

# The Madness of our Contemporary World: An Address

Michael Berenbaum

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There is an old Hasidic story about a town whose drinking water was poisoned. Anyone who drank the water went mad. The town came to its Rebbe and asked him: "what are we to do? If we do not drink the water we die; yet, if we drink the water we go mad."

The Rebbe pondered the question for a moment and then turned to his trusty *shamas*, his closest disciple. He said: "give me brush and some paint." His disciples were startled but they complied with his order and he quickly drew a X on the forehead of his *shamas* and insisted that the *shamas* in turn paint an X on the Rebbe's forehead. And he turned to the community and said: "Drink the water! But when you look at him and when you look at me remember. We are mad."

Well if you want to know the condition of our world today remember we are mad.

When the President of Iran says that the Holocaust did not happen and the President of Germany responds: "Oh yes it did and we know because we did it and we cannot face our future without admitting the crime of our past." This is madness.

Who should deny the Holocaust? Clearly, the President of Germany; after all, his nation is stained by that crime.

And who has no stake in denying the Holocaust, the President of Iran. After all, his nation was untainted by the evil that enveloped Europe three score and ten years ago and his nation provided relief for some and its Jews continued to live in peace while the Jews of Europe were decimated. If Christian Europe killed its Jews, what is the stake of a Moslem in Iran in denying what happened?

As we shall see, Holocaust denial in the Moslem world is rather different than Holocaust denial in the West, there are two different forms of denial, two very different agendas. And Holocaust denial in the Muslim world is part of the migration of the discredited myths of Western Christendom, where they make cultural sense to the Middle East when they are alien, but where they have become peculiarly potent.

## Antisemitism in the New Millennia:

The late Milton Himmelfarb was one of the most insightful and quotable students of American Jewry. It is he who first said that "American Jews live like Episcopalians and vote like Puerto Ricans." When he made that statement Puerto Ricans indeed voted like Puerto Ricans. His second observation is much less quoted but no less accurate. "The easiest way to get booed by an American Jewish audience," Himmelfarb said. "is to tell them that antisemitism is a less severe problem than they think it is." The information is disconcerting to American Jews, unduly disquieting for it leaves them with the feeling that their insecurity is not grounded in fact, in reality, but in the anguish of centuries past, of time not our own.

I will not tell you that antisemitism is not a problem, no a severe problem but I will say candidly and directly, do not believe anyone who tells you that these are the 1930s again.

The times are different.

The threat is different.

The enemy is different.

And we are different.

Like many of my generation, I once thought that antisemitism was a problem of the past, one resolved in my lifetime by the generation that preceded mine. I thought that my children could grow up without knowing its reality. Unfortunately, I was wrong.

In the early 1990 when I published *After Tragedy and Triumph: Modern Jewish Thought and the American Experience* I argued that the two defining questions of contemporary Jewish life would be the questions posed by European Philosophers Jean Paul Sartre and Freidrich Neitzsche. Sartre asked: would it take the antisemite to make the Jew. In the absence of antisemitism could Jews sustain themselves internally without the external pressures. Sartre was not alone; Joseph B. Soloveichik advanced the concept of the two covenants the covenant of fate and the covenant of faith: in the absence of a covenant of fate – a commonality of destiny imposed by external situation of the Jewish people – would a second covenant, a covenant of faith bind the Jews.

Nietzsche asked: Was Judaism the religion of the powerless: would an empowered people affirm the same values, maintain the same traditions, champion the same causes. We live in a time of the empowerment of the Jewish people and it was presumed that with adequate power the problem of antisemitism could be resolved. Even Theodore Herzl, whose vision was shaped by the antisemitism he experienced at the trial of Alfred Dreyfus, presumed that antisemitism could be ended with the normalization of the Jewish condition, with sovereignty and a state. For a while, Israel offered that promise but it now seems quite illusory.

The answers were uncertain then; they remain uncertain now, Yet, I had underestimated the degree to which more than a decade later we would still be confronting antisemitism, now in very different manifestations.

A brief word of history: in the 1980s Jonathan Woocher published an important work on the American Jewish community entitled *Sacred Survival*. His argued that the American Jewish community was united in its mission of survival, which expressed itself in three areas of activity: working on behalf of the survival of the State of Israel; freeing and protecting endangered Jews – Soviet Jews, Ethiopian Jews, Latin American Jews – and remembering the Holocaust, which endowed all post-war Jewish life with a special quality of triumph over our oppressors. “Do not give Hitler a posthumous victory,” became the 614<sup>th</sup> commandment, a commitment shared by all Jews, secular and religious, Conservative, Orthodox, Reform, Reconstructionist, Humanistic Judaism, Zionists and non-Zionist alike.

Within fifteen years Woocher’s work no longer resonated with the younger Jews who looked inwardly, not outwardly, to define their Jewishness. They had seen the barriers to advancement of Jews within the United States disappear; there was nothing they could not be, nowhere that they could not travel, and nothing they could not achieve from the Presidency of Harvard, Princeton and Yale to nomination for the Vice Presidency of the United States. More importantly, they could achieve what they sought to achieve as Jews, without changing their name, masking their identity or even limiting their observance of Jewish rituals in private or in public. Indeed, they broke the unwritten rule of post-emancipation Jewish life: “Be a Jew in your home and a man in the street!” One now has the freedom to be Jewish everywhere.

In the mid 1990s, after the Oslo Accords and after all the barriers to American Jewish participation in the larger society were broken many Jews thought that antisemitism was a malaise of the past and the major challenge to Jewish survival was internal: was there enough within Judaism, Jewish history, thought, tradition, memory and community to command the allegiance of a new generation of Jews who had every opportunity – even the opportunity to leave without a sense of betrayal, and for whom no barriers existed? Could Judaism thrive without antisemitism, without the common fate of collective animus to fuel communal allegiance? In the 1990s, it seemed as if peace in Israel was but a matter of time and Jews could be a “normal” people, a nation whose survival was granted and who could thrive with opportunity and without being the target of hatred. Israel was productive and prosperous, secure and stable and Jews everywhere were experiencing the joys of freedom.

A personal story: Each year at our Passover Seder, just prior to the cup of Elijah we recount what must be done in our world at this time to liberate the Jews from slavery. One year in the late 1990s, the conversation was blessedly brief, Jews were free virtually everywhere so the conversation was fully spiritual

Enter the new millennia!

The peace process collapsed; Oslo was replaced by Intifada II, which now seems tame in comparison to the activities of militant Islam. Antisemitism has exploded within the Moslem world. Debunked myths alien to Islam, painstakingly discredited over the past half century within the Christian world, have been absorbed in the Moslem world. *The Protocols of the Elders of Zion*, the Russian forgery that purports to show Jewish world domination has been made into a television series in Egypt. Islam has borrowed the Blood Libel and the desecration of the

Eucharist, which makes psychological sense within Christianity, where the central ritual is consuming the body and blood of the Christ but should not have resonated within the Moslem world. Political anti-Zionism has fueled hatred within the Arab world and religious anti-Judaism has propelled political opposition to Israel. The results have been bad; the trends are worse.

### **Religious Extremism, European Antisemitism:**

Religious extremism has reared its head within each of the major monotheistic faith and with the greatest intensity within the Moslem world where the balance of secularism and western liberalism does not hold sway. In Judaism, religious extremism is a minority phenomenon, abhorred by the majority but still it resulted in the Purim Days massacre at Hebron and the assassination of Israeli Prime Minister Yitzhak Rabin and thwarted attempts to blow up the Al Aksa Mosque, on the Temple Mount in Jerusalem. Contemporary religious extremism is intemperate, either by lack of exposure to outside thought or by principled rejection of all outside thought. It is fueled by the certitude of the assent of God and the demonization of one's enemies as God's enemies.

In Europe antisemitism has been on the rise as country after country throughout the Continent face a demographic situation that can only make things worse. The European population is aging and a new working generation must be imported to take their place and to work, in part to provide the social safety net that the European workers have come to expect.

For three centuries after the industrial revolution Europe produced a surplus population that was exported to settle the new world or to exploit and colonize the third world; and now Europe is unable to reproduce itself. The result has been the importation of large Muslim populations: Turks in Germany and Arabs in many other countries.

And unlike the United States where immigration was followed by assimilation and Americanization, or at least it should be, these populations reside in the countries of Europe, but do not become Europeans. French President Jacques Chirac could say with all confidence "that antisemitism is not France," by which he meant that antisemitism is alien to the values of liberty, equality and fraternity, even as populations living in France increase their antisemitic activities. They *reside in France but are not of France*. Only belatedly has French officialdom begun to recognize that these differences will spell the doom of France -- as we know it -- unless these populations assimilate French values and become part of French culture. Only after the riots in the streets of Paris and elsewhere has the French government started to change its orientation, but the transformation may be clumsy and it may be too little, too late.

France had no concept of "Hate Crimes" so the attacks against Jews, the scrawling of graffiti on synagogue walls and other such acts were regarded as petty crimes and not an attack against the society at large. By contrast, if a swastika is painted on a synagogue in the United States, we all know what would happen. The Mayor would come and say that this act does not represent our city; the chief of police would come and pledge that he would do everything in his power to catch the perpetrator; the District Attorney would come and say that "we will throw the book at the culprits; and a minister, a priest and increasingly an Imam would join the rabbi in symbolically cleansing the stain. Thus, hatred would suffer a defeat by the solidarity of civil and religious authorities joining together against hatred, but only if the concept of hate crimes exists and such attacks are properly viewed as attacks against the society as a whole.

European opposition to Israeli policies, whether legitimate or excessive, only exacerbates the situation. Frenchmen and other Europeans easily distinguish between their native Jews, whom they regard as fellow citizens and their denunciation of Israeli policies. And yet local inhabitants, Arab residents of the European countries, regard the intensity of European opposition to Israel as *license* to attack indigenous Jews. Any talk of the illegitimacy of the State of Israel is translated as the illegitimacy of Jews -- everywhere.

To the degree that European nationalism is coupled with anti-Americanism or at least with the rivalry between the Old World and the New World, a rivalry intensified by the language used by some American officials, opposition to the Jews also intensifies. Jews are seen as an agent of globalism and as shapers of American policy, a privileged constituency within the American power structure.

### **American is Still Different:**

As opposed to other countries where antisemitism thrives without Jews, in the United States antisemitism is comparatively tame despite the prevalence of the Jews in the areas where traditional anti-Jewish conspiracy theorists sought to explain Jewish domination. Over the past several years there was ample opportunity for an increase in antisemitism. Jews led the economic policy of the Clinton Administration from Robert Rubin and Lawrence Summers at the Department of Treasury to Alan Greenspan at the Federal Reserve and at James Wolfenson at the World Bank, [the latter two were succeeded by Jews Paul Wolfowitz and Ben S. Bernake] dominant voices at the center of American economic policy were Jews.

Jews – but not only Jews -- were also among the strongest voices calling for the invasion of Iraq and conducting the war from Paul Wolfowitz and Doug Feith at the Department of Defense to William Kristol and Charles Krauthheimer in the press, Jews are prominent in the neo-conservative movement and indeed there was widespread talk of a backlash against Jews precisely as casualties mounted and the war seemed to be going badly. Indeed, some feared that political support for the state of Israel might diminish because of the war. Such concerns were confined to fringe elements in American politics, yet the fear was widespread among American Jews. Despite the publication of a scathing piece of quasi-journalistic scholarship by Harvard and University of Chicago professors, these views have not gained a hold in the political mainstream.

Mel Gibson's *The Passion of the Christ* was a blockbuster success bringing to the theater Christians who seldom saw R-rated movies. Their religious experience in the theater was profound, so profound that Christian believers were blinded to Gibson's portrayal of the Jews. Jews who saw the very same film were so chagrined by the portrayal of the Jews that they could not see the majesty of the passion. Jewish opponents of the film, Jews who expressed concern about its content from Abraham Foxman to Marvin Hier were depicted as anti-Christian by elements of the religious and political right. And for the first time in a very long time, Jews experienced themselves as cultural outsiders, unable to understand something that had become a major cultural event to their neighbors. Yet the results were neither pogroms nor a dramatic rise in antisemitic incidents. It seems that Americans could distinguish between the historical depiction of first century Jews and their Jewish neighbors, and even between ancient Jews living in the land of Israel and contemporary Israelis.

Frankly, America is different. After more than 350 years on this soil, the arrival of the first Jews forced Peter Stuyvesant, much against his will, to forge a pluralistic *multi-religious* society in the New Land and not a pluralistic *Christian* society and that sense of America has continued for more than three centuries into the third millennia. America has only become more diverse in the past half century. In the mid-fifties, Wil Herberg could define the American religious experience as *Catholic, Protestant or Jew*. Jews constituted three percent of the American community but 33% of the American religious experience. This is no longer the case and will never again be true of the United States as our religious experience is more diverse. The Moslem populations has grown dramatically; so too adherents to the Eastern Religions and confirmed secularists. Still the place of the Jews in the United States is secure for the foreseeable future.

We have heard some reckless talk: the all too common – and all too unchallenged – comparison between the Jewish condition of today and the Jewish condition during the Holocaust.

### **We are not in the 1930s:**

The vulnerability of the 1930s cannot be compared with contemporary Jewish vulnerability.

The Holocaust was unique. Not every Jewish vulnerability is the vulnerability of the Holocaust and not every enemy is Adolf Hitler. As Leon Wieseltier wrote, "Hitler is dead." Hitler ruled most of Europe and in his last years Arafat could not move more than 150 yards from his battered headquarters. And today Nassrallah can not go out in public for fear of assassination and not only from the Israelis. By contrast, Hitler could ride into newly conquered Vienna standing up in an open convertible.

In a fine book on *Power and Powerless in Jewish History*, David Biale summarized the Jewish predicament:

From biblical times to the present day, Jews have wandered the uncertain terrain between power and powerlessness, never quite achieving the power necessary to guarantee long-term security,

but equally avoiding, with a number of disastrous exceptions, the abyss of absolute impotence. They developed the consummate skill of living with uncertainty and insecurity.

The Holocaust was the paradigmatic example of absolute impotence. And today, Jews are an empowered people.

Israel is ranked as the third or fourth most powerful army in the world. And by any scale of power, the American Jewish community is a powerful community, not quite as powerful as the antisemites proclaim, but far more powerful than we sense ourselves to be.

Jews have wealth, power and influence. They can be seen in the corridors of power in government and industry, in academia and in the media, they face virtually no barriers to career advancement and they can advance without having to abandon or mute their commitment to Jewish faith and their proud membership in the Jewish people. We are not the Jews of the thirties and we are not hesitant to advance Jewish issues to the very center of the American National Agenda. In fact, we are quite skilled at it; so skilled that American administration after administration has been responsive to Jewish issues, large and small and supportive of Israel.

After the Yom Kippur war, Jews mistakenly feared that power in the last third of the 20<sup>th</sup> century would be in control of natural resources -- in Arab oil, the great addiction of the West. In fact, it turned out that over the past four decades power was in the management of information and Jews both in Israel and the United States were ideally positioned to benefit from the information revolution.

The much heralded antisemitic address several years ago by the Prime Minister of Malaysia underscored the degree to which the Muslim feel disempowered and socially unprepared for this information revolution, the way that they have not built their societies from the newfound wealth of oil. Islam, which had been at the center of philosophy and science, which had brought forth classical thought to the Dark Ages in partnership with the Jews living under Islam, had shut itself off from science, closed itself to outside ideas. It is only in dialogue with these new ideas that power is found in the twenty first century world.

In the aftermath of World War II and the experience of powerlessness during the Shoah, Jews learned a fundamental lesson: powerlessness invites victimization. We had presumed with Theodore Herzl and the Zionists that the Jewish state would become a normal state and end the problem of antisemitism and for a time it seemed that it might. Jews assumed that power would end victimization and a land and state would end vulnerability. They have not.

The painful lesson of this time, taught again in the first years of the 21<sup>st</sup> century as it was demonstrable during the oil crises of 1973 and 1979 is that Israel can fuel the flames of antisemitism and not only quench its fires. Empowerment has not ended Jewish vulnerability; it has merely given us alternate means with which to grapple with our ongoing vulnerability.

In the 1930s racial antisemitism became the dominant philosophy of one of an expansionist Germany that soon conquered country after country and wherever it ruled it imposed that racial antisemitism and the policies that led to the annihilation of the Jewish people. And the Jewish people were powerless to combat it and unable --perhaps also unwilling -- to marshal the support of the United States and Great Britain, those with power, to adequately respond to the genocide.

The most extreme antisemitism is found today in countries where Jews no longer reside and however bad the situation is in France its Jewish community is not vulnerable to state-sponsored systematic murder. It is far less vulnerable to antisemitism than it was in the late nineteenth century when Frenchmen were chanting in the streets of Paris "death to the Jews," and extraordinarily less vulnerable than when French policeman and Vichy officials participated in the roundup and deportation of French Jews to transit camps in France and from transit camps to Auschwitz.

Still, the times are depressing. The generation that lived through the Six Day War, saw Israel emerge as a military power and a potential economic powerhouse, and experienced the collapse of antisemitism as

a factor in American life was ill prepared for its resurgence and unable to explain why the Jewish State became the place where Jews are most vulnerable.

Jews on the right sees it as more of the same, ongoing antisemitism, which seems seamless from Hitler to Arafat. And the left can only blame Israel for its occupational policies and because of that blame seems mute when antisemitism is manifest.

Comparing the contemporary situation to the 1930s is to cede to our enemies a power they do not have, an intent they may not share, and to disparage to great achievement of the Zionist revolution that the Jews become actors in history rather than its passive victims.

It is to invite upon ourselves not only nightmare of our own times, but the absolute darkness of another time and another place that is not our own and bears no resemblance to our own. Those who do so manifest considerable ignorance of those times and misinterpret our own.

I neither wish to condone or to minimize contemporary antisemitism nor to presume for a moment that Jews are not vulnerable today. To state that something is not the Holocaust or that a second Holocaust is not pending is merely to restate the obvious, not to prescribe complacency.

The contemporary feeling of powerless may be explained by our own paralysis. We have heard time and again from Israeli military leaders that the Jewish-Palestinian struggle does not lend itself to a military solution, at least not one commensurate with democratic norms and with values most Jews – and I would argue, though others would certainly disagree, that Judaism also -- holds dear. We have employed many tactics in our contemporary struggle but it seems blatantly clear that we are without a strategy. We don't quite know what we want to achieve or how to achieve it and consequently we have empowered extremists who alone seem able to determine the agenda. And because we can't decide what to do, we are reactive and not proactive.

### **What's at Stake in Muslims Denying the Holocaust:**

Western deniers deny the Holocaust in order to rehabilitate the reputation of Germany, to restore the good name of its people, to defend fascism and to cleanse Hitler of the stain. There are not the interests of Islamic deniers who are seeking a two-fold achievement in denying the Holocaust.

They delegitimize Europe, which is perceives itself as the antithesis of the Nazis; pluralistic and tolerant, welcoming of the outsider and deeply committed to human rights and human dignity.

And they delegitimize Israel, which sees itself as the heir of the Nazis victims and the antidote to another Holocaust. It is an irresistible twofer – two for the price of one.

And yet, they cannot resist at the same time equating the Jews with the Nazis and they are empowered in this task by the Europeans who have experienced Holocaust fatigue over the past fifteen years as the National Myths of one European society after another crumbled.

Germans tried to speak of the few Nazis and the good Germans. And in the 1990s the Goldhagen debate emerged, which claimed that the Germans wanted to get rid of the Jews, not a few but most and the Nazi received widespread cooperation. His book became a best seller *before* it was translated into German as a new generation faced the questions that their parents were too polite to ask of their grandparents.

They demonstrated Irving Greenberg's adage that after the Holocaust: "The innocent feel guilty and the guilty innocent." Who is more innocent that the third generation of Germans?

Austria portrayed itself as the first of the Nazi victims, Switzerland saw itself as heroically neutral and they discovered that its neutrality facilitated the economy of the Third Reich and it benefited from its cooperative relationship. France spoke of *resistance* and then had to face *collaboration*. By seeing the Jews as the new Nazis, it frees Europe of the burden of its past and cleanses it of its responsibility.

Let me state it clearly. Israel did not commit a genocide. If in 34 days of war, assuming that Lebanese figures are accurate – and that may not be a correct assumption – some 1,000 people were killed, then Israel's bombing was accurate and it was precise. The airport runways were hit, but not the new billion dollar glass terminal in Beirut. Specific buildings were hit but not indiscriminately. The West has yet to figure out how to morally attack an enemy who hides among civilians and use women and children as shields. But the Israelis faced the dilemma and responded carefully, though not always perfectly.

Let us be clear, Israeli is *not* committing genocide.

It has the power. Lebanon could have been a parking lot.

It has the provocation. Thousands of rockets were directed at its citizens. Arab and Iranian leaders are speaking of "death to the Jews." Suicide bombers target civilians and Jews everywhere. But Israel responds with restraint.

Israel has the opportunity, but it does not avail itself of it.

One need not offer a blanket defense of every Israeli action -- or even of the wisdom of the war -- to deny the most scurrilous of the attacks against Israel by its enemies, by Europeans, by the media and even by human rights organizations.

We are in an enduring struggle. Perhaps, the aim should be divorce and separation rather than an elusive peace. But remember that wars offer opportunities for diplomacy. We will not know for a while the outcome of this war – perhaps not for a long while. And therefore, most judgments are premature.

### **And What About Us?**

And what about us?

Anyone who works in the field of Holocaust Studies or Holocaust Education well understands that we are at a moment of transition. Survivors are aging and with their aging come a diminishment of vitality or a loss of memory and then death. Those who were eighteen on liberation are now 79 and those who were 29 have now reached four score and ten. Soon, the last survivor will be no longer and with their passing the transition from lived memory to historical memory will be complete.

You the children of survivor will be the last eyewitnesses. You no longer have to compete for your place in the chain of memory, it is yours, unchallenged for those who were adults are now frail and time is their enemy. It is appropriate that you joined with the second generation who are heirs to a distinguished legacy, but whose status on the chain of memory will only be secure, will only be respected if they assume the responsibilities of memory. Otherwise, the institutions that have been established will assume the leadership. The best of them have *neshama*, have soul. But a soulless institution is a golem, a betrayal of memory and dangerous to the cause.

Now is the time for both communities to step forward and to embrace that responsibility.

If not now, when?

Thank you!

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