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"Responding to Anti-Semitism and Anti-Israel Bias"
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Chairman Smith, Ranking Member Wild, members of the committee, thank you for inviting me to testify today on the subject of antisemitism, a topic I have covered for over a decade as a journalist. For the record, I'm against it.

That line might sound funny, but it wasn't always the obvious position in this body. In 1934, Pennsylvania representative Louis McFadden stood on the House floor and bemoaned alleged Jewish control of the American economy. "Is it not true," he declared, "that, in the United States today, the gentiles have the slips of paper while the Jews have the gold?"

We've come a long way since then.

In the past, it was not uncommon for Jews to be called before parliaments and political leaders; however, the intent was not to protect them, but to persecute them. This is not ancient history. There are people on this panel who come from countries like the former Soviet Union that repressed their Jews in living memory. So I think I speak for everyone at this table when I say I am grateful to be here, grateful to you for being here, and grateful to live in an exceptional country where a conversation like this is not just possible, but desired. While we are here to discuss negative developments in the treatment of Jews, I think it's important to acknowledge that encouraging context.

That said, I think there is a general sense—backed up by data and events—that in the last decade, antisemitism has gradually worsened rather than abated in America and around the world, some of which we have discussed today. Which raises the question: If more people than ever are aware of the perils of anti-Jewish bigotry, why does it persist?

I would argue that a major reason for this is that the stories that we tell about antisemitism and where it comes from are too narrow and convenient. For some people, talking about anti-Jewish prejudice understandably means talking about neo-Nazis, white supremacists, and the far-right. For others, as reflected in the framing of this hearing, it means talking about anti-Israel sentiment that too often lapses into antisemitism. I've reported on both of these stories at length. These narratives dominate the discourse because they contain real truth, but also because they are easy for partisans to tell about their ideological opponents.

But they aren't the whole story, and I'd like to tell you a different one, because until we challenge the comfortable conversation about antisemitism, we are unlikely to impact the problem.[1]

That story goes like this:

For almost as long as there have been Jewish people, there has been anti-Jewish prejudice. This bigotry predates the United States of America and the modern state of Israel. It is older than capitalism and communism, Republicans and Democrats, progressives and conservatives. And it precedes Christianity and Islam. Because of this, while antisemitism is *expressed* by these communities, it cannot be *caused* by them.[2] The source is something much more fundamental.

Consider recent antisemitic incidents that on the surface seem to have little connection to each other. In 2018, a white supremacist massacred 11 congregants in Pittsburgh's Tree of Life synagogue. In 2019, assailants tied to the Black Hebrew Israelite movement shot up a kosher supermarket in Jersey City, killing three. And in 2022, an Islamic extremist held an entire congregation hostage in Colleyville, Texas, for much of the Jewish Sabbath.

To take another odd example: Both the supreme leader of Iran's Islamic theocracy and Robert Bowers, the Pittsburgh shooter who hated Muslims, posted memes on social media alleging Zionist control of American politics. During the 2016 presidential race, supporters at campaign events for *both* Donald Trump and Bernie Sanders were captured on tape claiming that "Zionists" run America's finances.

What unites all of these seemingly disparate antisemitic actors? Not their identity or background, but their adherence to a conspiracy of Jewish control. The Pittsburgh white supremacist believed that Jews were responsible for flooding the country with the brown people he hated, as part of the so-called "great replacement" of the white race. One of the Black Hebrew Israelite sympathizers in Jersey City wrote on social media about how Jews controlled the government. And the British Islamic extremist who targeted the Texas synagogue did so because he thought American rabbis held sway over the U.S. authorities and could free someone from prison.

This is not how we usually think about antisemitism. Most people parse it as a personal prejudice like many others, in which a bigot simply despises a group because they are different—too Black, too Brown, too Muslim, too Jewish. Antisemitism *is* a personal prejudice. But it is also something else: a conspiracy theory about how the world works that blames sinister string-pulling Jews for social and political problems—and this is the kind of antisemitism that, as

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[1] For more on this point, see my article, "The Invisible Victims of American Anti-Semitism," *The Atlantic*, 2/23/23.
[2] "Antisemitism" is a relatively recent term for this phenomenon, but I employ it throughout my remarks for ease of understanding.

we've seen, is more likely to get people killed. But because many well-meaning individuals don't understand how this antisemitism works, they tend to miss much of it.[3]

That's a problem, because while the antisemitic conspiracy theory is pre-political, it is regularly expressed politically, in ways designed to evade our defenses. Today, fewer people would fall for Congressman McFadden's bald claim that "the Jews" control our politics and economy. But substitute "George Soros," or the "Rothschilds," or the "the Zionists," or "Israel," and suddenly the antisemitic argument regains its appeal, and respectable people and institutions start nodding their heads and suggesting we debate the subject. The notion that Jews control the weather might sound bizarre to your ears, but the idea that Israel controls the media—something Pakistan's foreign minister claimed on CNN in 2021—might not. Because people have long been conditioned to conceive of Jews in an underhanded fashion, it doesn't take much to update the ancient conspiracy theory to persuade contemporary audiences. And thanks to centuries of material blaming the world's problems on its Jews, conspiracy theorists seeking a scapegoat for their sorrows inevitably discover that the invisible hand of their oppressor belongs to an invisible Jew.

To be clear: Actors like Soros or the state of Israel possess real power and certainly warrant specific critique for how they exercise it. The problem is rather that such criticism is too often replaced with conspiracy, in which the Jewish target is transformed into an avatar of absolute evil who stands behind the world's ills.

This way of thinking threatens democracy, because as long as prejudiced people pin their society's problems on Jewish culprits, they will be unable to organize collectively to rationally solve them. The conspiracy theory threatens both Israelis and Palestinians, because when the conversation over their conflict is captured by antisemites, legitimate criticism cannot be heard and both parties inevitably lose. And of course, it threatens Jewish people everywhere, which should be reason enough for us all to oppose it.

Thank you, and I look forward to answering any questions you might have.

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[3] As I've written elsewhere, "Because this expression of anti-Jewish prejudice is so different from other forms of bigotry, many people don't recognize it… Social-media companies ignore it. Anti-racism activists—who understand racism as prejudice wielded by the powerful—cannot grasp it, because anti-Semitism constructs its Jewish targets as the privileged and powerful. And political partisans, more concerned with pinning the problem on their opponents, spend their time parsing the identity of anti-Semitic individuals, rather than countering the ideas that animate them."