

On the Present Danger

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Like many other Jews—and non-Jews as well—many of my conversations since the atrocious Pittsburgh massacre on Shabbat Chayei Sarah, Nov. 3, 2018, have been about current antisemitism in the US and elsewhere, and how it relates to the long history of Jewish persecution. I've found that my views on this didn't necessarily match those of friends and listserv acquaintances, even those who generally share my political perspectives, so I thought I'd share them here as well. **Partners** doesn't have any particular view on anti-semitism (except that we absolutely oppose it, of course) so these should just be understood as my own musings on the matter. Comments are welcome at the end of this – and every – *Israel Horizons* article.

What struck me most about the massacre – apart from the unwelcome fact that it took place at all – was the apparently universal condemnation it received along with the widespread support for the Pittsburgh Jewish community it engendered, notably from Muslim groups. While I have no doubt at all that Donald Trump's dog-whistles and outrageous comments (e.g., "very fine people on both sides") have emboldened and encouraged people like Robert Bowers and his ilk, I am particularly intrigued how *unlike* the current reaction is to most other times in Jewish history, when powerful people and organizations were arrayed, covertly or overtly, against Jews, and antisemitism was open and unconcealed.

This period was well portrayed in a [NY Times oped by James Kaplan](#) that appeared on Nov. 9, which happened to be the 80th anniversary of *Kristallnacht*. The article was actually commemorating the 80th anniversary of the first performance of Irving Berlin's song "God Bless America," and the reception it received, which included infuriated denunciations by American Nazis (not yet "neo-"). While most Americans immediately loved it, a clearly visible fringe did not and, as the author notes, "the fringe was scarily close to the main fabric of American life in those prewar years. It was a time when Jews, even wealthy and famous Jews like Irving Berlin, had to watch their step..."

This is where our time decisively parts company with the 1930s, whether in the U.S., Germany, or most other places. We, as Jews, are not obliged to, nor should we, "watch our step." While many of us seem to resist hearing that affirmation, for reasons I can only guess at, we are not guests at the US table who must watch our manners lest we be noticed and ejected. We are full-fledged members of the club because we fought for it and succeeded – and we should recognize that the antisemitism that clearly remains (as Pittsburgh horrendously showed us it does) pales in comparison with the prejudice, discrimination, and worse suffered regularly by African Americans, Muslims, Hispanics, and others, whether newly-arrived or not; or whether citizens, documented or otherwise.

I have heard all my life variations of “the German Jews too thought they were safe, and look what happened...” I reject the comparison, which reflects scant knowledge of that period. Jews were not only fewer (around 500,000 in 1933 Germany compared to about between 5.5. and 6.5 million in the US today), they were infinitely less integrated and accepted than we are. While I will leave statistics to the sociologists, there are very few bars, social or otherwise, to Jewish success today, while in pre-1933 Germany, despite seeming (for then) unprecedented acceptance, we can see that not only was antisemitism rife and open, but the social and other barriers were strewn everywhere, unlike today.

Perhaps most important is the curious fact that few of the most reactionary forces in the US today (the Koch brothers, for example, or other massive rightwing funders) are at all connected with any sort of antisemitism, or even are themselves vociferously Jewish (such as Sheldon and Miriam Adelson, the latter of whom will shortly [receive the Presidential Medal of Freedom](#). I and most other progressives would indict the Kochs and Adelsons for any number of anti-social activities, but antisemitism is not among them. This may be contrasted to the German *Junkers* and industrialists of the 1920s and '30s, most of whom despised Jews and made no attempt to conceal it. Nor is there any group remotely comparable to the Nazi Party in the 1920s and '30s, for which antisemitism is a significant element. Rather, it is the lowlifes like Bowers who are the main carriers of the antisemitic virus in the US today, whose danger is hugely magnified by our criminally lax gun control laws.

Many, including me, are baffled by the undue attention and extreme demonization accorded George Soros, vilified internationally by the Right worldwide, including Bibi Netanyahu, another figure whose many sins do not include antisemitism. To my mind, Soros's Jewishness is incidental to, not the cause of his demonization. He is, however, the only billionaire philanthropist who spreads his largesse to progressive *political* causes worldwide, and in my view it is his political effectiveness and not his Jewish identity that explains the fury with which the Right attacks him. I particularly enjoy [a quote from Steve Bannon in the NY Times](#): “Soros is vilified because he is effective. ... “I only hope one day I'm as effective as he has been – and as vilified.”

None of the above is meant to imply that antisemitism worldwide – or even in the US – is a spent force or not dangerous. Much of it today, though not by any means all, is connected with opposition to Israel and Zionism – but I don't intend to set foot into that perennial quagmire here and now. Rates of antisemitic incidents in the US have risen lately – but my point is that it is invariably *unaccompanied* by support from the usual powerful forces except, albeit somewhat indirectly, from the one residing at 1600 Pennsylvania Avenue. Of course, that by no means downplays the dangers of white nationalism to us and our fellow Americans, whether or not they include specific antisemitic manifestations.

Finally, I will freely acknowledge that my own geographical choices, and that of my parents, may have shielded me from antisemitic occurrences, whether due

to ignorance or genuine antisemitism, that others may well have experienced. I grew up in New York City, and have lived most of my life there as well as in Berkeley, CA., Washington, D.C., and Jerusalem. Only in the latter location did I come very close to being blown up by a large bomb in the Hebrew University cafeteria during the Second Intifada, but that is a whole different subject. Others, who have grown up or lived in less Jewish-friendly environments have had their own experiences, which I absolutely do not belittle or downplay. Obviously, both their experiences and the views they formed, as well as mine, are part of current reality.

In my view, any serious identity is liable to become grounds for attacks on those who visibly wear it – and the Jewish experience of being on the receiving end of such attacks during the last 2000 years is probably unparalleled. Nevertheless, history is not destiny, and I contend that our here and now is very different from other times and places, that antisemitism is not a virus carried in the bloodstream but a social attitude, and that such attitudes may and do change fundamentally over time. I will never proclaim “It can’t happen here,” but I think it’s clear it is *not* happening here. If conditions change, I will eat my words, but I doubt very much I’ll ever have to do so.

All in all, I think the response of Jews and others to the dangerous trends of the last few years have generally been appropriate – and reasonably effective. I am proud that 76% of Jews voted Democratic in the midterms, and I am heartened that some of the mainstream Jewish organizations have been willing to take more courageous stands than in the past. Jews have an inside-outside relationship with American society, and we need to continue to use it to expand – and not contract – that space.



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