

## Undue stress on American anti-Semitism?

Steven M. Cohen

In the last two years or so, American Jews' anxieties about American anti-Semitism have mounted considerably. Possibly this trend derives from: Israel's diminished popularity in the wake of the *intifada*, the Robertson and Jackson presidential candidacies, the Skinheads around the country, and last year's widely reported ADL audit of anti-Semitic incidents that recorded no small number of synagogue and cemetery desecrations. The evidence of increased Jewish anxiety is well demonstrated in the surveys I have been conducting for the American Jewish Committee. In 1983 and 1984, less than half of the national samples of American Jews thought that American anti-Semitism was a serious problem for American Jews. In both 1988 and January 1989, this figure had grown to almost three quarters.

Consistent with these sentiments, some major community relations agencies advance the view that Jewish interests are seriously threatened by American anti-Semitism. They argue that anti-Semitism is a potent and growing force in American society; that anti-Semitic motives underlie the behavior of the most powerful opponents of our communal agenda; that anti-Semitic stereotypes among the public can readily influence the policies of important institutions; and that anti-Semitic attitudes invariably lead to anti-Jewish behavior.

I want to argue here that each of these propositions is demonstrably false. But more critically, I also want to argue that the price of an undue emphasis on anti-Semitism is not merely superfluous vigilance; it also means that we exert less influence on American society than we might otherwise.

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## Differences not Evidence of Anti-Semitism

My contention that American anti-Semitism is far less serious than we often say it is rests upon several related arguments. First, we use anti-Semitism to refer to any sort of antagonism to Jews, Judaism or Jewish interests. Blacks may struggle with Jews over local political power or they may bridle at our opposition to the use of quotas in affirmative action; Catholics may take offense at most Jews' pro-choice stand on the abortion issue; fundamentalists may envision a "Christian" America; Arab-Americans or foreign policy elites may seek to limit U. S. support for Israel; and journalists indeed may hold Israel to higher standards than other countries. All of these actions represent serious differences with Jews and some constitute grave threats to legitimate Jewish interests. But none are evidence of anti-Semitism, even though many of us see them as such.

Second, we tend to get very excited by the expression of anti-Semitic sentiments, whatever their source. The truth is not all anti-Semitism is equally dangerous. Attitudes expressed verbally are far less threatening than behavior expressed institutionally; and anti-Semitism among political outsiders is far less worrisome than the same views if held by elites. Fortunately, American anti-Semitism is largely confined to the political periphery rather than the institutional center.

Third, anti-Semitic stereotypes and sentiments are far more widespread than anti-Semitic behavior. The fabulous success of American Jews in education, business, politics and culture is itself testimony to the very limited real impact of anti-Semitism on the life chances of American Jews. Jews comprise over a third of the billionaires in this country, over a quarter of the multi-millionaires, and between a third and a half of the elite professionals in law, in journalism, in medicine, and in academia. The point is that biased attitudes do not always translate into discriminatory behavior.

The limited extent of American anti-Semitism becomes readily apparent when we compare our situation against any reasonable standard, be it Jews in most other diaspora countries today, or Jews in America years ago, or almost any other American ethnic group in America with roots outside European Christendom. To elaborate, today's Jews in France, England and even Canada—to say nothing of the Soviet Union—have far more to be anxious about than we do. Or we can reflect back on the American situation just twenty or thirty years ago—when universities, law firms, hospitals, and industrial corporations widely discriminated against Jews. Every social scientific study in the last decade has documented a retreat from earlier, higher

levels of anti-Semitic prejudice and discrimination. Try as we might, we simply cannot find anti-Semitism when and where we expect it—not during the Arab oil embargo nor among hard-pressed Midwestern farmers.

### Over-reaction Among Jews

While Jews regularly regard every anti-Semitic incident as the possible harbinger of pogroms, concentration camps or worse, other American ethnic groups regularly take some very odious forms of discrimination in stride. To take just one example, the revelation not long ago that physicians undertake less effective forms of intervention for black patients than for whites, even when controlling for social class, provoked only a mild outcry. Imagine our reaction were we to learn that Jewish patients die more than others because doctors were subtly discriminating against the Children of Israel.

Exaggerating the anti-Semitic threat impels us to deploy our scarce personnel and financial resources in treating the wrong illness. We have far graver threats to Jewish security and interest than those posed by anti-Semites. In my view, the three most important public policy concerns facing American Jewry are as follows:

- 1) The declining image of Israel. Israel was once widely seen as moral, peace-loving, democratic, efficient, and vulnerable. Certainly, those images have deteriorated with potentially adverse consequences for support for Israel in terms of economic aid, military aid, diplomatic support, private investment, and philanthropic assistance from American Jews.
- 2) Declining support for the immigration of Soviet Jews.
- 3) Declining support for Jewish social services, particularly care for the elderly. As reimbursement rates for hospitals and nursing homes deteriorate so does the quality of care for thousands of Jewish sick and elderly.

To these I would add a fourth concern, that of maintaining in Jews' minds the idea that America is hospitable to divergent religious and ethnic cultures. The sense among Jews that American society tolerates diversity has been critical to Jewish cultural vitality over the last two decades. The reality and the perception of a tolerant America helps foster the self-confidence necessary for Jews to openly and proudly identify as such. The mistaken belief that anti-Semitism is widespread and rampant can only serve to dampen Jews' enthusiasm for overt expression of Jewish commitment.

Now it turns out that institutional behavior in the first three areas—support for Israel, support for So-

viet Jewish emigration, and support for social services—has very little to do with anti-Semitism. I may even point out that in the general population, opposition to (or support for) Israel bears little statistical correlation with anti-Semitic (or philo-Semitic) sentiments. In other words, a good number of anti-Semites support U. S. aid to Israel, and many opponents of such aid happen to think very highly of American Jews.

Another adverse consequence of the exaggerated fear of American anti-Semitism is found in the distorted way in which we look out upon the world. The over-emphasis on anti-Semitism inevitably closes us off from working on imaginative ways of winning friends and influencing people.

### We Must Work with Others

To elaborate, the conventional perspective I am criticizing contains a critical sub-text. It suggests

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that Gentiles who act in behalf of Jewish interests must be doing so because they like Jews or admire Judaism, while those who oppose our interests must be doing so because they dislike Jews or disdain Judaism. If this is what we think of our allies and adversaries, then we miss some very useful opportunities to strengthen our alliances or to blunt the attack of our adversaries. Seeing the world as divided into philo-Semites or anti-Semites not only insults the morality and intelligence of Gentiles; it limits our ability to manipulate the larger environment. When we cease looking for the political principles and interests that unite us with others, we cease working on building coalitions with those who may share a common interest with us in increased foreign aid, or in open immigration, or in high quality social services, or in a tolerant, multi-cultural society.

Black leaders, for example, may differ with us on Israel and affirmative action, but we share with them an interest in higher social spending. Arab-Americans may now see attacking U. S. aid to Israel as a way of promoting respect for Palestinian rights, but we share with them an objective interest in promoting U. S. aid to all parties in the region, Israeli, Egyptian, Palestinian, or otherwise. Catholic Church leaders may take offense at our pro-choice stand, but we also share with them an interest in support for sectarian social services and for a society that encourages the free exercise of religion. And with all these diverse groups we share a common interest in a tolerant society that condemns bigotry in all its forms.

American Jews' widespread perception of anti-Semitism predisposes us to mistakenly assume that any opponent of our interests, in any context, must harbor anti-Semitic sentiments. Since we are so frightened of and so deeply outraged by the merest whiff of anti-Semitism, we increasingly exclude those who are our adversaries in one context from serving as our coalition partners in another arena.

It is here that I want to make my most controversial point. My sense is that we are far too ready to publicly brand anti-Semites as anti-Semitic and to refrain from dealing with them at all costs. Not all anti-Semites are equally dangerous, not all are anti-Semitic in all situations. President Nixon's personal anti-Semitism did not prevent him from supporting Israel militarily or from authorizing Secretary Kissinger to negotiate the disengagement agreements. Reverend Jesse Jackson's anti-Semitism did not inhibit him from confronting President Gorbachev over the issue of Soviet Jewish emigration. Theodor Herzl was only the first of many Zionist leaders who recognized the value of dealing with all Gentiles with power, be they friendly to Jews or dyed-in-the-wool anti-Semites.

In short, I suppose I am saying that even if American anti-Semitism were as widespread and dangerous as many claim, I also am critical of our tendency to refuse to speak with suspected or actual anti-Semites. Our ancestors had no choice but to negotiate with anti-Semites, so long as they held power over Jewish lives and livelihood. We cannot afford the principled luxury of refusing contact with our most dangerous adversaries, be they anti-Semitic or not. We need to always bear in mind that today's paramount Jewish interests remain the security of Israel, freedom for Soviet Jews, support for Jewish social services, and a tolerant America. These are the most vital concerns of American Jews today, and, fortunately, anti-Semites play only a small role in these areas in frustrating the achievement of our policy goals. □

## Jewry up against the wall

Alan J. Yuter

The prayer demonstrations at the Western Wall (*Sh'ma* 19/375) have achieved much notoriety and attention in the press, making Jews look unduly contentious and parochial. At a time when Israel does not look attractive with its handling of the *intifada*, the incidents at the Wall only make Jewry look silly at best, and uncivil at worst.

Throwing stones and calling names is behavior unbecoming pious Jews. Maimonides teaches that a scholar's behavior must be "nice and proper." The behavior of the *talmid haham*, or student of the wise, must serve as a moral and educational model for others. If the women's service at the Wall really troubled local pietists, other avenues of protest should have been explored, if only to shed light and credit upon those who were protesting. By protesting the feminist demonstrators in a violent and undignified fashion, the pietists of the Wall betrayed the Torah they claim to support, because they diminished the honor of Torah in the eyes of bystanders.

The Orthodox feminist women who took part in the liturgical demonstration claim that their liturgy is in conformity with Jewish law. While this claim is debated within their larger Orthodox community, we might still concede that while their service may be *halachically* justified, the wisdom of their demonstration could be questioned. First, they joined hands with ideological egalitarians who do not believe or practice the way they do. Their allies were tactical rather than ideological, thereby diminishing the moral force of their protest. Further, Jewish law

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