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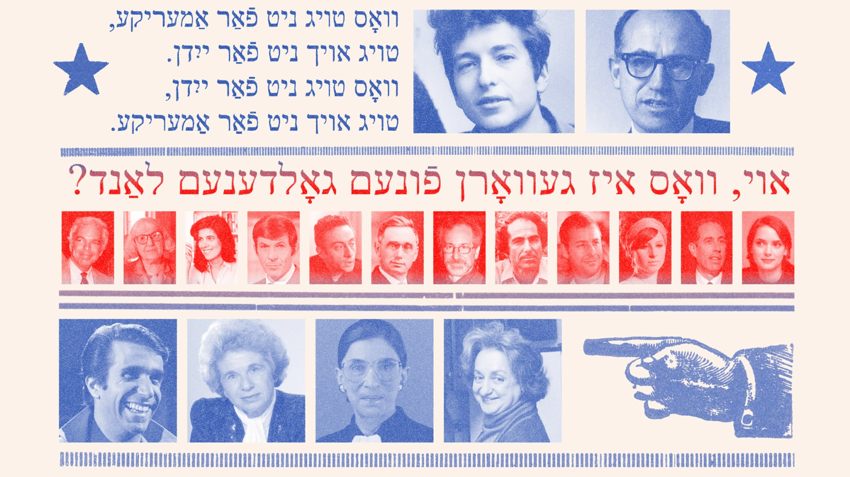
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The Atlantic*

IDEAS

THE GOLDEN AGE OF AMERICAN JEWS IS ENDING

Anti-Semitism on the right and the left threatens to bring to a close an unprecedented period of safety and prosperity for Jewish Americans—and demolish the liberal order they helped establish.

By Franklin Foer

MARCH 4, 2024

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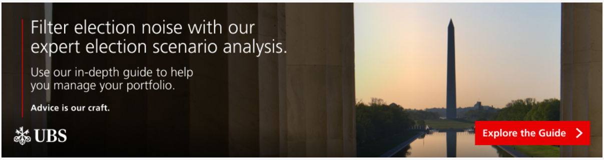
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1

STACEY ZOLT HARA was in her office in downtown San Francisco when a text from her 16-year-old daughter arrived: “I’m scared,” she wrote. Her classmates at Berkeley High School were preparing to leave their desks and file into the halls, part of a planned “walkout” to protest Israel. Like many Jewish students, she didn’t want to participate. It was October 18, 11 days after the Hamas invasion of southern Israel.

Zolt Hara told her daughter to wait in her classroom. She was trying to project calm. A public-relations executive, Zolt Hara had moved her family from Chicago to Berkeley six years earlier, hoping to find a community that shared her progressive values. Her family had developed a deep sense of belonging there.

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But a moral fervor was sweeping over Berkeley High that morning. Around 10:30, the walkout began. Jewish parents traded panicked reports from their children. Zolt Hara heard that kids were chanting, “From the river to the sea, Palestine will be free,” a slogan that suggests the elimination of Israel. Rumors spread about other, less coy phrases shouted in the hallways, carrying intimations of violence. Jewish students were said to be in tears. Parents were texting one another ideas about where in the school their children could hide. Zolt Hara placed a call to the dean of students. By her own admission, she was hysterical. She says the dean hung up on her.

By the early afternoon the walkout was over, but Zolt Hara and other Jewish parents worried that it was a prelude to something worse. They joined Google Groups and WhatsApp chains so they could share information. Zolt Hara organized a petition, pleading with the school district to take anti-Semitism more seriously. It quickly received more than 1,300 signatures.

Most worrying was what parents kept hearing about teachers, both in Berkeley and in the surrounding school districts. They seemed to be using their classrooms to mold students into advocates for a maximalist vision of Palestine. A group of activists within the Oakland Education Association, that city’s teachers’ union, sponsored a “teach-in.” A video trumpeting the event urged: “Apply your labor power to show solidarity with the Palestinian people.” An estimated 70 teachers set aside their normal curriculum to fix students' attention on Gaza.

Even classes with no discernible connection to international affairs joined the teach-in. Its centerpiece was a webinar titled "From Gaza to Oakland: How Does the Issue Connect to Us?," in which local activists implored the kids to join them on the streets. They told the students—in a predominantly Black and Latino school district—that the Israeli military works hand in glove with American police forces, sharing tips and tactics. "Repression there ends up cycling back to repression here," an activist named Anton explained. Elementary-school teachers, whose students were too young for the webinar, were given a list of books to use in their classes. One of them, *Handala's Return*, described how a "group of bullies called Zionists wanted our land so they stole it by force and hurt many people."

The same zeal was gripping schools in Berkeley. Zolt Hara learned from another parent about an ethnic-studies class in which the teacher had described the slaughter of some Israelis on October 7 as the result of friendly fire. She saw a disturbing image that another teacher had presented in an art class, of a fist breaking through a Star of David. (Officials at Berkeley High School did not respond to requests for comment.) In her son's middle school, there were signs on classroom walls that read TEACH PALESTINE.

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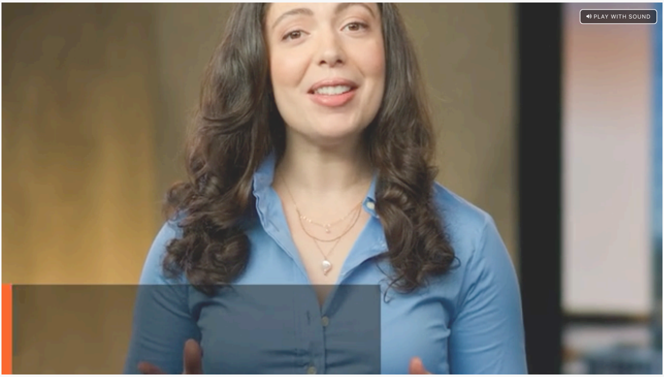
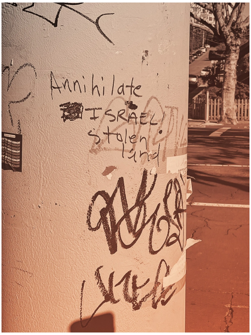


Zolt Hara didn't need to imagine how kids might respond to these lessons. She heard about incidents at her children's schools. One kid walked up to a Jewish student playing what he called a "Nazi salute song" on his phone. Another said something in German and then added, "I don't like your people." A Manichaean view of the conflict even filtered down to the lowest grades in Berkeley. According to one parent complaint to the principal of Washington Elementary School, a second grader suggested that students divide into Israeli and Palestinian "teams," and another announced that Palestinians couldn't be friends with Jews.

On November 17, the middle school that Zolt Hara's son attends staged its own walkout. Zolt Hara was relieved that her son was traveling for a family event that day. But she heard about video of the protest, recorded on a parent's phone. I tracked down the footage and watched it myself. "Are you Jewish?" one mop-haired tween asks another, seemingly unaware of any adult presence. “No way,” the second kid replies. “I fucking hate them.” Another blurts, “Kill Israel.” A student laughingly attempts to start a chant of “KKK.”



Graffiti in Oakland, January 2024 (Franklin Foer)

On a damp morning this winter, I joined about 40 kids assembled in a classroom at a public high school in the East Bay for a meeting of the Jewish Student Union. I promised that I wouldn’t identify their school in the hopes that they might speak freely, without fear of retribution from teachers or peers. The first boy to raise his hand proudly announced that he supported a cease-fire. But as the conversation progressed, students began to recall how painful their school’s walkout had felt. Their classmates had left them alone with teachers, who they suspected would think less of them for having stayed put. At every stop in their education in this progressive community, they had learned about a world divided between oppressors and the oppressed—and now they felt that they were being accused of being the bad guys, despite having nothing to do with events on the other side of the world, and despite the fact that Hamas had initiated the current war by invading Israeli communities and murdering an estimated 1,200 people.

At the end of the session a student in a kippah, puffer jacket, and T-shirt pulled me aside. He said he wanted to speak privately, because he didn’t want to risk crying in front of his peers. After October 7, he said, his school life, as a visibly identifiable Jew, had become unbearable. Walking down the halls, kids would shout “Free Palestine” at him. They would make the sound of explosions, as if he were personally responsible for the bombardment of Gaza. They would tell him to pick up pennies. As he was walking into the gym to use one of its courts, a kid told him, “There goes the Jew, taking everyone’s land.” I asked if he’d ever told any of this to an administrator. “Nothing would change,” he said. Based on how other local authorities had responded to anti-Semitism, I didn’t doubt him.

2

LIKE MANY AMERICAN JEWS, I once considered anti-Semitism a threat largely emanating from the right. It was Donald Trump who attracted the allegiance of white supremacists and freely borrowed their tropes. A closing ad of his 2016 presidential campaign flashed images of prominent Jews—Lloyd Blankfein, Janet Yellen, and George Soros—as it decried global special interests bleeding the people dry.

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Trump’s victory inspired anti-Semitic hate groups, long consigned to the shadows, to strut with impunity. Less than two weeks after Trump’s election, the white nationalist Richard Spencer came to Washington, D.C., and proclaimed, “Hail Trump! Hail our people!” as supporters responded with Nazi salutes. In August 2017, angry men carried tiki torches through Charlottesville, Virginia, chanting, “Jews will not replace us.” In 2018, the consequences of violent anti-Semitic rhetoric became tangible: At the Tree of Life synagogue in Pittsburgh, Pennsylvania, 11 people were fatally shot. The following year, on the last day of Passover, at a synagogue in a San Diego suburb, a gunman killed one and wounded three others, including a rabbi.

After each incident, my anxiety about the safety of my own family and synagogue would spike, but I consoled myself with the thought that once Trump disappeared from the scene, the explosion of Jew hatred would recede. America would revert to its essential self: the most comfortable homeland in the Jewish diaspora.

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That reassuring thought required downplaying the anti-Semitism that had begun to appear on the left well before October 7—on college campuses, among progressive activists, even on the fringes of the Democratic Party. It required minimizing Representative Ilhan Omar's insinuation about Jewish control of politics—"It's all about the Benjamins baby"—as an ignorant gaffe. And it meant dismissing intense outbreaks of anti-Zionist harassment by pro-Palestinian demonstrators, which coincided with tensions in the Middle East, as a passing storm.

Part of the reason I failed to appreciate the extent of the anti-Semitism on the left is that I assumed its criticisms of the Israeli government were, at bottom, a harsher version of my own. I opposed the proliferation of settlements in the West Bank, the callousness that military occupation required, and the religious zealotry that had begun to infuse the country's right wing, including its current ruling coalition.

In October 2018, a gunman killed 11 people and wounded six at the Tree of Life synagogue in Pittsburgh, Pennsylvania. (Brendan Smialowski / AFP/ Getty)

Such criticisms were not those of a dissident—the majority of American Jews share them. The Palestinian leadership has a long record of abject obstructionism, historical denialism, and violent irredentism, but American Jews heap blame on recalcitrant right-wing Israeli governments, too. Polling by the Pew Research Center in 2020 found that only one in three American Jews said they felt that the Israeli government was "sincere" in its pursuit of peace. But whatever criticism American Jews leveled against Israel, the anger was born of love. Eight in 10 described Israel as either "essential" or "important" to their Jewish identity. And they still held out hope for peace. In that same poll, 63 percent of American Jews said they considered a two-state solution plausible. Jews were, in fact, more likely than the overall U.S. population to believe in the possibility of peaceful coexistence with an independent Palestine.

Among the brutal epiphanies of October 7 was this: A disconcertingly large number of Israel's critics on the left did not share that vision of peaceful coexistence, or believe Jews had a right to a nation of their own. After Hamas's rampage of rape, kidnapping, and murder, a history professor at Cornell named Russell Rickford said Palestinians were understandably "exhilarated by this challenge to the monopoly of violence." He added, "I was exhilarated." A student at the same university was arrested and charged with posting online threats about slitting the throats of Jewish males and strafing the kosher dining hall with gunfire. In Philadelphia, a mob descended on a falafel restaurant, chanting about the Israeli American co-owner's complicity in genocide. Over the three-month period following the Hamas attacks, the Anti-Defamation League recorded 56 episodes of physical violence targeting Jews and 1,347 incidents of harassment. That 13-week span contained more anti-Semitic incidents than the entirety of 2021—at the time the worst year since the ADL had begun keeping count, in 1979.

I don't want to dismiss the anger that the left feels about the terrible human cost of the Israeli counterinvasion of Gaza, or denounce criticism of Israel as inherently anti-Semitic—especially because I share some of those criticisms. Nor do I believe that *anti-Zionist* is a term that should be considered axiomatically interchangeable with *anti-Semite*. The elimination of Israel, in my opinion, would be a profound catastrophe for the Jewish people. But I have read idealistic critics of Israel, such as the late historian Tony Judt, who imagined that it could be replaced by a binational state, where Jews and Palestinians live side by side under one democratic government. That strikes me as naive in the extreme—especially after the Hamas pogrom of October 7—and very likely the end of Jewish existence in the Levant. But not everything that is terrible for the Jews is anti-Semitic.

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Anti-Semitism is a mental habit, deeply embedded in Christian and Muslim thinking, stretching back at least as far as the accusation that the Jews murdered the son of God. It's a tendency to fixate on Jews, to place them at the center of the narrative, overstating their role in society and describing them as the root cause of any unwanted phenomena—a centrality that seems strange, given that Jews constitute about 0.2 percent of the global population. Though it shape-shifts over time, anti-Semitism returns to the same essential complaint: that Jews are cunning, bloodthirsty, and mad for power. Anti-Zionism often takes a similar form: the dehumanization, the unilateral casting of blame, and the fetishizing of Jewish villainy.

Liberal Jews once celebrated Israel as the lone democracy in a distinctly undemocratic region. Prime Minister Benjamin Netanyahu's coalition of theocrats and messianists seems bent on shredding the basis for that claim. But many governments in the world share these undesirable traits. Still, no one calls for the eradication of Hungary or El Salvador or India. No one defaces Chinese restaurants in San Francisco because Beijing imprisons Uyghurs in concentration camps and occupies Tibet.

The anti-Zionism that has flourished on the left in recent years doesn't stop with calls for an end to the occupation of the West Bank. It espouses a blithe desire to eliminate the world's only Jewish-majority nation, valorizes the homicidal campaign against its existence, and seeks to hold members of the Jewish diaspora to account for the sins of a country they don't live in and for a government they didn't elect. In so doing, this faction of the left places itself in the terrible lineage of attempts to erase Jewry—and, in turn, stirs ancient and not-so-ancient existential fears.

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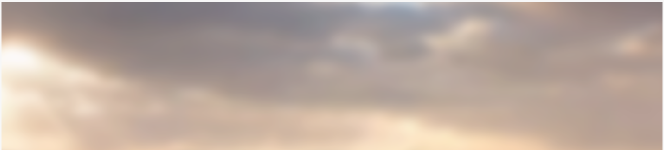

Nowhere is this more fully on display than in the Bay Area. After October 7, protesters flooded city-council meetings, demanding cease-fire resolutions and rejecting any attempt to include clauses condemning Hamas for the rape and murder of Jews. One viral video compiled enraged citizen comments at an Oakland city-council meeting. These citizens weren't just showing solidarity for the people of Gaza, but angrily amplifying wild conspiracy theories. One woman declared, in the style of a 9/11 truther, that "Israel murdered their own people on October 7." Another, in the manner of a Holocaust denier, described the events of that day as a "fabricated narrative."

For months, the Berkeley city council resisted the pressure to pass a cease-fire resolution; the mayor regarded foreign policy as far beyond its jurisdiction. But the pressure grew so intense that the council could hardly conduct any other business. Protesters disrupted official meetings, forcing the mayor to keep adjourning deliberations to another room where the public was not allowed. Police offered to escort council members to their cars after meetings. The mayor's unwillingness to condemn Israel was anomalous, even in his own city. On December 4, the Berkeley Rent Stabilization Board voted to endorse a cease-fire.

Impassioned support for the Palestinian cause metastasized into the hatred of Jews. Anti-Semitism has become part of the landscape. In 2021, a community space in San Francisco's Mission neighborhood, owned by a progressive gay Jewish activist, was defaced with messages including ZIONIST PIGZ. After October 7, the windows of Smitten Ice Cream, owned by a Jewish woman, were smashed and spray-painted with the words OUT THE MISSION.

In December 2023, a large menorah on public display in Oakland, California, was destroyed. (Jane Tyska / Digital First Media / *East Bay Times* / Getty)

During Hanukkah, a menorah sponsored by Chabad Oakland and perched on the shore of Lake Merritt, in the center of the city, was torn apart by its branches and hurled into the water, replaced by graffiti reading YOUR ORG IS DYING, WE'RE GONNA FIND YOU, YOU'RE ON FUCKING ALERT. Oakland Public Works quickly painted over the message and other anti-Semitic graffiti. But when I walked the trail around the lake several weeks after Hanukkah, I found a weathered metal box, built to display a work of public art. On its side was a laminated message titled "The World We Wish to See." What followed was a lyrical vision of liberation that imagined a future in which "all beings are treated with dignity." But whatever display had once existed in the box had been removed. What was left were the etched words ZIONIST KILLER.

In the hatred that I witnessed in the Bay Area, and that has been evident on college campuses and in progressive activist circles nationwide, I've come to see left-wing anti-Semitism as characterized by many of the same violent delusions as the right-wing strain. This is not an accident of history. Though right- and left-wing anti-Semitism may have emerged in different ways, for different reasons, both are essentially attacks on an ideal that once dominated American politics, an ideal that American Jews championed and, in an important sense, co-authored. Over the course of the 20th century, Jews invested their faith in a distinct strain of liberalism that combined robust civil liberties, the protection of minority rights, and an ethos of cultural pluralism. They embraced this brand of liberalism because it was good for America—and good for the Jews. It was their fervent hope that liberalism would inoculate America against the world's oldest hatred.

For several generations, it worked. Liberalism helped unleash a Golden Age of American Jewry, an unprecedented period of safety, prosperity, and political influence. Jews, who had once been excluded from the American establishment, became full-fledged members of it. And remarkably, they achieved power by and large without having to abandon their identity. In faculty lounges and television writers' rooms, in small magazines and big publishing houses, they infused the wider culture with that identity. Their anxieties became American anxieties. Their dreams became American dreams.

But that era is drawing to a close. America's ascendant political movements—MAGA on one side, the illiberal left on the other—would demolish the last pillars of the consensus that Jews helped establish. They regard concepts such as tolerance, fairness, meritocracy, and cosmopolitanism as pernicious shams. The Golden Age of American Jewry has given way to a golden age of conspiracy, reckless hyperbole, and political violence, all tendencies inimical to the democratic temperament. Extremist thought and mob behavior have never been good for Jews. And what's bad for Jews, it can be argued, is bad for America.

3

I GREW UP at the apex of the Golden Age. The nation's sartorial aesthetic was the invention of Ralph Lifshitz, an alumnus of the Manhattan Talmudical Academy before he became the denim-clad Ralph Lauren. The national authority on sex was a diminutive bubbe, Dr. Ruth. Schoolkids in Indiana read Anne Frank's diary. The Holocaust memoirist Elie Wiesel appeared on the nightly news as an arbiter of public morality. The most-watched television show was *Seinfeld*. Even Gentiles knew the words to Adam Sandler's "The Chanukah Song," which earned a place in the canon of festive music annually played on FM radio. Jews accounted for roughly 2 percent of the nation's population at the time, but I'd estimate that my undergraduate class at Columbia University was one-third Jewish; soon, a third of the justices on the Supreme Court would be Jewish as well. In 2000, Joe Lieberman, a Shabbat-observant Jew with a wife named Hadassah, fell 537 votes short of becoming vice president. None of these occurrences sparked a backlash worthy of note.

Jerry Seinfeld and Jason Alexander film the *Seinfeld* pilot, 1989. (NBCU Photo Bank / NBCUniversal / Getty)

By the mid-'90s, experts had declared the end of anti-Semitism. It persisted, of course, in the dark corners of American political culture—in the wacky cosmology of the Nation of Islam and in the malevolent rantings of David Duke, the ubiquitous ex-Klansman—but that proved the point. The only Jew haters to be found were hopelessly fringe; anti-Semitism disappeared from polite conversation. Leonard Dinnerstein, a historian who devoted his life's work to studying anti-Semitism, concluded his magnum opus, published in 1994, with the admission that his scholarly obsession was becoming a relic: "It has declined in potency and will continue to do so for the foreseeable future."

That last sentence was an expression of triumphalism, rendered in the spirit of the times. Like the end of history, the end of anti-Semitism was a post–Cold War reverie, a naive declaration of a golden age without end. American Jews now worried that they might become *too* accepted. The great anxiety of the fin de siècle was intermarriage.

The threat of assimilation had frightened the Orthodox Jews who came to the United States during the great wave of immigration in the last decades of the 19th century. Fathers who had fled the Pale of Settlement feared that their sons would trade ancestral traditions for the allure of American culture. (A quite popular, very American musical is energized by these anxieties.) One of those sons, however, made it his intellectual project to find a way for Jews to enjoy the bounties of American society without having to fully abandon their Jewishness.

Born in Silesia in 1882, the eldest of eight, Horace Kallen had a preordained calling: to become a rabbi like his father. But a Boston truant officer forced him, against his parents' wishes, to attend a secular grammar school. This set him on the path to Harvard, where he paid his way by reading meters for the Dorchester Gaslight Company. Kallen never felt at ease with patrician classmates like Franklin D. Roosevelt, though the philosopher William James embraced him as a protégé.

Kallen's breakthrough came in the course of an argument with another Jew. In 1908, the British-born playwright Israel Zangwill had a hit called *The Melting-Pot*, a melodrama about a pogrom survivor who sets out to marry a Christian woman in the hopes that he will no longer be haunted by his identity. This vision of assimilation was a warmed-over version of the devil's bargain that Western Europeans had offered Jews ever since Napoleon: In exchange for the rights of citizenship, Jews would have to give up their distinctive identity.

Yair Rosenberg: How to be anti-Semitic and get away with it

Kallen didn't want to surrender his identity. He wasn't religious, but he had read Spinoza and devoured the works of the early Zionist thinkers. At Harvard, he co-founded the Menorah Society, a Jewish affinity group. His rebuttal to Zangwill took the form of unabashed patriotism. In essays that were intellectual bombshells at the time, Kallen extolled the mongrel nature of American society, the phenomenon known as hyphenation. Harvard's Brahmin elite believed that newcomers must assimilate in full, commit to what they called "100 percent Americanism." But to Kallen, the hyphen was the essence of democracy. He described America as a "symphony of civilization," an intermingling of cultures that resulted in a society far more dynamic than most of the countries back in the Old World. The genius of America was that it didn't coerce any minority group into abandoning its marks of difference.

That argument was idealistic, though also self-interested. Kallen's polemics implicitly targeted the Protestant monopoly controlling academia, politics, and every other corner of the establishment, which reverted to desperate measures to block the ascent of Jews, imposing quotas at universities and restrictive housing covenants in well-to-do neighborhoods. His ideas were emblematic of an emerging strain of Jewish political philosophy, a set of arguments that would define American Jewry for generations.

Horace Kallen, who encouraged American Jews to embrace their adopted country without sacrificing their Jewish identity (Courtesy of the Jacob Rader Marcus Center of the American Jewish Archives, Cincinnati, Ohio)

The sons and daughters of immigrants may have dabbled in socialism, but in the 1930s and '40s, liberalism became the house politics of the Jewish people. Walter Lippmann, a descendant of German Jews, first used the term *liberal* in the American context, to describe a new center-left vision of the state that was neither socialist nor laissez-faire. Louis Brandeis, the first Jewish justice on the Supreme Court, conceptualized a new, expansive vision of civil liberties. Lillian Wald and Henry Moskowitz co-founded the National Association for the Advancement of Colored People, in the belief that all minorities deserved the same protections. Jews became enthusiastic supporters of the New Deal, which staved off radical movements on the left and the right that tended to hunt for Jewish scapegoats. As a Yiddish joke went, Jewish theology consisted of *die velt* ("this world"), *yene velt* ("the world to come"), and Roosevelt.

The historian Marc Dollinger titled his 2000 narrative of Jewish liberalism *Quest for Inclusion*. Jews set out to achieve that goal procedurally—opposing prayer in public school, knocking down discriminatory housing laws, establishing new fair-employment rules. But it was also a project of mythmaking and dream-casting. Widely read mid-century intellectuals such as Louis Hartz, Daniel Boorstin, and Max Lerner wrote books reimagining America as the home of a benevolent centrism—tolerant, cosmopolitan, unique in the history of nations.

Reality began to resemble the myth: In the years following World War II—and especially as the world began to comprehend the extent of the Nazi genocide—a liberal consensus took hold, and anti-Semitism receded. After Auschwitz, even three-martini Jewish jokes at the country club felt tinged by the horrors. In 1937, the American edition of *Roget's Thesaurus* had listed *cunning*, *rich*, *extortioner*, and *heretic* as synonyms for *Jew*. At that time, nearly half of Americans said Jews were less honest in business than others. By 1964, only 28 percent agreed with that assessment. It became cliché to refer to America as a "Judeo-Christian nation." Quotas at universities fell to the side.

As anti-Semitism faded, American Jewish civilization exploded in a rush of creativity. For a time, the great Jewish novel—books by Saul Bellow, Philip Roth, Norman Mailer, Joseph Heller, and Bernard Malamud, inflected with Yiddish and references to pickled herring—was the great American novel. Under the influence of Lenny Bruce, Sid Caesar, Mel Brooks, Elaine May, Gilda Radner, Woody Allen, and many others, American comedy appropriated the Jewish joke, and the ironic sensibility contained within, as its own.

During the Golden Age, Jews created new genres of Americana, and in turn remade America's image of itself, through the idealized vision of the heartland found in Rodgers and Hammerstein's *Oklahoma!*; the folk revival popularized by Bob Dylan, Art Garfunkel, and Paul Simon; the movies mythologizing the decency of the American Everyman produced by David O. Selznick, Louis B. Mayer, and Jack Warner. (To say that "the Jews" run Hollywood is conspiratorial; to say that Jews founded it is factual.) Only in America could Jews—Irving Berlin, George Wyle, Sammy Cahn—write the Christmas songbook.

It wasn't just mass culture. The New York Intellectuals, a group with a name as euphemistic as it sounds, acquired a priestly authority in the realm of aesthetics and political ideas, and included the likes of Alfred Kazin, Clement Greenberg, Irving Howe, and Susan Sontag. Betty Friedan, Bella Abzug, and Ruth Bader Ginsburg ushered second-wave feminism into the world. Jews became the prophetic face of American science (J. Robert Oppenheimer) and the salvific one of American medicine (Jonas Salk). The intellectual rewards of Jewish liberation could be measured in medals: Approximately 15 percent of all Nobel Prize winners are American Jews.

In the Golden Age, Jews in America embraced Israel. Enjoying their political and cultural ascendance, they looked to the new Jewish state not as a necessary refuge—they were more than comfortable on the Upper West Side and in Squirrel Hill and Brentwood—but as a powerful rebuttal to the old stereotypes about Jewish weakness, especially after the Israeli military's victory in the Six-Day War of 1967. As *The New York Times*' Thomas Friedman has put it, American Jews "said to themselves, 'My God, look who we are! We have power! We do not fit the Shylock image, we are ace pilots; we are not the cowering timid Jews who get sand kicked in their faces, we are tank commanders.'"

A now-obscure cultural event captures, for me, this newfound sense of self and self-confidence. In 1978, ABC aired *The Stars Salute Israel at 30*, a kitschy prime-time variety show filmed in front of a full house at the Dorothy Chandler Pavilion, in Los Angeles, the same venue that hosted the Oscars. Like the Oscars, it featured an A-list slate: Barry Manilow in a white suit, surrounded by backup singers in sequins; Henry Winkler, the Fonz himself, playing a rough-hewn Israeli in a sketch; and, of course, Sammy Davis Jr. Near the conclusion, Barbra Streisand emerged in a white gown to talk via remote hookup with Golda Meir as a camera filmed the former prime minister in a book-filled room in Israel—the two most celebrated Jewish women of the century kibitzing on American TV.

Barbra Streisand performs during *The Stars Salute Israel at 30* in 1978. (Wally Fong / AP)

In the early decades of Hollywood, Jewish stars had hidden behind stage names—Emanuel Goldenberg performed as Edward G. Robinson; Issur Danielovitch transformed himself into Kirk Douglas. Streisand had also changed her name, dropping the *a* from Barbara, but that was an instance of a diva's bravado, not a sop to the goyim. What made her stardom so emblematic of the Golden Age was that she never allowed herself to be bullied into suppressing her Jewish identity. Her crowning achievement was *Yentl*, an adaptation of an Isaac Bashevis Singer short story. For the grand finale of the ABC telecast, Streisand sang "Hatikvah," the Israeli national anthem, for 18.7 million viewers. "The good feelings and the love will always remain," she told them.

4

THE JEWISH VACATION from history ended on September 11, 2001. It didn't seem that way at the time. But the terror attacks opened an era of perpetual crisis, which became fertile soil where the hatred of Jews took root. Though Osama bin Laden claimed credit for the plot, that didn't stop some people from trying to shift the blame. One theory explained in exquisitely absurd detail how Mossad, the Israeli intelligence service, had toppled the Twin

Towers.

But there was also a more sophisticated version of this conspiracy theory, one that had a patina of academic respectability. On the left, it became commonplace to fulminate against the neoconservatives, warmongering intellectuals said to be whispering in the ear of the American establishment, urging the invasion of Iraq and war against Iran.

This wasn't fully untethered from reality: The neocons were a group of largely Jewish think-tank denizens and policy operatives, some of whom held top posts in President George W. Bush's administration. But the angry talk about neocons also trafficked in dangerous old tropes. It inflated their role in world events and ascribed the worst motives to them. Men like Paul Wolfowitz, the second-highest-ranking official in Bush's Pentagon, and William Kristol, the editor of *The Weekly Standard*, were portrayed by critics on the left as bamboozlers undermining the national interest in service of their stealth loyalty to Israel. Secretary of Defense Donald Rumsfeld, for one, took exception to the idea that Jews were pulling the strings of the United States government. "I suppose the implication of that is that the president and the vice president and myself and Colin Powell just fell off a turnip truck to take these jobs," he said.

In 2007, Stephen Walt and John Mearsheimer, professors at Harvard and the University of Chicago, respectively, spelled out what others implied in *The Israel Lobby and U.S. Foreign Policy*, a book published by a venerable house, Farrar, Straus and Giroux, that soon arrived on the *New York Times* best-seller list. This was the opposite of the schmaltzy Streisand tribute—the Jewish state as not a friend but a villain surreptitiously manipulating American power to further its own ends.

One year later, Lehman Brothers, a bank founded in 1850 by the son of a Jewish cattle merchant from Bavaria, collapsed. That news was followed by the revelation that Bernie Madoff had masterminded the largest-known Ponzi scheme in history. Although politicians, on the whole, refrained from casting Jews as the primary culprits of the 2008 financial crisis—which was, in fact, systemic—a sizable portion of the public harbored this thought. Stanford University professors conducted a survey that found that nearly a quarter of the country blamed Jews for crashing the global economy. Another 38.4 percent ascribed at least some fault to "the Jews."

In the era of perpetual crisis, a version of this narrative kept recurring: a small elite—sometimes bankers, sometimes lobbyists—maliciously exploiting the people. Such narratives helped propel Occupy Wall Street on the left and the Tea Party on the right. This brand of populist revolt had long been the stuff of Jewish nightmares. A fear of the mob suffused masterworks of the Golden Age—Theodor Adorno's *The Authoritarian Personality*, Hannah Arendt's *The Origins of Totalitarianism*, Richard Hofstadter's *Anti-intellectualism in American Life*. Haunted by the Holocaust and inherited memories of pogroms, these writers warned how a society might fall prey to a demagogue who tapped into prejudice.

After 2008, a version of their prophecy came to pass. The right settled on a Jewish billionaire as their villain of choice: George Soros. An idea took hold, and not just on extremist blogs. The mainstream of the Republican Party seeded the image of Soros as the "shadow puppet master," in the words of the former Fox News host Bill O'Reilly. In elevating the figure of Soros and invoking him so frequently, Fox News and Republican politicians were also, intentionally or not, drawing on the deeply implanted imagery of the Jewish financier bankrolling the destruction of Christian civilization.

In 2018, Fox News began carrying images of migrant caravans headed from Central America toward Texas, a tide of humanity it described as an "invasion." Though they had no evidence to bolster the charge, Republican politicians insinuated that the caravans were paid for by Soros. Representative Matt Gaetz tweeted a video of two men handing out cash to a line of Honduran migrants, accompanied by the question "Soros?" When President Trump was asked about Soros's role in funding a caravan, a week after a pipe bomb was found in Soros's mailbox, and days after the Tree of Life shooting, he told reporters, "I wouldn't be surprised."

Soros was a central character in a new master narrative, much of it adapted from European sources. The spine of the story was borrowed from a French author named Renaud Camus, a socialist turned far-right reactionary who wrote a 2011 book called *The Great Replacement*, warning that elites intended to diminish the white Christian presence in Europe by flooding the continent with migrants. The Jews weren't a central feature of Camus' theory. But when elements of the American right embraced it, they inserted Soros and his fellow Jews as the masterminds of the elite plot. This became the basis for the chant "Jews will not replace us."

Jews were the antagonists of the conspiracy theory because they occupied a special place in the bizarre racial hierarchy of American ethno-nationalism. Eric Ward, an activist who is among the most rigorous students of white supremacy, has put it this way: “At the bedrock of the movement is an explicit claim that Jews are a race of their own, and that their ostensible position as White folks in the U.S. represents the greatest trick the devil ever played.” That is, Jews were able to pass as white people, but they were really stealth agents working for the other side of the race war, using immigration to subvert white Christian hegemony.

This notion planted itself in the mind of Robert Bowers, a loner who lived in a suburb of Pittsburgh. He became obsessed with the work of HIAS, originally the Hebrew Immigrant Aid Society. It was formed in 1902 with the intention of easing the arrival of Jewish refugees fleeing pogroms. The group’s evolution was emblematic of the trajectory of Jewish liberalism. As American Jews settled into a comfortable existence in their new land, HIAS’s mission expanded. It has field offices in more than 20 countries, including a branch on a Greek island to tend to Syrian, Iraqi, and Afghan migrants. On October 19, 2018, the Tree of Life synagogue in Pittsburgh was participating in a National Refugee Shabbat, which was the brainchild of HIAS.

The event stoked Bowers’s rage. “HIAS likes to bring invaders in that kill our people,” he wrote on Gab, the Christian-nationalist social-media site. Just before he entered the synagogue’s sanctuary, armed with three semiautomatic pistols and an AR-15 rifle, he posted, “Open you Eyes! It’s the filthy EVIL jews Bringing the Filthy EVIL Muslims into the Country!!”

A citizenship class conducted by the Hebrew Immigrant Aid Society, 1952 (Bettmann / Getty)

A faith in immigration—the idea of America as a sanctuary for the refugee, the belief that subsequent groups of arrivals would experience the same up-from-the-shtetl trajectory—was a core tenet of Jewish liberalism. A Jewish poet had written the lines about huddled masses inscribed at the base of the Statue of Liberty. If America was a nation of immigrants, that made Jews quintessential Americans. But now this ideal was the basis for Jews' vilification. At the Tree of Life synagogue, it was used to justify their slaughter.

5

IN THE OLD Jewish theory of American politics, the best defense against the anti-Semitism of the right was a united left: minorities and liberal activists locking arms. When I was young, rabbis and elders reverently told us about the earnest young Jews in chunky glasses who had jumped aboard the Freedom Rides; about Rabbi Abraham Joshua Heschel, in his unmissable kippah, marching right next to Martin Luther King Jr.; and about the martyrdom of Andrew Goodman and Michael Schwerner, two Jews who had been murdered alongside James Chaney, a Black Mississippian, for their work registering Black Americans to vote. A coalition of the tolerant pressed the country to live up to its ideals.

Later, I would learn that those memories were a bit gauzy. In the late 1960s, former comrades began to quietly, then brusquely, discard this spirit of common cause. Younger activists in the civil-rights movement took a hard turn toward Black Power and dismissed the old liberal theory of change as a melioristic ruse. Anti-war protesters embraced the decolonization struggles of the developing world. After Israel captured the Gaza Strip and the West Bank in 1967, many came to view the Jewish state as a vile oppressor. (This was well before right-wing Israeli governments saturated the occupied territories with Jewish settlers.) Even as Israel's shocking victory in the Six-Day War, 22 years after the liberation of Auschwitz, filled American Jews with pride and confidence, a meaningful portion of America's left turned on Israel.

The turmoil of the late '60s presaged the rupture that has occurred over the past decade or so. A new ideology has taken hold on the left, with a reordered hierarchy of concerns and an even greater skepticism of the old liberal ideals.

This rupture was propelled by the menace of Donald Trump. His election jolted his opponents to take emergency measures. The left began describing itself as the Resistance, which implied a more confrontational style than that of Nancy Pelosi floor speeches or Center for American Progress white papers.

Even before Trump took office, the Resistance announced a mass protest set to defiantly descend on the capital, what organizers called the Women's March on Washington. In an early planning meeting, at a New York restaurant, an activist named Vanessa Wruble explained that her Judaism was the motivating force in her political engagement. But Wruble's autobiographical statement of intent earned her a rebuke. According to Wruble, two members of the inner circle planning the march told her that Jews needed to confront their own history of exploiting Black and brown people. *Tablet* magazine later reported that Wruble was told that Jews needed to repent for their leading role in the slave trade—a fallacious charge long circulated by the Nation of Islam. (The two organizers denied making the reported statements.) That moment of tension never really subsided, either for Wruble or for the left.

When the march's organizers published their "unity principles," they emphasized the importance of intersectionality, a theory first introduced by the law professor Kimberlé W. Crenshaw. It would be insufficient, she argued, for courts to focus their efforts on one narrow target of discrimination when it takes so many forms—racism, sexism, homophobia—that tend to reinforce one another. Her analysis, incisive in the context of the law, was never intended to guide social movements. Transposed by activists to the gritty work of coalition-building, it became the basis for a new orthodoxy—one that was largely indifferent to Jews, and at times outwardly hostile.

When the Women's March listed the various injustices it hoped to conquer on its way to a better world, anti-Semitism was absent. It was a curious omission, given the central role that Jews played in the conspiracies promoted by the MAGA right, and a telling one. Soon after the march, organizers pushed Wruble out of leadership. She later said that anti-Semitism was the reason for her ouster. (The organizers denied this charge.)

The intersectional left self-consciously rebelled against the liberalism that had animated so much of institutional Judaism, which fought to install civil liberties and civil rights enforced by a disinterested state that would protect every minority equally. This new iteration of the left considered the idea of neutrality—whether objectivity in journalism or color blindness in the courts—as a guise for white supremacy. Tolerance, the old keyword of cultural pluralism, was a form of complicity. What the world actually needed was intolerance, a more active confrontation with hatred. In the historian Ibram X. Kendi's formulation, an individual could choose to be anti-racist or racist, an activist or a collaborator. Or as Linda Sarsour, an activist of Palestinian descent and a co-chair of the Women's March, put it, "We are not here to be bystanders." To be a member of this new left in good moral standing, it was necessary to challenge oppression in all its incarnations. And Israel was now definitively an oppressor.

Martin Luther King Jr. holds the photos of three civil-rights workers murdered by the Ku Klux Klan in Philadelphia, Mississippi, during 1964's Freedom Summer. Two of them—Michael Schwerner and Andrew Goodman—were Jewish. (Bettmann / Getty)

The American left hadn't always imposed such a litmus test. During the years of the Oslo peace process, groups such as Students for Justice in Palestine had no problem attending events with liberal Zionists. Back then, the debate was over the borders of Israel, not over the fact of its existence. But that peace process collapsed during the last days of the Clinton administration, and whatever good faith had existed in that brief era of summits and handshakes dissipated. Hamas unleashed a wave of suicide bombings in the Second Intifada. And in the aftermath of those deadly attacks, successive right-wing Israeli governments presided over repressive policies in the West Bank and an inhumane blockade of Gaza.

Palestinian activists and their allies began the Boycott, Divestment, Sanctions movement, pushing universities to divest from Israel. The new goal was no longer coexistence between Arabs and Jews. It was to turn Israel into an international pariah, to stop working with all Israeli institutions—not just the military, but also symphonies, theater groups, and universities. In that spirit, it became fashionable for critics of Israel to identify as "anti-Zionist."

Within the Jewish establishment, there's a tendency to impute anti-Semitism to anyone who describes themselves that way. That has always struck me as intellectually imprecise and, occasionally, as a rhetorical gambit to close down debate. But there's a reason so many Jews bristle at the thought of anti-Zionism finding a home on the American left: *Zionist* can start to sound like a synonym for *Jew*. Zionists stand accused of the same crimes that anti-Semites have attached to Jews since the birth of Christianity; Jews are portrayed as omnipotent, bloodthirsty baby-killers. Knowing the historical echoes, it's hard not to worry that the anger might fixate on the Jewish target closest at hand—which, indeed, it has.

In 2014, dorms at NYU where religiously observant Jews lived received mock eviction notices—"We reserve the right to destroy all remaining belongings," read the flyer slipped under doors—as if intimidating college kids with unknown politics somehow represented a justifiable reprisal for Israeli-government action in the West Bank. The same notices appeared at Emory University, in Atlanta, in 2019. At the University of Vermont and SUNY New Paltz, groups that helped sexual-assault survivors were accused of purging pro-Israel students from their ranks. "If you don't support Palestinian liberation you don't support survivors," the Vermont group exclaimed. Years before October 7, students at Tufts University, outside Boston, and the University of Southern California moved to impeach elected Jews in student government over their support for Israel's existence. This wasn't normal politics. It was evidence of bigotry.

Among the primary targets of the activists were the Hillel centers present on most college campuses. These centers occasionally coordinate trips to Israel and, on some campuses, sponsor student groups supportive of Israel. Those facts led pro-Palestinian activists to describe Hillel as an arm of the "Israeli war machine." At SUNY Stony Brook, activists sought to expel Hillel from campus, arguing, "If there were Nazis, white nationalists, and KKK members on campus, would their identity have to be accepted and respected?" At Rice University, in Texas, an LGBTQ group severed ties with Hillel because it allegedly made students feel unsafe. What made this incident darkly comic is that Hillel couldn't be more progressive on issues of sexual freedom. What made it so worrying is that Hillel's practical purpose is not to defend Israel, but to provide Shabbat dinners and a space for ritual and prayer. To condemn Hillel is to condemn Jewish religious life on campus.

Gal Beckerman: The left abandoned me

As exclusion of Jews became a more regular occurrence, the leadership of the left, and of universities for that matter, had little to say about the problem. To give the most generous explanation: Jews simply didn't fit the analytic framework of the new left.

At its core, the intersectional left wanted to smash power structures. In the American context, it would be hard to place Jews among the ranks of the oppressed; in the Israeli context, they can be cast as the oppressor. Nazi Germany definitively excluded Jews from a category we now call "whiteness." Today, Jews are treated in sectors of the left as the epitome of whiteness. But any analysis that focuses so relentlessly on the role of privilege, as the left's does, will be dangerously blind to anti-Semitism, because anti-Semitism itself entails an accusation of privilege. It's a theory that regards the Jew as an all-powerful figure in society, a position acquired by underhanded means. In the annals of Jewish history, accusations of privilege are the basis for hate, the kindling for pogroms. But universities too often ignored this lesson from the past. Instead, they acted, as the British comedian David Baddiel put it in the title of his prescient book about progressive anti-Semitism, as if "Jews don't count."

6

IN THE DEATH SPIRAL of liberalism, extremism on the right begets extremism on the left, which begets further extremism on the right. To protest the censoriousness of the new progressives, right-wing edgelords and trolls attempted to seize the mantle of liberty.

The most powerful of the edgelords was Elon Musk, who purchased Twitter ostensibly to save discourse from the woke mob. To make good on his noble aims, he reversed bans that the platform's previous regime had imposed on the most vile anti-Semites, including the white nationalist Patrick Howley, the comic Sam Hyde, and the Daily Stormer's founder, Andrew Anglin. By restoring them to the site, Musk was, in essence, conceding that their words shouldn't have been considered taboo in the first place. He legitimized their claims of victimhood, the sense that they had been excluded only because they'd offended the wrong people.

In fact, Musk hinted that he shared this conspiratorial view of censorship. In May 2023, he retweeted an aphorism that he attributed to Voltaire: "To learn who rules over you, simply find out who you are not allowed to criticize." Those words were actually uttered by a neo-Nazi named Kevin Alfred Strom, not the French philosopher. It shouldn't have been hard to imagine that the words had dubious origins, because they captured a view of the world in which shadowy forces furtively censor their enemies.

Nor was it hard to imagine that those shadowy forces might include the Anti-Defamation League, which relentlessly called attention to the proliferation of Jew hatred on Twitter under Musk's ownership. Musk threatened to sue the group, accusing it of trying to "kill this platform by falsely accusing it & me of being anti-Semitic." The Jews, he all but spelled out, were those who couldn't be criticized—which, by the logic of the Strom quote, made them society's secret masters.

Musk wasn't alone in this argument. In 2022, Dave Chappelle used the opening monologue of *Saturday Night Live* to muse about the cancellation of the hip-hop artist Ye (formerly Kanye West), who had lost a deal with Adidas after he promised, among other things, to go "death con 3 on JEWISH PEOPLE." Chappelle exuded empathy for Ye. "I don't want a sneaker deal, because the minute I say something that makes those people mad, they're going to take my sneakers away … I hope they don't take anything away from me," he said, adding with a smile and a conspiratorial whisper: "Whoever they are." There was no mystery about his use of pronouns: "I've been to Hollywood … It's a lot of Jews. Like, a lot." He went on, "You could maybe adopt the delusion that the Jews run show business."

Dave Chappelle opens *Saturday Night Live*, November 2022. (Will Heath / NBC / Getty)

Chappelle practices shock comedy as a form of shock therapy: The authoritarian impositions of the left justify offensive comments, which are a form of defiance. He has taken a genuine problem—anti-liberalism on the left—and used it as a pretext for smuggling anti-Semitism into acceptable discourse.

That Chappelle and Musk see fit to indulge anti-Semitism in order to protect freedom of speech contains a dark irony. In the 20th century, starting with Louis Brandeis's dissents on the Supreme Court, Jews stood at the vanguard of the movement to protect "subversive advocacy," even when it came at their own expense. This could be understood as a defense of the Talmudic tradition of disagreement, what Rabbi David Wolpe calls the "Jewish sacrament" of debate. The movement culminated in Skokie, Illinois, in 1977, when the ACLU deployed the lawyer David Goldberger to sue to allow neo-Nazis to march through the Chicago suburb, which was filled with Holocaust survivors. The Jewish community was hardly unanimous on the Skokie question—unanimity would have been inconsistent with the tradition—but the ACLU position reflected a commitment to free speech officially espoused by major Jewish communal institutions in the postwar years.

In the Jewish vision of free speech, open interpretation and endless debate mark the path to knowledge; the proliferation of discourse is the antidote to bad ideas. But in the reality of social media, free speech also consists of Jew hatred that masquerades as comic entertainment, a way to capture the attention of young men eager to rebel against the strictures of what they decry as wokeness.

When I asked Oren Segal, who runs the ADL's Center on Extremism, to point me to a state-of-the-art anti-Semitic hate group, he cited the Goyim Defense League. The spitefully silly name reflects its methods, which include pranks and stunts broadcast on its website, Goyim TV. Its leader sometimes dresses as an ultra-Orthodox Jew, calling himself the "Honest Rabbi." In one demented piece of guerrilla theater, he apologizes on behalf of the Jewish people for fabricating stories about the Holocaust. The group has attempted to popularize the slogan "Kanye is right about the Jews," hanging a banner proclaiming it on a freeway overpass in Los Angeles and projecting it on the side of a football stadium in Jacksonville, Florida, as 75,000 fans filed out. GDL hecklers have stood in front of Florida synagogues and Holocaust museums, shouting, "Leave our country. Go back to Israel" and "Heil Hitler."

In a short span, as the edgelords successfully pushed the limits, American culture became permissive regarding what could be said about Jews. Anti-Semitism crept back into the realm of the acceptable.

7

FOR A BRIEF MOMENT, it felt as if the October 7 attacks might reverse the tide, because it should have been impossible not to recoil at the footage of Hamas's pogrom. Israel had yet to launch its counterattack, so there was no war to condemn. Still, even in this moment of moral clarity, the campus left couldn't muster compassion. At Harvard, more than 30 student groups signed a letter on October 7, holding "the Israeli regime entirely responsible for all unfolding violence." Days later, the incoming head of NYU's new Center for Indigenous Studies described the attacks as "affirming." This sympathy for Hamas, when its crimes were freshest, was a glimpse of what was about to come.

On the afternoon of October 11, Rebecca Massel, a reporter at the *Columbia Daily Spectator*, received a tip. She was told that a woman, her face wrapped in a bandanna, had assaulted an Israeli student in front of Butler Library in a dispute over flyers depicting hostages held by Hamas. The woman's alleged weapon was a broomstick. Her battle cry was said to be "Fuck all of you prick crackers." After striking him with the broomstick, the man said, she attempted to punch him in the face. By the end of the fracas, she had bruised one of his hands and sprained a finger on the other.

Massel began to report out the story. She spoke with the victim, who told her, "Now, we have to handle the situation that campus is not a safe place for us anymore." She spoke with the NYPD, which confirmed that it had arrested the woman, who was charged with hate crimes and has pleaded not guilty. Massel and her editors curbed their impulse to quickly score a scoop, double-checking every sentence. They didn't publish the story until 3 a.m. on October 12.

Later that morning, Massel, a sophomore studying political science, was sitting in her Contemporary Civilization seminar when her phone lit up. It was her editor, calling her back. She had texted him to get his sense of the response her article had elicited, so she stepped out of class to hear what he had to say. She had already caught a glimpse of posts on social media, harping on her Jewishness and accusing her of having a "religious agenda." She'd worried that these weren't stray attacks. The editor told her the paper had been inundated. The messages it had received about the article were vitriolic, but he didn't give her any specifics. Before returning to class, she checked her own email. A message read, "I hope you fucking get what you deserve … you racist freak."

Read: The juvenile viciousness of campus anti-Semitism

For as long as she could remember, Massel had wanted to be a journalist. She'd founded the newspaper at her elementary school. During high school, she'd read *She Said*, Jodi Kantor and Megan Twohey's book about investigating Harvey Weinstein's sexual assaults. The *New York Times* reporters insisted that they were journalists, not feminist journalists. Massel vowed to take the same approach. The accusations of bias, therefore, didn't just feel anti-Semitic. They felt like an attack on the integrity that she hoped would define her work.

But anger was an emotion for another day. At that moment, she was overwhelmed by fear. She thought about what the Israeli student had told her the day before. A dean had apparently advised him to leave campus because the university couldn't guarantee his safety. Now Massel felt unsure of her own physical well-being. She decided that she would stay with her parents until she could get a better sense of the fury directed at her.

In her unnerved state, Massel threw herself into her journalism. She decided to interview Jewish students, from all corners of the university, to gauge their mood. After the office of public safety assured her that she could return to campus, she parked herself in the second-floor lounge of Columbia's Hillel center. When she overheard a student mention an incident, she would approach them and ask to talk.

Over the course of two weeks, Massel spoke with 54 students. What she amassed was a tally of fear. Thirteen told her that they had felt harassed or attacked, either virtually or in person. (One passerby had barked "Fuck the Jews" at a small group of students.) Thirty-four reported that they felt targeted or unsafe on campus. (At one precarious moment, the Hillel center went into lockdown, out of concern that protesters might descend on the building.) Twelve said that they had suppressed markers of their Jewish identity, wearing a baseball cap over a yarmulke or tucking a Star of David necklace into a sweatshirt. She learned that a group of students had created a group-chat system to arrange escorts, so that no Jew would have to walk across campus alone if they felt unsafe.

Perhaps even more ominously, Massel uncovered incidents in which teachers expressed hostility toward Jewish students. One Israeli student told Massel that a professor had once said to him, “It’s such a shame that your people survived just in order to perpetuate another genocide.” When I made my own calls to students and faculty, I heard similar stories, especially instances of teaching assistants seizing their bully pulpit to sermonize. One TA wrote to their students, “We are watching genocide unfold in real time, after a systematic 75+ years of oppression of the Palestinian people … It feels ridiculous to hold section today, but I’ll see you all on Zoom in a bit.” One student left class in the middle of a professor’s broadside against Israel in a required course in the Middle East–studies department. Afterward, he sent an email to the professor explaining his departure, to which the professor wrote back, saying they could discuss it in class later. When the student returned, the professor read his email aloud to the whole class, and invited everyone to discuss the exchange. It felt like an act of deliberate humiliation.

When I talked with Jewish students at Columbia, I was struck by how they, too, tended to speak in the language of the intersectional left. They described their “lived experience” and trauma: the pain they felt on October 7 as they learned of the attacks; the fear that consumed them when they heard protesters call for the annihilation of Israel. They sincerely expected their university to respond with unabashed empathy, because that’s how it had responded in the past to other terrible events. Instead, Columbia greeted their pain with the soon-to-be-infamous concept of “context,” including a panel discussion that explained the attacks as the product of a long struggle. This historicizing felt as if it not only discounted Jewish students’ suffering but also regarded it as a moral failing. (In early November, in response to criticism, Columbia announced that it would create a task force on anti-Semitism.)

A Jewish Columbia student watches a pro-Palestine demonstration outside the gates of the university, November 2023. (Andrew Lichtenstein / Corbis / Getty)

There are many reasons for the unusual intensity of events at Columbia, which is located in a city that is a traditional bastion of the American left; its campus is where the late Palestinian American literary critic Edward Said achieved legendary status. But Columbia is also a graphic example of the collapse of the liberalism that had insulated American Jews: It is a microcosm of a society that has lost its capacity to express disagreements without resorting to animus.

The events on campus that followed October 7 were a sad coda to the Golden Age. When I was a student at Columbia, in the '90s, the Ivy League was a primary plot point in a triumphalist tale. During the first half of the 20th century, Columbia had deployed extraordinary institutional energy to limit the presence of Jews. The modern college-application process was invented by Columbia President Nicholas Murray Butler to more effectively weed out Jews. In the late '20s, the university created an ersatz version of itself in Brooklyn, Seth Low Junior College, so that it could educate otherwise qualified Jewish applicants there, rather than having them mingle with the Gentiles in Morningside Heights. But once Columbia lifted its quotas after World War II, the Jewish presence swelled. By 1967, the student body was 40 percent Jewish. The institution that arguably had fought hardest to exclude them became a welcoming home.

But in the 21st century, the Jewish presence in the Ivy League has steadily receded. In the 2000s, Yale was 20 percent Jewish. The proportion is now about half that. The University of Pennsylvania went from being a third Jewish to about 16 percent. The reasons for that plummet aren't nefarious. There has been a deliberate institutional drive to reengineer the elite, to provide opportunities to first-generation college students and students of color. Some Jews have chafed at this reengineering. But the concept of meritocracy that Jews celebrated was far from a pure reward for test scores and grades. Jewish alumni came to benefit from the same dynastic system of preference that their Protestant predecessors had taken advantage of. Their children applied from prestigious high schools, which maintained a cozy relationship with university admissions offices. It was a system that desperately required reforming in the name of fairness.

The problem exposed in the limp university response to campus anti-Semitism after October 7—distilled to then–Harvard President Claudine Gay's phrase, "It depends on the context"—is that Jewish students aren't just a diminished presence but a diminished priority. Whereas Jews thought of themselves as a vulnerable minority—perhaps not the most vulnerable, but certainly worthy of official concern—their academic communities apparently considered them too privileged to merit that status. This wasn't just scary. It carried the sting of rejection.

There's a number that haunts me. In 2022, the Tufts political scientist Eitan Hersh conducted a comprehensive study of Jewish life on American college campuses, which surveyed both Jews and Gentiles. Hersh found that on campuses with a relatively high proportion of Jewish students, nearly one in five non-Jewish students said they "wouldn't want to be friends with someone who supports the existence of Israel as a Jewish state." They were saying, in essence, that they couldn't be friends with the majority of Jews.

8

EACH SPRING, during the Passover seder, Jews recite this phrase from the

Haggadah: “In every generation, our enemies rise up to destroy us.” To participate in the most universally observed of all Jewish rituals, a celebration of liberation and survival, is to be reminded of the grim cycle of Jewish history, in which golden ages are moments of dramatic irony, the naive complacency just before the onset of doom. Some of these moments are within living memory.

In 1933, the Central Union of German Citizens of the Jewish Faith published a 1,060-page book meticulously enumerating the achievements of the community. It was quite a list. Weimar Germany is remembered as a period of instability, a time of beer-hall-putschists, louche cabarets, and rampant assassinations. But Weimar was also the pinnacle of Jewish power, a golden age in its own right, especially if one considers the whole of German culture, which sprawled across borders on the map. During the first decades of the 20th century, Jewish contributors to German music included Gustav Mahler, Kurt Weill, and Arnold Schoenberg; to German literature, Franz Kafka, Stefan Zweig, and Walter Benjamin; to science, Albert Einstein. Jews presided over the Frankfurt School of social criticism and populated the Bauhaus school of art and architecture. The Central Union’s compendium could be read as the immodest self-congratulation of a people who represented 0.8 percent of the total population—or as a desperate, futile plea for Germany to return the love that Jews felt for the country.

Americans maintain a favorable opinion of Jews. The community remains prosperous and politically powerful. But the memory of how quickly the best of times can turn dark has infused the Jewish reactions to events of the past decade. “When lights start flashing red, the Jewish impulse is to flee,” Jonathan Greenblatt, the head of the Anti-Defamation League, told me.

Back in 2016, many liberals blustered about leaving the country if Donald Trump was elected president; after he won, many Jews actually hatched contingency plans. My mother tried, in vain, to get a passport from Poland, the country of her birth. An immigration lawyer I know in Cleveland told me that he had obtained a German passport, and suggested that I call the German embassy in Washington to learn how many other American Jews had done the same.

The German government, for understandable reasons, doesn’t count Jews. But the embassy sent me a tally of passport applications submitted under laws that apply to victims of Nazi persecution and their descendants. In 2017, after Trump’s election, the number of applications nearly doubled from the year before, to 1,685, and then kept growing. In 2022, it was 2,500. These aren’t large numbers in absolute terms; still, it’s extraordinary that so many American Jews, whose applications required documenting that their families once fled Germany, now consider the country a safer haven than the United States.

I also saw signs of flight in Oakland, where at least 30 Jewish families have been approved to transfer their children to neighboring school districts—and I heard similar stories in the surrounding area. Initial data collected by an organization representing Jewish day schools, which have long struggled for enrollment, show a spike in the number of admission inquiries from families contemplating pulling their kids from public school.

After 1967, the previous moment of profound political abandonment, the American Jewish community began to entertain thoughts of its own radical reinvention. A coterie of disillusioned intellectuals, clustered around a handful of small-circulation journals and think tanks, turned sharply rightward, creating the neoconservative movement. Among activists, the energy that had once been directed toward Freedom Rides was plowed into the cause of Soviet Jewry, which became a defining political obsession of many synagogues in the 1970s and ’80s. Meanwhile, Jewish hippies turned inward, creating new spiritual movements centered on prayer and ritual.

Although not all of these movements proved equally fruitful, this history, in a way, is cause for optimism, an example of how conflict might provide the path to religious renewal and a fresh sense of solidarity. It’s also a reminder that the Golden Age was not an uninterrupted rise.

The case for pessimism, however, is more convincing. The forces arrayed against Jews, on the right and the left, are far more powerful than they were 50 years ago. The surge of anti-Semitism is a symptom of the decay of democratic habits, a leading indicator of rising authoritarianism. When anti-Semitism takes hold, conspiracy theory hardens into conventional wisdom, embedding violence in thought and then in deadly action. A society that holds its Jews at arm’s length is likely to be more intent on hunting down scapegoats than addressing underlying defects. Although it is hardly an iron law of history, such societies are prone to decline. England entered a long dark age after expelling its Jews in 1290. Czarist Russia limped toward revolution after the pogroms of the 1880s. If America persists on its current course, it would be the end of the Golden Age not just for the Jews, but for the country that nurtured them.

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This article appears in the April 2024 print edition with the headline “The End of the Golden Age.” When you buy a book using a link on this page, we receive a commission. Thank you for supporting The Atlantic.

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