America. He has written and edited five books, most recently *A People Divided: Judaism in Contemporary America*.

Jack Wertheimer develops a historical context for the discussion of antisemitism and Jewish security in the United States in the 1990s. In doing so he addresses a basic question: Why indeed did antisemitism *not* take firm root in this country, whatever its manifestations? Wertheimer's approach to the historical analysis of antisemitism is to place antisemitism in the context of other forms of intolerance, and therefore not to exaggerate the valence or power of this form of hatred, however dreadful its manifestations may be.

J.A.C.

A historical examination of antisemitism in the United States yields a striking paradox: every accusation of wrongdoing, every stereotype and anti-Jewish ideology, every evil imputed to Jews on the part of detractors in the United States has an identifiable counterpart in the repertoire of European Jew-haters; and in turn, it seems unlikely that allegations made by antisemites around the world in recent centuries have not surfaced in the United States as well. By contrast, the manner in which Jew-haters have mobilized public opinion in this country and the organized forms of their attacks have differed significantly from European versions of antisemitism. It is precisely the singular

expression of antisemitism in the United States that requires analysis if Jews and their allies are to respond effectively to contemporary Jew-hatred.

Many of the distinctive—and contradictory—characteristics of antisemitism in the United States were evident during the colonial period and the founding years of the American republic. Indeed, some patterns were already on display when the first group of Jews landed in North America. In 1654 a boatload of Sephardic Jews arrived in New Amsterdam (subsequently renamed New York), a colony of the Dutch West India Company. Fleeing from Recife, an island off the coast of Brazil that had been captured by the Portuguese, twenty-three impoverished Jews appealed to Peter Stuyvesant, the governor, for the right to settle in New Amsterdam. Stuyvesant, in turn, requested permission from his superiors in Amsterdam to expel the Jewish refugees. To justify his request, he invoked stock formulations of medieval antisemitism: the Jews, if admitted, would engage in "their customary usury and deceitful trading with Christians"; "they might become a charge in the coming winter"—that is, they are parasites; and they are "hateful enemies and blasphemers of the name of Christ."¹ Putting aside their fears that the colony would be "infected by people of the Jewish nation," Stuyvesant's superiors ordered him to admit the Jews in consideration of the losses they had sustained in defense of Recife, a Dutch colony, and the shares owned by Dutch Jews in Amsterdam who had petitioned the company to admit coreligionists to New Amsterdam.² Stuyvesant complied with these orders, but he restricted Jewish activities severely by denying Jews the right of public worship, land ownership, engaging in certain forms of trade, and bearing arms. Gradually, however, all of these barriers fell.

The initial encounter of Jews with a New World official thus included a range of conflicting circumstances. It was evident from Stuyvesant's initial response that European attitudes toward Jews had been imported to the New World. Stuyvesant evoked typically medieval Christian stereotypes and introduced discriminatory policies common in Europe—barring Jews from land ownership and bearing arms. He even went beyond prevailing practices in the Old World when he prohibited public worship.

But this traditional hostility was tempered by altered circumstances in the American colonies. Unlike the Old World, where limitations on Jewish participation were well defined and codified, the rights of Jews in the colonies were subject to rapid change. Jews benefited greatly from the fluidity of life in the colonies; since discriminatory policies were not well entrenched, individual Jews often found ways to circumvent or topple barriers. Within short order, they enjoyed opportunities denied to their contemporaries in Europe. It was symptomatic of the rapid change that Myer Myers assumed the presidency of New York's goldsmiths society in the mid-eighteenth century, a time when Jews were barred from even working as artisans throughout Europe, let alone holding high office in a guild.³

In addition to their new opportunities, Jews found themselves in the company of other minorities—many far more despised. Jews were not singled out as pariahs or uniquely victimized. Peter Stuyvesant, for example, was hostile to Jews, but he was even more brutal toward fellow Christians who failed to meet his standards. A staunch defender of the Dutch Reformed Church, Stuyvesant was ruthless toward Quakers, Lutherans, and Catholics.

From the outset of the American Jewish experience, then, an important pattern of group relations was set: Jews often encountered discrimination and certainly were subjected to verbal abuse, but they rarely suffered as grievously as other groups. The sheer heterogeneity of colonial America, the mixture of groups from many different nations and religious backgrounds, created an environment in which Jews were not the primary targets of bigots, and in fact never experienced the kind of abuse meted out to Christian outcasts, such as Catholics and Protestant dissenters. Ever since, the rich diversity of America has shielded Jews; they have been but one minority group in a vast nation consisting of immigrants from many lands and religious adherents of hundreds of denominations. Accordingly, even during the most serious surges in popular antisemitism, Jews did not encounter the hostility routinely inflicted upon racial minorities from Africa or Asia and religious minorities such as Catholics and Mormons. In a society as heterogeneous as America, antisemitism must compete with many other forms of bigotry, and therefore its intensity is diluted.

The small size of the Jewish population relative to the larger American society has provided additional protection. Simply put, Jews have been too insignificant a minority to provoke a strong antisemitic response. This was especially evident in the colonial era when Jews constituted no more than 1,500 souls out of a population of 2 million individuals. With no Jewish community numbering more than 200 to 300 people, there was little need to formulate unequivocal laws regarding the rights of Jews in a particular colony. Hence, there was considerable fluidity over time and from one colony to the next in the treatment of Jews.

The most important long-term consequence of this circumstance was the absence of any significant public debate over Jewish emancipation. A comparison with parallel developments in Europe is instructive. Since the end of the eighteenth century when the French National Assembly took up the question of Jewish rights, nations publicly debated the proper status of the Jews: Should they be treated as equal citizens? Could they be expected to demonstrate proper patriotism? Would they cease their distinctive patterns of behavior? Whenever such debates over Jewish rights or emancipation erupted, they were accompanied by highly public displays of political antisemitism which promoted discrimination against Jews. In the United States, by contrast, the framers of the Constitution chose not to discuss Jews as a separate group—and indeed, there is no reference at all to Jews in the Constitution. Jews were simply too insignificant a group to warrant sustained attention from the Founding Fathers. As a result, political antisemitism failed to emerge during the early years of the republic.

An exception to this generalization proves the rule: between 1818 and 1826, pro-Jewish legislators repeatedly introduced a bill to alter the Maryland state constitution in a manner that would provide Jews with the opportunity to vote and serve in office by taking an oath different from the one required of Christians. Once the question of Jewish rights was raised in the public square, a short-lived but bitter antisemitic controversy erupted over "the Jew Bill," as it was dubbed. Opponents of the bill united to form a "Christian ticket" and railed against the proposed changes:

"Preferring, as I do, Christianity to Judaism, Deism, Unitarianism, or any other sort of new fangled ism," wrote Benjamin

Galloway, a Federalist opponent of the bill's sponsor, "I deprecate any change in our State government, calculated to afford the least chance to the enemies of Christianity, of undermining it in the belief of the people of Maryland."⁴ An explicit legislative initiative to remedy a form of discrimination against Jews *as a group* thus evoked a strong response by antisemites. In the case of the federal Constitution, by contrast, no questions about Jews as a collective entity were raised and accordingly, there was no "emancipation debate" or public expression of political antisemitism.

A third factor mitigating antisemitism in the United States was the uniquely American arrangement of church-state matters introduced during the earliest years of the republic. The Constitution and Bill of Rights created a political system dedicated to creedal freedom. No single religion was given special legal status. No religious hierarchy was officially privileged. To be sure, there has been a continuous effort on the part of some groups formally to Christianize America. But such campaigns have failed because of the strong tradition mandated by the Constitution to separate church and state, a tradition reinforced by the needs of a heterogeneous nation consisting of numerous religious groupings. Many Christians belonging to denominations not regarded as mainline have been even more wary than Jews of efforts to breach the walls of separation.⁵

Constitutional protections, moreover, also provided Jews with the means to challenge discrimination and institutionalized bigotry. From the first years of the republic to the present day, defenders of the Jews have employed their guaranteed freedom of speech to challenge antisemites forthrightly. Commenting on this phenomenon, the historian Jonathan Sarna has observed: "As early as 1784, a 'Jew Broker'—probably Haym Solomon—responded publicly and forcefully to the anti-Semitic charges of a prominent Quaker lawyer, not hesitating to remind him that his 'own religious sectary' could also form 'very proper subjects of criticism and animadversion.' A few years later, Christian missionaries and their supporters faced Jewish polemics no less strident in tone." As Sarna points out, this pattern of response set during the early national period has persisted: "In defense of Jewish rights, [opponents of antisemitism] did battle even with the President of the United States."⁶

The sheer longevity of the American Jewish experience has also given courage to Jews engaged in battles against anti-semitism. With a history dating back to 1654, the Jews can properly claim to have been present at the creation of the colonies that eventually joined to become the United States. They have pointed proudly—if in an exaggerated manner—to the contributions of Jews during the birth of the nation. Hence the obsession with the exploits of Haym Solomon. And they have gained heart from blessings conferred upon Jews by George Washington, the first president of the United States, who expressed his hope that “the children of the stock of Abraham who dwell in this land continue to merit and enjoy the good will of other inhabitants, while every one shall sit in safety under his own vine and fig-tree, and there shall be none to make him afraid.”⁷

To be sure, such statements did not protect Jews from attacks, let alone sway antisemites. Rather, they served to encourage Jews engaged in self-defense to speak out forcefully, to feel that they were in the United States by right and not by sufferance. Emboldened by their pride in the role played by Jews in the American experiment and inspired by a line of predecessors dating back to the colonial era to feel at home in America, defenders of the Jews have castigated antisemitism as an “un-American,” foreign import. Here, again, it is evident that patterns of relations established in the colonial and early national periods have shaped the relationship between Jews and the larger American society.

Historians have offered several different accounts of when American antisemitism actually began. All agree that instances easily can be adduced of cases dating to the colonial era and the first decades of the republic when individuals invoked negative stereotypes of Jews, engaged in missionary activities to convert them to Christianity, discriminated against Jews in hiring practices, and expressed their hostility in other ways. But one would be hard-pressed to find examples of blatantly public expressions of anti-semitism. The “Jew bill” controversy in Maryland serves as a brief episode of such a public display, but it ended quickly and the bill, after all, passed. A recent study by Frederic Cople Jaher contends that “American anti-Semitism assumed its modern contours, if not its subsequent intensity and scope, from the later

1830s through the Civil War."⁸ Arguing that "traditional prejudices were joined by newer forms of bigotry to create increasingly frequent anti-Jewish images and actions," Jaher identifies the immediate antebellum decades as the turning point.⁹

But the evidence Jaher cites demonstrates more continuity than change. Some of the abolitionists expressed criticism of the Jewish religion based upon typical Christian arguments; Dunn and Bradstreet agents portrayed Jewish-owned firms as unreliable, engaging as they did in "money making and money saving characteristics of their race;" and textbooks such as McGuffey's *Reader* "indoctrinated schoolchildren in Hebraic transgressions and devalued Judaism."¹⁰

However, these and other expressions of antisemitism rarely affected the lives of large numbers of Jews or intruded on the public sphere. On the contrary, Jaher and other historians of Jewish life prior to the Civil War are impressed with the remarkable strides taken by Jews toward equality. Their progress was even more dramatic coming as it did during a time when organized political parties officially sought to restrict Roman Catholics.

The expulsion of Jews from the territory of Tennessee in 1862 has prompted some historians to regard the Civil War as the critical turning point. In a sweeping indictment of all Jews, General Ulysses S. Grant charged that "the Jews as a class violat[ed] every regulation of trade established by the Treasury Department, and also department [of Tennessee] orders." Accordingly, he ordered them "expelled from the department within twenty-four hours from the receipt of this order."¹¹ This blanket stereotyping of all Jews as black-market profiteers by the official head of the territorial government held the potential for setting a terrible new precedent: "resembling a Czarist ukase more than an American governmental decree," writes historian Jaher, "Grant's order was the severest attempted official violation—civil or military, federal, state or local—of the rights to Jews in the history of this nation."¹² Far more important, however, was the immediate action taken by President Abraham Lincoln to countermand Grant's order. Thus, in the only instance in which an American government official instituted an official policy of anti-Jewish discrimination, the damaging act was quickly overturned and never again repeated.

PERSPECTIVES

Most historians trace the eruption of antisemitism in the public sphere to the closing decades of the century. The noted American historian Oscar Handlin identified populist resentment as the primary source of attacks upon Jews. In the post-Civil War period, an era of massive industrial transformation, rural inhabitants watched aghast as urban centers grew rapidly and dominated the nation's economy. According to Handlin, during the 1890s,

the injured groups of American society, in agony, had issued the cries of an infant that has no words to express pain. Searching vainly for a means of relief, they could scarcely have guessed that the source of their trials was a change in the world in which they lived. And groping toward an understanding of that change, some perceived its instrument, the Jew. If all trade was treachery and Babylon the city, then the Jew—stereotyped, involved in finance, and mysterious—stood ready to be assigned the role of arch-conspirator. It was this suspicion that transformed the conception of the Jew after 1900, replaced the older images with that of the Elder of Zion.¹³

The dispossessed farmers of the American South and Midwest threw their support behind populist demagogues who blamed the economic distress on a cabal of financiers intent on manipulating markets for their own selfish gain. Interestingly, these demagogues inveighed against Jews living abroad who allegedly were exploiting hardworking Americans from the safety of Europe. Thus, an article in the *Illustrated America* of July 27, 1895, speculated:

Might it not be that the money lenders of London, the magnificent, titled Shylocks of our modern world; who play with Czars, Emperors and Kings as a chess-player with castles, rooks and pawns, in the artificial production of a panic . . . may have purposely wrought the ruin of many American banks . . . because in America these gamblers of the banking world reap their riches harvest and wish to continue their tightest grip on the people?¹⁴

Although the primary culprits were identified as the agents of the House of Rothschild, populist writers also accused other Jew-

ish financiers in Europe of unseemly financial machinations. Here, then, the nexus between European and American antisemitic motifs was clear: by tracing the source of the menace to European lands, populist antisemites were also drawing upon the vast anti-Jewish literature propagated in Europe during the late nineteenth century. There was little difference between these populist charges and the rantings of European antisemites intent on saving their countries from Jewish economic domination.

In time, the stereotype of the Jew as a Shylock figure was employed in the United States to further demonize Jewish financial dealings. The populist demagogue Ignatius Donnelly described in his antiutopian novel of 1890, *Caesar's Column*, how an oligarchy consisting mainly of Jews "wreak their cruel revenge on Christians for the ancient 'sufferings inflicted by their bigoted and ignorant ancestors upon a noble race.'"¹⁵ Jewish malevolence, it was claimed by populist preachers, threatened not only the economic life of the country but its most cherished ideals. Writing in 1892, the well-known populist orator Tom Watson of Georgia asked: "Did [Thomas Jefferson] dream that in 100 years or less his party would be prostituted to the vilest purposes of monopoly, that red-eyed Jewish millionaires would be the chiefs of that party, and that the liberty and prosperity of the country would be sacrificed to Plutocratic greed in the name of Jeffersonian Democracy."¹⁶

The campaign launched by some populist demagogues in the waning years of the nineteenth century produced its most lethal consequences during and after World War I. First came the arrest and conviction of Leo Frank, a transplanted New Yorker who had come to Atlanta to supervise a family-owned factory. When a young employee named Mary Phagan was found murdered at the factory, Frank was arrested. In the minds of his accusers, he quickly came to embody all the imagined evils of Jews. A product of the hated Northern city, a Jew involved in business, Frank stood accused of dishonoring and murdering a child. Paranoid fears were further fueled by the arrival of big-city defense attorneys from New York.

All this was grist for the mill of populist demagogues. Writing during the trial, Tom Watson played upon deeply entrenched fears, describing Mary Phagan as "a daughter of the people, of the

common clay, of the blouse and the overall, of those who eat bread in the sweat of the face, and who, in so many instances are the chattel slaves of a sordid Commercialism that has no milk of human kindness in its heart of stone;" He beatified Mary Phagan as "the little factory girl who held to her innocence."¹⁷ Not long after the Governor of Georgia, John M. Slaton, commuted Leo Frank's death sentence in 1915, a mob seized him from prison and lynched him, a fate that befell no other American Jew, but that instilled fear in the hearts of Jews who lived in populist regions of the country.

A few years later, the specter of a Jewish conspiracy raised so frequently in populist rhetoric found full expression during the "Red Scare." In the wake of the Russian Revolution, American fears of Bolsheviks and anarchists heightened. Seeking to ferret out subversive elements, defenders of America tended to suspect recent immigrants to America, such as Italians and Russian Jews, of maintaining direct ties with European bomb-throwers. A link between Jews and Bolsheviks became a staple of antisemitic writings. When a subcommittee of the Senate Judiciary Committee met in 1919 to deal with the Communist menace, U.S. senators were particularly warned about Jewish troublemakers on New York's Lower East Side:

A number of us were impressed with the strong Yiddish element in this thing right from the start, and it soon became evident that more than half of the agitators in the so-called Bolshevik movement were Yiddish. . . . I do not think the Bolshevik movement in Russia would have been a success if it had not been for the support it got from certain elements in New York, the so-called East Side. . . . After the revolution they swarmed in. . . . I do not want to be unfair, but I usually know a Jew when I see one.¹⁸

Among the most noteworthy accusers of Jews were other recent immigrants from Eastern Europe.

Equally pernicious were the attacks upon Jews mounted in publications sponsored by none other than Henry Ford. Convinced that Jews were up to no good, Ford opened a detective agency in New York to investigate Jewish influence. When the agency sent him a copy of the *Protocols of the Elders of Zion*, a

fabrication of the tsarist secret police originally compiled at the end of the nineteenth century in French, Ford became obsessed with revealing the newfound truth of "the world-Jewish conspiracy." For almost two years, Ford's *Dearborn Independent* regularly featured accusations against "Jew finance," the malevolent role of Jews in sponsoring Communism, and the Jewish plot to exercise power—to the point of controlling U.S. presidents. Seeking to rally the forces of goodness against the Jewish conspiracy, Ford's publications sought to reveal all:

"To the victor belong the spoils" is an old saying. And in a sense it is true that if all this power of control has been gained and held by a few men of a long-despised race, then either they are supermen whom it is powerless to resist, or they are ordinary men whom the rest of the world has permitted to obtain an undue and unsafe degree of power. Unless the Jews are supermen, the Gentiles will have themselves to blame for what has transpired, and they can look for rectification in a new scrutiny of the situation and a candid examination of the experiences of other countries.¹⁹

That the supporter of these conspiratorial fantasies was in fact one of the most powerful men in America, an industrialist who controlled the fate of thousands of workers, did not prevent the circulation of Ford's hysterical lies. Ironically, populist fears of Jewish financiers in time became the tool of America's preeminent industrialist. (Remarkably, Ford eventually apologized for his vicious attacks upon Jews, one of the few outspoken antisemites to take back his words. Even more important, more than one hundred prominent Americans, including Woodrow Wilson and William Howard Taft, denounced antisemitic campaigns in a statement issued early in 1921.)

As pressure built at the end of the nineteenth century for the dispossessed to blame Jews for their economic distress, an equal if not greater resistance to Jewish success grew among America's upper classes. Initially, this resistance took the form of discrimination practiced by American patricians to keep well-to-do Jews out of their elite social domains, particularly, summer resorts and social clubs.

The new trend became public knowledge when in 1877 Joseph Seligman, a prominent banker and friend of Lincoln and Grant, was barred from registering as a guest at the Grand Union Hotel in Saratoga Springs, New York, a posh summer resort. In light of Seligman's fame, the story was widely circulated in the press. "Newspaper editorials differed as to whether [the hotel] was right or not in barring Jews," writes historian Leonard Dinnerstein, "but the distasteful episode indicated that no matter how well-to-do or refined Jews might be they were socially undesirable and some later chroniclers erroneously marked this incident as the beginning of antisemitism in America."²⁰

Two years later, another exclusionary incident dramatized the growing acceptance of social discrimination by America's elite. The president of the Manhattan Beach Corporation in Brooklyn, New York, announced a policy of barring Jews:

Personally, I am opposed to Jews. They are a pretentious class who expect three times as much for their money as other people. They give us more trouble on our [rail]road and in our hotel than we can stand. Another thing is that they are driving away the class of people who are beginning to make Coney Island the most fashionable and magnificent watering place in the world.²¹

Thus it was precisely the most well-heeled of American Jews, mainly consisting of immigrants from Central Europe and their upwardly mobile children, who faced discrimination from upper-class Americans intent on protecting their exclusive domains. "If this is a free country," argued one such patrician, "why can't we be free of the Jews?"²²

In time, less-established Jews also were targets of social discrimination. Indeed, John Higham, the historian most identified with an interpretation of American antisemitism that stresses the importance of social discrimination, has placed the problem within the context of immigrant mobility: "What finally set off . . . a pattern of social discrimination, in the 1870s, was not the arrival of immigrants; it was their rise. Though a remarkable number had prospered mightily, evidently few had yet acquired much education or polish. Discrimination began where Jews as a group pressed most heavily upon a limited field of opportunity."²³ As

the waves of Jewish immigration from Russia, Austro-Hungary, and Rumania washed over American shores in the late nineteenth century and the first decades of the twentieth, the fear of upwardly mobile newcomers intensified, heightening xenophobia and anti-immigrant sentiment in the United States.

Before describing some symptoms of this aversion to the "new immigration," it is important to note the critical distinctions between an interpretation that stresses populist resentment as opposed to social discrimination as the source of American antisemitism. Whereas the former traces the roots of anti-Jewish animosities in the United States to those at the bottom rungs of America's socioeconomic ladder, the second stresses the role of more established classes in keeping upwardly mobile Jews in their place. In short, the critical question raised by these analyses is whether antisemitism originates at the top or the bottom of American society. These interpretations also differ in the credit they give to European antisemitic traditions for inspiring American bigots. Populist demagogues not only warned of the pernicious role played by European Jews, they clearly were inspired by European antisemites. By contrast, social discrimination is a response to local conditions that needs no support from imported ideas. Finally, this debate between historians is of more than academic interest: whereas the resentments of dispossessed Americans were fueled by traditional religious and cultural animosities toward Jews, social discrimination against Jews is part of a long history of conflict between more established Americans and recent immigrants. If American antisemitism stems primarily from such conflicts, rather than deeply entrenched folk beliefs and overarching ideologies of hatred, then there is reason to hope for a mitigation of antisemitism just as other forms of intergroup conflict have eased over time. The bitter enmity between Irish and German Americans, and between European and Asian Americans, has largely disappeared; so too one would expect antisemitism to ease considerably if its source is mainly conflict over an ethnic group's share of the American economic pie.

With the upsurge of Jewish immigration at the turn of the century, conflict between newly arrived Jews and their more established neighbors intensified. Accordingly, the drive to exclude Jews had grown to encompass not only the protection of

elite social bastions, but the integrity of America's immigration policy. Claiming that Jewish and other immigrants from southern Europe threatened the very character of the country, a coalition of restrictionists, ranging from patrician Boston Brahmins, such as Senator Henry Cabot Lodge, to representatives of American labor, to medical officials, urged a tightening of immigration policy. *Frank Leslie's Weekly*, for example, warned in 1892 that East European Jews "are the most undesirable and least welcome of immigrants" because they "strain the country's power to assimilate." The popular journal went on to depict the immigrant enclave on Manhattan's Lower East Side:

There exists on the east side of this town a great and coherent population of foreigners of a low order of intelligence, speaking their own languages, following their own customs, and absolutely blind or utterly indifferent to our ideals, moral, social, and political. . . . Go and see them swarm in the streets and the houses of the east side if you have doubts on the subject, and form your own conclusions as to the availability of the material for manufacture into the sort of citizen which the founders and fathers of the republic had in mind.²⁴

Several intertwined motifs are evident in these remarks: Jews are portrayed as culturally and qualitatively different from other Americans; they are portrayed as less-than-human creatures who "swarm" in the houses and streets, and the quality of their racial stock is deemed inferior.

Indeed, racism became enmeshed with the restrictionist campaign. Learned scientists employed the recently invented intelligence test to demonstrate the mental deficiencies of Jewish immigrants. H. H. Goddard, director of the Vineland Institute for Feeble-Minded Girls and Boys in New Jersey, administered Binet tests to recent immigrants at Ellis Island and found that "83 percent of the Jews, 87 percent of the Russians, 80 percent of the Hungarians, and 79 percent of the Italians were feeble-minded—that is below mental age of twelve."²⁵ According to Goddard, "possibly the moron has his place" as a menial worker doing work "that no one else will do. . . . There is an immense amount of drudgery to be done."²⁶

But other proponents of racial and eugenics science favored national quotas to restrict the inflow of racially "inferior" immigrants such as Jews from Eastern Europe.²⁷ As the restrictionist movement reached fever pitch, Madison Grant exhorted Americans to free themselves of the "widespread and famous belief in the power of environment, as well as education and opportunity, to alter heredity." Instead, he warned of the danger posed by "the Polish Jew, whose dwarf stature, peculiar mentality, and ruthless concentration on self-interest are being engrafted upon the stock of the nation."²⁸

This racist campaign bore fruit immediately after World War I when the U.S. Congress passed legislation that favored immigrants from desired places of origin and sharply curtailed the opportunities of less-desired newcomers. Jewish immigration from Eastern Europe to the United States virtually ceased. Still, even this extreme form of American xenophobia did not take the form of an exclusive attack upon Jews: unlike restrictionists in England and Germany, for example, Americans who favored bars on immigration passed a law that included no specific quota on Jews, but rather limited immigration from countries of origin.

Although historians hold disparate views about when public anti-semitism actually began in the United States, there is little doubt that the period between the two world wars represented the heyday of publicly expressed animosity toward Jews. One important sphere riddled with antisemitic discrimination was the academy. Virtually every private institution of higher learning, and many public ones as well, introduced selective admissions policies aimed at curbing the number of Jewish students, policies that lasted well into the 1950s at certain elite schools. Some institutions, such as Harvard, employed the subterfuge of seeking "geographic diversity" as a means to curtail the number of Jews who applied for admission from New York City. Others instituted quotas on Jewish students and openly asked applicants about their "religious affiliation," as well as questions about whether the applicant's parents had ever been known by another name—in other words, had they anglicized their name to cover up their Jewishness?

Selective admissions policies were justified by colleges and

professional schools as a means to protect an institution of higher learning from decline. As A. Lawrence Lowell, president of Harvard University, put it: too many Jews at Harvard would result in the institution's losing "its character as a democratic, national university, drawing from all classes of the community and promoting a sympathetic understanding among them."²⁹

Initially instituted to maintain the prestige of elite institutions by keeping out individuals deemed socially inferior, quotas had dire consequences for the job prospects and upward mobility of Jews. It was one thing when a talented Jew could not get into the most prestigious university and had to settle for an undergraduate education at an inferior school. It was quite another matter when the same Jew could not enter a graduate program in his or her chosen field and had to forgo a professional career entirely.

Social discrimination at universities quickly spread into the workplace as entire industries locked out Jews. Help-wanted advertisements during the interwar era routinely stated that Christians or Protestants only need apply. According to the historian Leonard Dinnerstein, "Utilities, banks, insurance companies, publishing houses, engineering and industrial companies, civic bodies for art and music, hospitals, universities, and law firms were among the major culprits" which discriminated with impunity against Jews.³⁰ Many made a virtue of their bigotry, as when Paul Cravath of a major New York law firm informed students at Harvard Law School of his firm's hiring preferences:

Brilliant intellectual powers are not essential. Too much imagination, too much wit, too great cleverness, too facile fluency, if not leavened by a sound sense of proportion, are quite as likely to impede success as to promote it. The best clients are apt to be afraid of those qualities. They want as their counsel a man who is primarily honest, safe, sound and steady.³¹

It is impossible to calculate how many gifted Jews were unable to pursue their chosen field of work because of this blatant bigotry.

The entrenched and institutionalized discrimination practiced during the first half of the twentieth century constitutes the most pernicious expression of American antisemitism to date. Prejudice against Jews had moved beyond the sphere of private bigotry

and the semiprivate realm of social discrimination to the marketplace; it had gone from subjective expressions of distaste and xenophobia to the objective expression of overt discrimination. It affected the career prospects of Jews, lessened their earning potential, and limited their mobility. Not accidentally, overt discrimination spread in this era to housing: apartment buildings in large cities prominently displayed signs stating that "Jews and Negroes" need not apply for rentals; and residential communities required new home buyers to sign "covenants" barring sales to unwanted groups, such as Jews. In response to these pressures, it became common for Jews to anglicize their names and downplay their distinctiveness.

The onset of the Great Depression and America's entry into the Second World War intensified antisemitic prejudices because Jews were blamed for these twin evils. When Charles A. Lindbergh, the great aviation hero, accused Jews of pushing the United States toward war with Nazi Germany, he struck a responsive chord. Some isolationists even characterized Franklin and Eleanor Roosevelt as dupes of the Jews if not Jews themselves.³² Demagogues such as Father Charles Coughlin and William Pelley employed the media of the day, newspapers and the radio, to spread the message of antisemitism; and groups sponsored by Hitler's Germany sought to import Nazi antisemitism to the United States. "The barest scratching of an economic or political reactionary," wrote the reporter Stanley High in 1942, "almost unflinching produces an anti-Semite."³³

Public opinion polls confirmed what most Jews experienced. When Americans were asked whom they would least appreciate as neighbors, Jews were routinely cited right after "Negroes." When Americans were asked whom they suspected of having too much power, they pointed first at Jews. And when the question was posed, "Have you heard any criticism or talk against Jews in the last six months?" rising numbers answered affirmatively, so that by 1946 nearly two-thirds of respondents answered positively.³⁴ The wave of antisemitism that had engulfed Europe in the 1930s and 1940s swept the United States as well.

And then in the postwar era, the tide of antisemitism ebbed. Almost overnight, it became socially unfashionable to express

anti-Jewish views in public. The same polls that found rising rates of response between 1940 and 1946 to the question "Have you heard any criticism or talk against Jews in the last six months?" traced a sharp decline thereafter: whereas 64 percent answered affirmatively in 1946, only 24 percent did so in 1950, and this figure was halved by the end of the decade.³⁵ Jews also made enormous strides in the 1950s and 1960s in all walks of life: industries that had previously barred Jews now promoted them to top executive positions; Jews assumed positions of influence at all levels of government—and were particularly overrepresented in the executive branch in Washington; remarkably, the very academic settings that had excluded Jews now vied to hire them in disproportionate numbers as professors. By the mid-1980s, Charles Silberman, himself an embodiment of the Jewish success odyssey, devoted a book to the stunning changes he had witnessed.³⁶

Moreover, Judaism acquired a new respectability in American society, achieving parity with Protestantism and Catholicism in the "triple melting pot" of midcentury American religion. A 1951 cover story in *Time* magazine lauding the interfaith activities of Louis Finkelstein, chancellor of the Jewish Theological Seminary of America, was symptomatic of the new appreciation of Jews and Judaism by the elite white Anglo-Saxon Protestant patricians who had long governed the country.³⁷

Antisemitism did not, of course, disappear from the American scene, but it assumed a lower profile and by the 1960s preoccupied Jews far less than previously. Periodically, antisemitism erupted in the public arena, as when synagogues were bombed in the South during the height of the civil rights movement; when Nazis sought to march in Skokie, Illinois, a largely Jewish suburb of Chicago; when some prominent Christian cleric or racist demagogue issued unflattering remarks about Jews; and when U.S. corporations bowed to the Arab boycott against Israel and discriminated against Jews. For the most part, however, antisemitism in the postwar era was confined to the private arena, as it had been for much of American history.

The relative calm was reflected in the changing priorities of Jewish organizations. Even community-relations groups that were dedicated to the defense of American Jews expended much energy in the post-1967 period to alleviating the plight of embattled

and impoverished Jews abroad rather than fighting antisemitism at home. The key domestic concerns of defense agencies revolved around building interfaith and interethnic coalitions; strengthening legislation against hate crimes; formulating positions for the Jewish community on a range of social issues, ranging from affirmative action and civil rights questions to abortion policy and nuclear proliferation; and educating the American population about the nature of Jewish life.

In the closing decade of the century, a number of disturbing developments suggest the reemergence of more public forms of antisemitism.

Item: As the culture wars between American conservatives and liberals intensify, groups on the right of the political spectrum are calling for the reintroduction of religion into the public sphere. The reflex of Jewish groups is to fear such intrusions as a means of "Christianizing" America. Most Jewish groups have redoubled their efforts to shore up the walls of separation so that religion plays no public role, a stance other Jews regard as the antithesis of what separationism long implied, namely that religion would be protected, not guaranteed.

Item: There has been a troubling rise of anti-Jewish attitudes within the African-American community. Attitudinal surveys trace a far greater propensity on the part of educated black Americans to hold negative views of Jews, particularly as compared to educated whites. In recent years, several prominent black leaders have openly expressed hostility toward Jews, most notably in the vicious ranting of Louis Farrakhan and his minions, and in the ignorant teachings of Afrocentrists.

Item: Since 1967 it has been fashionable on the American left to couch anti-Jewish hostility in the language of anti-Zionism. Within the feminist movement,³⁸ fashionable academic circles, and other avant-garde groupings, there has long been a flirtation with the Palestinian liberation movement and a tendency to castigate Israel as a colonial power. This anti-Zionism, notes historian Henry Feingold, "demonstrates an unerring instinct for [attacking] what lies at the center of Jewish sensibility."³⁹

Item: A number of conservative ideologues have displayed gross insensitivity toward Jews that has verged on outright antisemitic attacks. The inflammatory language of Patrick Buchanan

during the Gulf War crisis was particularly offensive to Jews: Claiming that "there are only two groups that are beating the drums for war in the Middle East—the Israeli Defense Ministry and its 'amen' corner in the United States," Buchanan described the U.S. Congress as "Israeli-occupied territory"; he then singled out four prominent Jews who had advocated American intervention in Kuwait and noted that the actual fighting would be done by "kids with names like McAllister, Murphy, Gonzales, and Leroy Brown," thereby invoking an old canard about Jews shirking their military duties.⁴⁰

Item: As interethnic rivalries reignite all over the world, some Jews fear that they will become targets of hate groups. Some worry about marginalization as new coalitions of the dispossessed are forming on college campuses and in the political arena, particularly since these groups show little sympathy for Jews and regard them as part of the victimizing establishment. Others fear the growth of the Aryan Nations and other violence-prone groups that define Jews and the "Zionist Occupation Government" in Washington as the enemy. Still others worry about the importation to the United States of anti-Jewish bigotry that now sweeps some sectors of formerly Communist countries.

As Jews confront these challenges, they would do well to consider the history of antisemitism in America. It is a history in which antagonism toward Jews never was entirely absent. And it is a history which encompasses virtually every variation of Jew-hatred known in other societies. Some antisemites in the United States have employed the traditional language of Christian Jew-hatred, whereas others have invoked more modern stereotypes, portraying Jews as racial inferiors, ideological conspirators, and political subversives; some antisemites in the United States have depicted Jews as arch capitalists and others as Communist fellow travelers. Despite these charges, Jews in the United States have been spared the types of onslaughts inflicted upon their coreligionists abroad: there have been no sustained pogroms, no cases of state-sponsored discrimination, and no concentration camps for Jews in the United States.

A critical distinguishing feature of the Jewish experience in the United States has been the failure of antisemites to institu-

tionalize anti-Jewish discrimination. No American government has enacted a policy, let alone a legislative program, singling out Jews for special ill treatment. The one noteworthy exception proves the rule: Grant's general order expelling all Jews from the Territory of Tennessee was quickly rescinded and never repeated. As noted earlier in this essay, a range of historical circumstances, many dating back to the early years of the republic if not to the colonial era, account for the anomalous conditions of Jewish life in the United States. For the most part, antisemitism has been confined to the private realm of individual prejudice and social discrimination; rarely has it intruded into the sphere of public policy. As the historian Edward S. Shapiro has recently observed,

Anti-Semitism is fundamentally at odds with the public culture of America as enunciated in the Declaration of Independence, the Bill of Rights, and the Gettysburg Address. One can search in vain for any major American anti-Semitic political figure or political movement or any important anti-Semitic theorist. Cut off from any significant constitutional or governmental basis, anti-Semitism in the United States has lacked a confident voice and has been relegated to the fringes.⁴¹

Since it is impossible to eradicate privately held antisemitic biases and stereotypes, those concerned with defending Jews would do best to concentrate their resources on battling efforts to inject antisemitism into the public sphere, and to react with special zeal to institutionalized discrimination against Jews. Using such a test, "defense" agencies in the recent past would have invested greater energy battling efforts by Arab countries to pressure American corporations to discriminate against Jewish employees than against the more overt but ultimately less significant expressions of antisemitism by bigots who painted swastikas on synagogues. In our own day, efforts to marginalize Jews in the academy and in public life warrant greater vigilance than hate-filled rhetoric.

As the sorry experience of discrimination at institutions of higher education and in the workplace during the interwar era attests, antisemitism can be institutionalized and highly damaging to Jewish prospects even if it is not sanctioned by govern-

ments. Jews need to remain particularly vigilant about the spread of antisemitic discrimination to this middle ground between governmental discrimination and social bias. If Jews are successfully barred from sectors of the economy, they may still find ways to prosper but their status in the United States will have deteriorated.

The most difficult—and divisive—issue in the present-day defense of Jewish interests revolves around questions of church-state separation. As conservative groups seek to give voice to religious teachings in the American public square, Jews reflexively recoil, fearing that such a program will automatically lead to the Christianization of the country and a steep rise in antisemitism. The historian David A. Gerber has cautioned against such an assumption by placing the separationist battles in a broader context:

Throughout American history, pious Christians have sought legal guarantees for the sanctity of Sunday, the Christian Sabbath, or for hymn singing in the public schools and at Christmastime. One may accuse them of forgetting about the doctrine of separation of church and state and of insensitivity to Jewish feelings, but one need not assume intentional hostility toward Jews. . . . Many Christians seeking public supports for Christianity have simply forgotten that Jews were in their midst.⁴²

As the struggles between liberals and conservatives intensify in the coming years, Jews will need to assess whether the reintroduction of some religious expression in American public life necessarily will unleash antisemitism or whether a more religious America will also be more civilized—and thereby offer Jews and other Americans greater safety.

NOTES

1. Morris U. Schappes, *A Documentary History of the Jews in the United States, 1654–1875* (New York: Schocken Books, 1971), pp. 1–2.

2. *Ibid.*, pp. 4–5.

3. Jacob Rader Marcus, ed., *American Jewry. Documents of the Eighteenth Century* (Cincinnati: Hebrew Union College, 1959), p. 380; Henry L.

Feingold, *Zion in America: The Jewish Experience from Colonial Times to the Present* (New York: Twayne Publishers, 1974), p. 37.

4. Joseph. L. Blau and Salo W. Baron, *The Jews of the United States 1790–1840: A Documentary History*, vol. 1 (New York: Columbia University Press, 1963), p. 49. See pp. 33–55 for more documents relating to the Maryland “Jew Bill.”

5. On efforts of Christianize the country and breach the walls of separation, see Robert T. Handy, *A Christian America: Protestant Hopes and Historical Realities* (New York: Oxford University Press, 1971); for a historical account of Jewish strategies to maintain a strong separation of church and state, see Naomi W. Cohen, *Jews in Christian America: The Pursuit of Religious Equality* (New York: Oxford University Press, 1992).

6. Jonathan D. Sarna, “Anti-Semitism and American History,” *Commentary*, March 1981, p. 46.

7. George Washington, “A Reply to the Hebrew Congregation of Newport,” in Paul R. Mendes-Flohr and Jehuda Reinharz, *The Jew in the Modern World: A Documentary History* (New York and Oxford: Oxford University Press, 1980), p. 363.

8. Frederic Cople Jaher, *A Scapegoat in the New Wilderness: The Origins and Rise of Anti-Semitism in America* (Cambridge, Mass.: Harvard University Press, 1994), p. 241.

9. *Ibid.*

10. Jaher, *Scapegoat*, ch. 5.

11. Bertram W. Korn, *American Jewry and the Civil War* (Philadelphia: Jewish Publication Society of America, 1951), pp. 122–23. Korn identifies the Civil War period as the turning point in the history of U.S. antisemitism: Grant’s “order was only one example of a series of anti-Jewish libels which were propagated during the War in both the Union and the Confederacy. Anti-Jewish prejudice was actually a characteristic expression of the age, part and parcel of the economic and social upheaval effectuated by the war” (p. 156).

12. Jaher, *Scapegoat*, p. 199.

13. Oscar Handlin, “American Views of the Jew at the Opening of the Twentieth Century,” in Leonard Dinnerstein, ed., *Anti-Semitism in the United States* (New York: Holt, Rinehart & Winston, 1971), p. 57.

14. Quoted in Michael N. Dobkowski, *The Tarnished Dream: The Basis of American Anti-Semitism* (Westport, Conn.: Greenwood Press, 1979), p. 170.

15. *Ibid.* p. 179.

16. *Ibid.* p. 177.

17. Leonard Dinnerstein, *The Leo Frank Case* (New York: Columbia University Press, 1968), p. 98.

PERSPECTIVES

18. Dr. George S. Simons, superintendent of the Methodist Episcopal Church in Russia and Finland, quoted in Dobkowski, *Tarnished Dream*, pp. 223–24.

19. "The International Jew," in Marc Lee Raphael, *Jews and Judaism in the United States: A Documentary History* (New York: Behrman House, 1983), p. 292.

20. Leonard Dinnerstein, *Antisemitism in America* (New York: Oxford University Press, 1994), pp. 39–40.

21. Quoted in Dinnerstein, ed., *Antisemitism in the United States*, p. 40.

22. *Ibid.*

23. John Higham, "American Antisemitism Historically Reconsidered," in Dinnerstein, ed., *Antisemitism in the United States*, p. 70.

24. Quoted in Dobkowski, *Tarnished Dream*, p. 147.

25. Stephen Jay Gould, "Science and Jewish Immigration," *Natural History*, December 1980, pp. 14–16.

26. *Ibid.*, p. 16.

27. For a fine analysis of antisemitic racism in America prior to the passage of immigration restrictions, see Robert Singerman, "The Jew as Racial Alien: The Genetic Component of American Anti-Semitism," in David Gerber, ed., *Anti-Semitism in American History* (Urbana: University of Illinois Press, 1987), pp. 103–28.

28. Excerpt from *The Passing of the Great Race*, in Michael Selzer, ed., *Kike* (New York: Meridian Books, 1972), p. 77.

29. Quoted in Dinnerstein, *Antisemitism in America*, p. 86.

30. *Ibid.* p. 89.

31. *Ibid.* p. 89.

32. The failure of Roosevelt to mount a sustained effort to rescue European Jews and admit more Jewish refugees has prompted historians to debate whether antisemitism shaped American policy during the war years. Restrictionists in the State Department have been criticized severely for failing to act decisively, and some have been labeled as antisemites. The historian Henry Feingold has accused the State Department of blatant antisemitism, and especially singled out Breckinridge Long, an assistant secretary of state, of engineering plans to prevent Jewish immigration during World War II. See Feingold's *The Politics of Rescue: The Roosevelt Administration and the Holocaust, 1938–1945* (New Brunswick, N.J.: Rutgers University Press, 1970), pp. 131–37. This approach has been challenged by Alan M. Kraut and Richard D. Breitman in their essay "Antisemitism in the State Department, 1933–44: Four Case Studies," in David A. Gerber ed., *Anti-Semitism in American History* (Urbana: University of Illinois Press, 1987), pp. 167–97. Kraut and Breitman contend that "some State Department officials often perceived Jews in stereotypical patterns; however, their policies and behav-

ior often lacked a double standard. One might say that their attitude toward refugees was influenced by their anti-Semitism, but other motives, often ones even more powerful than ethnic prejudice, were primarily responsible for State Department policies that hampered the immigration of Jews imperiled by Nazi Germany" (p. 169). "Restrictionism," they conclude, "was not a euphemism for anti-Semitism" (p. 190).

33. Quoted in Dinnerstein, *Antisemitism in America*, p. 135.

34. *Ibid.* p. 132.

35. *Ibid.* p. 151.

36. Charles Silberman, *A Certain People: American Jews and Their Lives Today* (New York: Summit Books, 1985).

37. *Time*, October 15, 1951, pp. 52-57.

38. Letty Cottin Pogrebin, "Anti-Semitism in the Women's Movement," *Ms.*, June 1982.

39. Quoted in Dinnerstein, *Antisemitism in America*, p. 232.

40. William F. Buckley, Jr., *In Search of Anti-Semitism* (New York: Continuum Books, 1992), pp. 26-28.

41. Edward S. Shapiro, "American Anti-Semitism and the Historians," *Congress Monthly*, June/July 1994, p. 15.

42. David A. Gerber, "Anti-Semitism and Jewish-Gentile Relations in American Historiography and the American Past," in Gerber, ed., *Anti-Semitism in American History*, p. 6.

SELECTED BIBLIOGRAPHY ON THE HISTORY OF ANTISEMITISM IN THE UNITED STATES

Baltzell, E. Digby. *The Protestant Establishment*. New York: Random House, 1964. An account of social discrimination practiced by the American white Protestant elite to keep upwardly mobile Jews at arm's length in the first half of the twentieth century.

Cohen, Naomi W. *Jews in Christian America: The Pursuit of Religious Equality*. New York and Oxford: Oxford University Press, 1992. A probing analysis of Jewish fears concerning church-state relations over the course of American history.

Dinnerstein, Leonard. *Antisemitism in America*. New York and Oxford: Oxford University Press, 1994. The most valuable and up-to-date one-volume survey of American antisemitism historically considered. A first-rate introduction to the subject.

_____. *The Leo Frank Case*. New York: Columbia University Press, 1968. A detailed examination of the trial and lynching of Leo Frank, the "American Dreyfus," in Atlanta on the eve of World War I.

PERSPECTIVES

- Dobkowski, Michael N. *The Tarnished Dream: The Basis of American Anti-Semitism*. Westport, Conn.: Greenwood Press, 1979. This examination of major motifs appearing in antisemitic writings does not come to grips with the singularity of antisemitism in the United States.
- Gerber, David A., ed. *Anti-Semitism in American History*. Urbana and Chicago: University of Illinois Press, 1987. An excellent collection of major essays on episodes and eras in the history of American antisemitism.
- Higham, John. *Strangers in the Land*. New Brunswick, N.J.: Rutgers University Press, 1955. This pioneering study of American nativism and hostility to aliens was perhaps the first work to integrate antisemitism into the larger patterns of American history.
- Jaher, Fredric Cople. *A Scapegoat in the New Wilderness: The Origins and Rise of Anti-Semitism in America*. Cambridge, Mass.: Harvard University Press, 1994. This work is strongest when it focuses sharply on developments prior to the Civil War, a period largely downplayed by most writers on American antisemitism. It is weaker when the author strays into sweeping assertions about the long history of antisemitism in Europe or in contemporary America.
- Smith, Tom. W. *Anti-Semitism in Contemporary America*. New York: American Jewish Committee, 1994. A comprehensive analysis of the most recent sociological research on contemporary trends in American antisemitism.
- Stember, Charles Herbert, et al. *Jews in the Mind of America*. New York: Basic Books, 1966. An important collection of essays which analyze American opinion about Jews, particularly in the middle of the twentieth century.
- Synott, Marcia Graham. *The Half-Opened Door: Discrimination and Admissions at Harvard, Yale, and Princeton, 1900-1970*. Westport, Conn.: Greenwood Press, 1979. A close examination of how three major universities implemented selective admissions policies to limit the enrollment of Jewish students.
- Wechsler, Harold S. *The Qualified Student*. New York: John Wiley & Sons, 1977. A comprehensive account of means taken to select "qualified students" from the early decades of the century to more recent times.
- Wyman, David, S. *The Abandonment of the Jews*. New York: Pantheon Books, 1984. The definitive, albeit highly judgmental, account of U.S. government policy regarding European Jewry during the Holocaust.