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# need to understand hatred better if we're serious about fighting anti-Semitism

by Kenneth S. Stern  
3 days ago

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An anti-Semitic flyer going around Westwood earlier this summer. File photo

The recent surge in antisemitic hate crimes in Europe was, unfortunately predictable. This much we know about antisemitism: since the collapse of the Camp David peace talks in 2000, whenever violence in the Middle East involves Israel, hate crimes against Jews and Jewish-linked property increase, dramatically, particularly in Europe.

In just the past few weeks, we've seen attacks at synagogues (mob-like), attacks on individual Jews, attacks on Jewish-linked property, refusal of a business to serve Jews, and the shuttering of Jewish museums for fear of attack. France, Norway, England, Ireland, Turkey, Belgium, Ukraine, you name it.

We also know that because the shooting between Israel and Hamas has stopped for the moment, and with it the cessation of fresh images of dead Palestinian children, the hate crimes in Europe should likely deescalate too. Until the next time.

But other contemporary antisemitic-linked challenges remain: the rise of the far-right in Europe, the full-throttled import of classic antisemitism into the Muslim world, and the vilification of Israel as the stand-in for the classic Jew, to name but a few.

We seem to be losing this battle. There are many reasons for this disturbing trend, but the most significant one is a matter of insufficient imagination and not enough serious thinking.

0 effective, and if effective, moreso than something else they could choose to do. Too often they do things because they've done them before, they sound "strong," and "determined," and - not coincidently - can be used as centerpieces for fundraising.



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There are five major tools in the current anti-antisemitism arsenal: attitudinal surveys, political pressure, education, legal approaches, and press releases.



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The purpose of this essay isn't to delve deeply into each approach, but rather to give a hint of their limitations.

§ Press releases (and blogs) put Jewish organizations "on the record" when an antisemitic act occurs (so they don't appear unconcerned or uniformed), and are useful for fundraising more than for effecting any significant change.

§ Educational programs, largely targeted to high school students and frequently using the Holocaust as a centerpiece, expose teenagers to important issues, but there is no convincing evidence that they result in long-term attitudinal changes. And, in any event, there are many well-educated antisemites.

§ Legal tools, such as hate crime legislation and training, are important, but also limited in what they can accomplish, and attempts to use legal tools against speech (on campus in the U.S., against Holocaust denial in some other countries), are actually counterproductive as they change the debate from antisemitism to "free speech," and/or give a disincentive for political leaders to speak out against antisemitism (because, they claim, a case is before the courts).

§ Political pressure, especially applied abroad, to speak out against and crack down on antisemitic crimes, political parties, or incidents, is, while important, of limited effectiveness, and ironically at times, works because of antisemitic stereotypes (a belief by some leaders who want access to the U.S. government, that the U.S. Jewish community holds the keys to Washington, DC).

§ Attitudinal surveys tend to look at classic antisemitic stereotypes, and then classify people as antisemitic or not, when antisemitism isn't a black-and-white issue (most people are probably somewhat antisemitic, like most are somewhat racist). Further, most surveys fail to address all contemporary forms of antisemitism, and very few employ any comparative analysis: if x percentage of people believe Jews have too much power, is that a small number or a large number compared to what people think about other groups?

The current approach has limited effectiveness because it largely looks at antisemitism as if it were an isolated phenomenon, and not - as we must - a subset of a larger human challenge: hate.

Looked at as separate from the human capacity to define, and then dehumanize and demonize some "other," we can see only a small hint of what antisemitism is, and that frequently out of context. This blindness also limits our ability to identify what to do to curtail it. (The same can be said about other hatreds too - sexism, homophobia, racism, Islamophobia, etc.) It's as if we look at it through a peephole, when, in order to see the object clearly, we need to use a wide-angled lens.

How narrow is our lens? We tend to default to "common wisdom" answers focusing on Jews or antisemitism alone, with little or no evidence to support these strategies. Holocaust education, as mentioned. Knowing about the Holocaust is important, but there is little evidence knowing about the Holocaust reduces antisemitism - in fact,

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Another piece of narrow "common wisdom," frequently reflected in blogs and press releases, is to combat antisemitism by noting what Jews, individually and collectively, have accomplished. We're smart. You wouldn't have cures for polio or the latest computer gadget without Jews. There's some academic-based evidence to suggest that it is difficult to hate and have empathy at the same time, but that's quite different from suggesting that admiration (or jealousy?) or gratitude is an antidote to hate.

And another is the questionable notion that antisemitism - particularly for Israelis from Palestinians - can be countered with economic prosperity. There is little evidence to show that having the capacity to buy more consumer goods because Jews have lifted the economic boat in Palestine can somehow remove a more powerful thought: that people who you perceive as your religious inferiors have an upper - and heavily armed - hand in a land you (and God) believes - belongs to you, alone.

These pat strategies of questionable effectiveness for combating antisemitism are endorsed because no one is demanding an investment in testable theories, based on understanding how human hatred works, to define what to do instead. And we can no longer afford the luxury of such ignorance.

Interestingly, after World War II, inspired by the antisemitism of Nazism, there was an attempt to go to the academy for insights about prejudice and hatred. Theodor Adorno wrote "The Authoritarian Personality." Social psychologist Muzafer Sherif conducted the "Robbers Cave" experiment, concluding that people (in this case summer campers) were likely to have prejudiced views of competing groups, but that when they had a common challenge which involved a superordinate goal, these views diminished.

There is much in evolutionary and social psychology that suggests that hatred isn't something that's learned - it is hard-wired (although we need help figuring out whom to hate, and sometimes how to find and identify "others" in creative ways - for example, a study noted that Greek and Turkish Cypriots identify each other by the brand of cigarettes smoked). And academics such as James Waller have made compelling cases that most of us, in the right circumstances, have the capacity not only to hate passionately, but also act on that hatred.

Sociologist Kathleen Blee, writing on women in the Ku Klux Klan, found that her subjects explained their racism and antisemitism differently. They could recount an interaction with a black person that they believe sparked their animus, but with antisemitism it was more of an "aha" moment, about secret forces and how the world really worked.

But while research in various fields offer some insights into how humans identify and dehumanize others, including Jews, there are very few multi-disciplinary efforts to pull together insights from these various fields - psychology, social psychology, law, religion, anthropology, economics, political science, history, and many others - to enable us to look at the many moving parts of any hatred simultaneously - how hate operates on the individual, group, societal, national, international levels, all at the same time.

By expanding the academic study of hatred, so that we understand better what motivates people to hate, what effectively controls hate, and how our institutions should have a better understanding of how they may intentionally or unintentionally impact hate (such as the unintended but foreseeable consequences of political actions, such as in Iraq), testable theories would emerge about what to do, and what not to do, to impact growing antisemitism.



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To understand what they think about Jews, and why they think what they do, and how they are motivated to act on those beliefs (such as voting for antisemitic parties in parts of Europe), we need to energize the academy to produce new interdisciplinary and multidisciplinary theories and research tied into how human beings intersect with hate – as individuals, groups, societies, nations.

The starting point of analysis must be from the macro – that humans hate, why they hate, how hate impacts them, those around them, and their institutions – and then to the micro – that some humans hate Jews (and then how Jew-hatred manifests itself).

Sometimes the most important questions (and answers) will have nothing to do with Jews directly. For instance, when Jewish groups spoke with leaders of various European governments over the last two decades about the antisemitism of the far-right, rather than speaking about just about Jews and the importance of “tolerance” of Jews to democracy, might it not have been wiser to draw those leaders’ attention to research, such as that of Professor Terri Givens at University of Texas – Austin, documenting the specific actions mainstream parties should undertake (and avoid) to maximize the probability that extremist parties remain marginal? (She argues that when mainstream parties make clear they will never join a coalition with extremist parties, those parties tend to lose votes in subsequent elections.)

One complicating factor to developing an approach to antisemitism grounded in a better understanding of the human capacity for hate is that the Jewish community usually insists that antisemitism is “unique.” And of course in some ways it is – it is one of the longest hatreds, it is one that occurs on the political left and the right, and it is one fueled by ideology and theology, usually packaged in conspiracy theory.

There are, of course, some logical reasons why the Jewish community leadership insists on antisemitism’s uniqueness. Politicians – especially in some European countries – have too many times tried to eliminate antisemitism from an articulation of their concerns, even while Jews are under attack. Isn’t it ok, they sometimes ask, to speak out against racism and xenophobia, isn’t antisemitism covered by the implicit “etcetera?” But this attempt to back-burner antisemitism (recall French officials in the early 2000s blaming “hooliganism” rather than antisemitism when synagogues were torched – but if this was “hooliganism,” why were synagogues, and not churches and mosques, being “hooliganized?”) is the problem of people who want to avert attention from antisemitism. The answer to them is not to ghettoize antisemitism further into a dark corner of limited thinking. It is to emphasize that hatred is a huge human problem – just look at all its manifestations every day in the news – and that to understand any subset of it better (including antisemitism), we have to expand our thinking. Maybe empirical research about how best to respond to hatred, rather than raw political pressure from Jewish groups, will provide recalcitrant politicians convincing evidence of the need (and the benefit to them) to call any hate by its name, quickly and loudly?

To know why people hate Jews, we have to know first why people hate. For as long as there have been human beings – no matter where, when, what the major religion, economic or political system – people have divided themselves into “us” and “them,” and then found ways to identify the “other” as not only alien, but a danger.

Antisemitism, it has been said, is in some ways like a disease. Each disease is different, but doctors who specialize in researching any particular disease all start from the fundamental departure point – the



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are ever going to understand everything we must about antisemitism.

0 *Kenneth S. Stern is an attorney and author who has written widely about hatred and antisemitism.*



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