

Anti-Semitism: Why We on the Left Need to Confront Our Anti-Semitism



Social media is on the constant rise, and it is not shying away from vulnerable subjects, including the Holocaust. Selfies, such as the one [Breanna](#)¹ took at the Auschwitz-Birkenau Museum and Memorial have caused controversy on social media and in political discourse. This juxtaposition of happiness and tragedy is seen by many Jewish (and non Jewish) activists and theorists as insensitive, ignorant, and hateful. Meanwhile, others like Breanna feel that their social media content should not be a place for political and moral discourse, that smiling, or things considered “taboo” in tragic spaces are more nuanced than objective. The rise of online platforms such as Instagram, Facebook, Twitter, and Snapchat, has shed light on personal opinions and understandings of the Holocaust, Jewishness and post Nazi Germany anti-Semitism through pictures and posts. These opinions and understandings differ greatly amongst political groups, and oftentimes display political agendas associated with said political groups.

This paper will first cover the socioeconomic rise and racial whitening of the Jewish people. This history will allow us to understand the privileges and stereotypes associated with Jews, as well as common themes within anti-Semitic and anti-Zionist discourse, important factors that contribute to liberal America’s dormancy towards anti-Semitism. I will be focusing on social media posts following the anti-Semitic shootings in Pittsburgh, a deadly shooting that occurred in the past year. We will dissect these posts and discover sentiments of anti-Semitism within influential left-leaning social media presences. These anecdotes will explain my call to action: for progressives in America (including myself) to understand that the enableness of anti-Semitism, while maybe not the most pressing issue in our country, is still relevant flaw in

¹ “ (@PrincessBMM).” *Twitter*, Twitter, 24 April 2019, twitter.com/PrincessBMM?lang=en.

our liberal movement that we must confront and combat in order to move forward as a more peaceful and productive society.

Revolutions often go unnoticed. When there are more publicized issues or movements concerning social change (such as racism, gender equality and economic equity) our complacency towards other issues act as its own form of political revolution that Lapham describes in his book “Revolutions.” While most political revolutions are easily apparent, the complexity in our dormancy towards anti-Semitism, arises since dormancy is difficult to notice. Only those who fear the dormancy’s effects notice the revolution, a dangerous predicament since others will see said worried people to be overreacting, brainwashed or apathetic towards more pressing movements for change. Comparative Anti-Semitism, white privilege and Israel’s complexity have revolutionized the way that liberal America lacks the urgency to resist anti-semitism.

In her broad-reaching work, *How Jews Became White Folks*, UCLA anthropologist Karen Brodtkin dismisses the myth of Jews as a “model minority.” Brodtkin demonstrates how the discourse of the model minority, particularly as it applies to Jews, “functions in the American cultural and national imagination, drawing upon historical sources, literature, legal scholarship, feminist social sciences, and critical race theory.” Our nation, as it is conceptualized, has relied on continually renegotiated constructions of whiteness.² Jews have experienced a kind of “double consciousness”³. Jewish racial identity has been shaped by the experience of being not white in relation to the dominant culture and white with regard to blackness. Allowed to see through both,

² Brodtkin 4

³ Brodtkin 32

Jews have developed a critical stance to white Christian culture and a social self-identity that made them proud to be in the middle, resulting in a characteristic left-liberal ethos that has been, from time to time, more style than substance.

Becoming white works in two ways. For the dominant white society, the gravitation of Jews and European white minorities toward hegemonic white culture served as a Horatio Alger story, one of hard work, determination and courage. Jews' movement from racial other, to not-quite-white⁴, to white reveals how race in America is constructed in the discursive space opened by a binary between whiteness and blackness.⁵ Jews did not become white because they succeeded in spite of racism, rather they succeeded *because* of white racism. Economic and social shifts following WWII reconfigured whiteness in such a way as to allow Jewish people the entitlements that being white brought (like the G.I. Bill and access to the suburbs)⁶. But becoming white is also a lived experience, a learning process. Brodtkin tells, for an anecdotal example, of the desire and equivocation she and her brother felt for being like the "blond people."⁷ The desire of the marginalized to be like those in power produces an anxiety, a complex for a group of people who were quite recently the most oppressed group in the world; oppressed, to add, by the same group they wish to belong to.

⁴Sacks, Karen Brodtkin. *How Jews Became White Folks and What That Says about Race in America*. New Brunswick, NJ: Rutgers University Press, 2010. (45-46)

⁵ Gruenwald 2

⁶ Gruenwald 3

⁷ Brodtkin 2

At first glance, Brodtkin's arguments may not seem new. It has been shown time and time again how the Irish or other European immigrants "became white."⁸ Brodtkin, however, focuses on gender in the post-war narrative.

Creating a Jewish identity in the 20th century produced a shift in the experiences of Jewish womanhood and Jewish manhood. (Gruenwald, 5) To become white, Jews had to conform to the gender norms of the dominant culture. In the wake of that shift, Jews were left with anxiety and ambivalence which manifest in, among other things, Jewish American Princess (JAP) jokes and misogyny toward the "Jewish mother." For Jewish men, accepting whiteness and the privileges it brings also means incorporating the patriarchal domesticity of dominant American culture. Jewish women gave up the power they once held in the family in exchange for the lifestyle of elite white women. When immigrants learn that the way to be American is to claim white patriarchal understandings of womanhood and manhood and a middle-class or bourgeois outlook for themselves, they are "adapting patterns and practices...by which the United States has continually redefined itself as a nation of whites."⁹

Brodtkin's critique may not sit well with some Jews, for whom the model minority myth is still a large part of our identities. These myths of resilience and self-propelled success give comfort to the collective pain of communally felt wounds. Brodtkin offers her critique with the same respect she gives in the telling of her family stories. *How Jews Became White Folks* serves as a call to scholars of American Jewish society to take a serious look at a younger generation and, as Brodtkin does, to dive into the social and economic arrangements which afford them with

⁸ Gruenwald 7

⁹ Brodtkin 14

a very different identity from their parents' while nonetheless producing its own anxieties about spirituality and community.¹⁰ It's , the Jewish people have greatly benefited from whiteness, but the fact that many scholars (and frankly, people across the world) view the Jewish people as a white group of power with nothing to worry about concerning anti semitism, discrimination or anxiety, anti-semitic rhetoric become palatable.

In Mitchell Cohen's *Anti-Semitism and the Left that Doesn't Learn*, he outlines commonalities between anti-Semitic and anti-Zionist discourses. Firstly he points out similarities in anti-Semitic and anti-Zionist insinuations: "Jews do not and cannot fit properly into our society. There is something foreign, not to mention sinister about them." vs. "The Zionists are alien implants in the Mideast. They can never fit there. Western imperialism created the Zionist state." He also compares the two ideologies in form of remonstrations: "Those Jews, they always carp that they are victims. In fact, they have vast power, especially financial power. Their power is everywhere, even if it is not very visible. They exercise it manipulatively, behind the scenes. (But look, there are even a few of them, guilty-hearted perhaps, who will admit it all this to you)." vs. "The Zionists carp that they are victims but in reality they have enormous power, especially financial. Their power is everywhere, but they make sure not to let it be too visible. They exercise it manipulatively, behind people's backs, behind the scenes – why, just look at Zionist influence in Washington. Or rather, dominance of Washington. (And look, there are even a few Jews, guilty-hearted perhaps, who admit it)."¹¹

¹⁰ Gruenwald 8

¹¹ "Anti-Semitism and the Left That Doesn't Learn." *Dissent Magazine*. Accessed April 22, 2019. https://www.dissentmagazine.org/online_articles/anti-semitism-and-the-left-that-doesnt-learn.

These comparisons can be hard for liberal Jews, including myself, to grapple with. With Israeli boycotts on the rise, and liberal ideology becoming more and more anti-Israel, I fear that the “left”, the group I belong to, is becoming nearly as much of an anti-Semitic problem as the far right anti-Semitic “Trump” rhetoric that we are always so quick to dispel.¹²

Within two hours of the horrific massacre in a Pittsburgh synagogue on October 27, 2018, Julia Ioffe, an American journalist (who actually spoke to the Humanities course this semester) tweeted:

“And a word to my fellow American Jews. This president makes this possible. Here. Where you live. I hope the embassy move over there, where you don’t live was worth it.”¹³

On Saturday, in the immediate aftermath of the horror, she considered it appropriate to engage in hate speech directed towards Jewish people. Let us parse, in an attempt to understand the inscrutable depths of irrationality and hatred underlying Ioffe’s outburst. Ioffe wears her Soviet immigrant background (anti-semitism/Jew credit) on her sleeve in this tweet. On such laurels, it seems, she rests her argument. “A word to my fellow American Jews,” she begins her tweet. This first declaration immediately ostracizes anyone who does not fit this description, including Israeli Jews (that she will later confront in her tweet).

“This president makes this possible.”

This part can be easily followed. She’s talking about President Trump. She is implying that President Trump paved the way for the Pittsburgh synagogue massacre. She is also positing that

¹² Chicago Daily Law Bulletin. "Free Speech Rights and the Rise of Anti-BDS Legislation." Chicago Daily Law Bulletin. Accessed May 27, 2019.

<https://www.chicagolawbulletin.com/law-day-israel-boycott-laws-free-speech-20190501>.

¹³ Ioffe, Julia. "And a Word to My Fellow American Jews: This President Makes This Possible. Here. Where You Live. I Hope the Embassy Move over There, Where You Don't Live Was worth It." Twitter. October 27, 2018. Accessed May 01, 2019. <https://twitter.com/juliaioffe/status/1056219660444676097?lang=en>.

President Trump encourages white supremacists and their violent tactics, which often target Jews. This sentiment can easily be understood, but the following logic in her tweet complicates things, and creates the most obvious danger: “I hope the embassy move over there, where you don’t live[,] was worth it.” Ioffe’s reasoning is that President Trump is a Nazi supporter, and that there are unenlightened Jews who support his policies with respect to Israel who allowed for this shooting to occur. She believes that Trump’s decision to move the American Embassy from Tel Aviv to Jerusalem was the direct cause of a madman taking a semi-automatic rifle into a synagogue on a Shabbat morning to murder as many innocents as possible for the sole reason that those in the synagogue were Jewish.

Among the well known liberal commentators on this shooting, Simone Zimmerman, left-wing American Jewish activist, added her commentary on Sunday:

“No words. Jewish fascists abusing white-supremacist terrorism to stoke Islamophobia and anti-Palestinian hate. Your collaboration with our Nazi-friendly administration is part of what allowed this to happen, and you are a disgrace to our people.”¹⁴

This tweet was a response to a quite sober statement from Rabbi Shmuley Boteach, in which he denounces anti-Semitism and implored Trump to make a major speech or statement on the subject. Somehow, the Ioffe-Zimmerman axis spins that into some sort of Jewish conspiracy. Zimmerman is trying to say that American Jews overwhelmingly support Trump (which is factually untrue) or repress their dislikings for Trump because, at the end of the day, he is

¹⁴ Simone Zimmerman. "No Words. Jewish Fascists Abusing White-supremacist Terrorism to Stoke Islamophobia and Anti-Palestinian Hate. Your Collaboration with Our Nazi-friendly Administration Is Part of What Allowed This to Happen, and You Are a Disgrace to Our People. <https://t.co/uxbxOhd1m>." Twitter. October 28, 2018. Accessed May 02, 2019. <https://twitter.com/simonerzim/status/1056504354444902400>.

supportive of Israel.¹⁵ Zimmerman believes that this makes American Jews fascists. These fascist Jews manipulate white supremacist terrorism (again, in America) to encourage Islamophobia and anti-Palestinian hatred.

This tweet is quite disturbing to read, to consider American Jews, as either outright fascists or fascist sympathizers, people that are somehow inspiring white supremacists toward the hatred of themselves. By collaborating with the Trump administration, which moved the American Embassy from Tel Aviv to Jerusalem, she is saying “you Jews” (besides people like herself) brought this massacre on ourselves. Put simply, the victims are to be blamed. She seems to believe that Jewish deception and evil are at the root of this horrendous mass murder. These are not the necessary steps that liberal America needs to take if they are attempting to create a more peaceful society.

It is not anti Jewish to denounce oppressive acts committed by Jews. To say that a history of oppression exempts Jews—or any other group for that matter—from accountability undermines Jewish liberation and betrays the values of Judaism itself. The suffering of Palestinians can not be minimized by comparing the occupation to many other terrible human rights disasters being committed worldwide by *non-Jews*. However, it is important to note that there is nothing about the Jewishness of Israeli leaders that makes their rockets more deadly or their walls more brutal—it is simply militaristic nationalism. We must criticize Jews who support the oppression of Palestinians on the same terms and by the same standards that we hold for all

¹⁵ Tibon, Amir. "U.S. Jews' Support for Trump at Serious Low despite Anti-Democratic Campaign, Poll Finds." Haaretz.com. March 17, 2019. Accessed April 24, 2019. <https://www.haaretz.com/us-news/.premium-u-s-jews-support-for-trump-at-serious-low-despite-campaign-poll-finds-1.7024010>.

oppressors around the world. We should be critical because of what Israel does, not because of who they are, otherwise we as liberal are perpetuating anti-Semitic sentiment.

Confronting anti-Semitism is a necessary. It is a central theme in the history and functioning of European and American capitalism. It also regularly undermines and distracts progressive (liberal) movements for social justice. For both political and psychological reasons, anti-Semitism interferes with Jews' ability to effectively work in movements for justice.

Antisemitism is real. The Anti-Defamation League has tracked anti-Semitic incidents since 1979, drawing on reports from victims, police and news publications. The worst year was 1994, with 2,066 incidents. By 2013, the total fell to 751. It has been rising ever since, with the biggest all-time annual jump coming in 2017, when the tally climbed 57% to 1,986.¹⁶ Left-leaning people (including Jews and myself) need to sharpen their understanding of anti-Semitism in order to more accurately identify it, and confront it. It is imperative that all us those on the left start tackling anti-Semitism together.

¹⁶ Kaleem, Jaweed. "Poway Synagogue Shooting Is the Latest in a Trend of Anti-Semitic Incidents." Los Angeles Times. April 27, 2019. Accessed April 24, 2019. <https://www.latimes.com/nation/la-na-california-synagogue-shooting-anti-semitism-20190427-story.html>.

