

The New Antisemitism Is the Oldest Kind

This isn't the midcentury 'Gentleman's Agreement' variety. It's the return of pure hatred of the Jews.

By
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Anti-Israel protesters gather in City Hall plaza in New York City, Nov. 7. PHOTO: BRUCE COTLER/ZUMA PRESS

I remember a dinner party on Martha's Vineyard in the 1970s when I and my first wife, who was Jewish, shared lobster with a half-dozen nicely tanned Protestants in sherbet-

colored golfing trousers. They chattered about what pests “those people” were, who kept “pushing” to join the local beach club, even though they were “not wanted.”

“Gee,” said a middle-aged Princeton man—pronouncing the word “jay”—“why don’t they stick to their own clubs?”

My then-wife and I left the party early, and in the car she burst into tears.

How innocent the moment seems. That was the postwar “Gentleman’s Agreement” version of American antisemitism—gentiles relaxing up-island, on their fourth glass of Chablis. The word “Jew” wasn’t mentioned. In the Martha’s Vineyard iteration—post-Auschwitz—American antisemitism often had a discreetly covert quality. It emerged from a kind of sly politesse because, after all, everyone at some time or other had seen the films from the Nazi camps—the ones that Gen. Eisenhower had ordered his troops to watch. In Elia Kazan’s 1947 movie based on the Laura Hobson novel “Gentleman’s Agreement,” desk clerks fidget and look away when Gregory Peck, as a journalist pretending to be Jewish, pushes them about renting a room.

America’s antisemites in those days were more fools than monsters. With exceptions—Henry Ford, Father Coughlin, et al.—their antisemitism seemed more snobbery than hate crime. It wasn’t political, programmatic or fanatical. One evening in 1918, Eleanor Roosevelt (of all people) came home from a Washington dinner party for the financier Bernard Baruch and wrote to her mother-in-law that “the Jew party was appalling.”

The antisemitism that has poured forth onto the country’s streets and campuses in the autumn of 2023 is a different thing—a reversion to a politics of aggressive, unapologetic hate. The ominous historical regression at work in the latest Jew-hatred takes up the themes of the mid-1930s, the spirit of Hitler’s brown shirts and Kristallnacht. Of course, the new Jew-haters—especially young people on campuses—think of themselves as perfectly virtuous. What is a thousand times worse, they think of their Jew-hatred as righteous. It’s morally fashionable among them.

To frame this in American terms, you might recall another Gregory Peck movie, “To Kill a Mockingbird” (1962). Remember the scene in which, in the middle of the night, a mob of whites comes into town with intent to lynch Tom Robinson, a black man who has been falsely accused of raping a white girl. Peck’s Atticus Finch sits in front of the local jail, reading a book. The moment is tense. Just then, the children, Jem, Scout and Dill, step forward and, in the most innocent way, greet the leader of the lynch mob. Scout says, “Hey, Mr. Cunningham,” and she mentions Cunningham’s son, whom she knows from school. His brutal face grows suddenly embarrassed. The children have shamed him out of his violence. The mob backs off and dissolves into the Alabama night.

The most disgraceful and dangerous change that has occurred in the character of America’s “elites” during my lifetime is this: In 2023, at some of the most expensive universities in the country (who bothers to call them “the best” anymore?), Jem and Scout are leading the lynch mobs.

Sympathy for innocent Palestinian civilians who have been killed under the Israeli bombardment of Gaza? By all means. Who doesn't feel that? The mirror neurons of any decent person must respond at the sight of child-sized body bags in the ruins of a Palestinian hospital; the stunned, unbearable grief on the faces of those still alive. The conscience recoils and cries, "Stop!"

But wait. Draw back. Who-whom, as Lenin said: How you assign blame for violence depends on who has done what to whom. The Americans didn't bomb Yokohama on Dec. 7, 1941; the Japanese attacked Pearl Harbor. And the Japanese were responsible for what followed.

Why did Hamas attack on Oct. 7? Israeli oppression? Hamas has ruled Gaza since 2007, two years after the Israelis withdrew. Under decent, intelligent leadership—with a touch of vision, with investment by oil-rich Arab states—Gaza might now be a Mediterranean Singapore. Instead, Hamas has maintained Gaza as an anguished slum, an ongoing dramatization of the Palestinian victimhood that is the source of Hamas's power and *raison d'être*.

Although it seems grotesque to say so, the casualties in Gaza have been relatively light by neighborhood standards. More than 300,000 of Saddam Hussein's own people ended up dead or missing during his 24-year rule. In Syria under the regime of the Assads, father and son, hundreds of thousands of Syrians have been killed and nearly 13 million people—more than half the country's prewar population—have been turned out into the world as refugees.

Students at Harvard and Columbia don't protest the region's routine inhumanities. They do so only when there are Jews around to blame and to hate. It's the Israelis' Jewishness that brings the demonstrators out. This isn't "a new antisemitism." Antisemitism is never new. It's an ancient beast that awakens from time to time and exhales such filth as "Gas the Jews" and "Hitler was right."

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