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Countering hate speech and the use of social media as a space for dialogue (PD 01)

Comments by
Rabbi David Rosen, International Director of inter religious affairs at the American Jewish committee (AJC), on Anti-Semitism as a paradigm for hate speech.

I have been brought into this panel in as much as I have, if you'd like, the dubious honor, to represent arguably the longest hated minority in terms of human record and memory. In fact, there's a book, a famous book about 40 years ago by the sociologist historian Robert Wistrich, called *The Longest Hatred*. I'm not totally comfortable talking about antisemitism. I'm comfortable in talking about it as a paradigm that has bearing beyond itself. In other words, it serves very much as a model for us to understand the different aspects and impulses of hatred that therefore manifests itself in hate speech and sometimes in far worse violence. Ultimately, of course, we have the history of the most demonical and perverse violence of all.

The term antisemitism is not necessarily a very felicitous one. It was coined first in Germany in 1860. Of course, it's not a very precise term. There was a great Jewish thinker by the name of Leo Pinsker, who about 20 years later, in about 1880, used the much better term judeophobia to describe this very complex, sometimes mystifying, but very often possible-to-analyze impulse of hostility towards Jews. It's particularly interesting because hostility towards others, whether it's real or perceived in terms of the fears behind it, will normally relate to some particular group that has some kind of capacity to be able to undermine the interests of another group. It's quite fascinating to see how a vulnerable, very small, almost impotent community would have been the target of so much hatred. It's particularly fascinating today, because today antisemitism is resurgent with a vengeance, and its different manifestations that I am going to try to highlight as paradigmatic of human hatred, all have come together once again with various different impulses and unholy alliances, joined together by this rather, as I say, perplexing hostility towards people of Jewish origin.

One very clear reason that we can understand for this lengthy history of prejudice is that Jews were more often than not the only other other. Jews after the destruction of the temple and after, especially the revolt in the second century of the common era and the exile conducted under the auspices of Rome, Jews already had been scattered, but now were scattered around the world. They were living in mostly Christian and Muslim societies, which were generally speaking, quite homogeneous. And therefore the Jew was the one who was different.

What was really interesting is it that only the Jews were, if you like, homeless and therefore dependent upon the hospitality of others. It was a process in which Jews were being invited in by various powers and princes, developing areas of specialty ultimately, in Central and Eastern Europe, but also throughout the Christian and the Muslim world, as they were seen as being useful in terms of trade and development. They were mobile, they were traders, there were communities and they therefore spoke many languages, had connections with the people around. And then they would be there and then they would be cast out. A different reason for this, we will come to in a moment.

The otherness meant that there was some suspicion. In the more primitive, pre-modern era, people needed to be able to find reasons for things that they feared and especially someone to blame when something was wrong. And thus, you have the classic phenomenon of the scapegoats. People do not want to confront their own challenges and own difficulties, and there is a value for them, if one could even use that word, there is a need that is satisfied by putting one's

fears and the concerns on the shoulders of those who are different from you. So we have this classical scapegoating phenomenon.

Quite fascinating in that regard is the fact that because the Jewish way of life was different, Jewish observances of various kinds, and because Jews sought to live within their own community and because very often even certain areas of religious observance had a bearing upon hygiene, even if that was not necessarily their original intention, Jews were very often both forcibly and voluntarily quarantined. And it's very interesting now within the context of COVID-19, so that during the period of the Black Death and the great plague, when Jews were dying, as everybody else in that society was dying, but perhaps in less numbers. And perhaps that had to do with that quarantine. Those are actions, which today we know can protect people, but it was actually if you like, a by-product of their way of life.

That of course added and abetted this scapegoating phenomenon and conspiracy theories that continue today. During COVID-19, you are not only seeing that, it's been actually quite fascinating how in places where there are no Jews whatsoever and where there is no way in which Jews could have had some interaction with the beginning of this pandemic, yet it's portrayed as a Jewish, a malevolent conspiracy to somehow do harm to those who are not Jews. So there's this fear, blame, scapegoating, conspiracy theories, aided and abetted by this different way of life.

What is perhaps particularly unique or special in the phenomenon of antisemitism is the religious dimension. This predates the monotheistic religions. There was already hostility towards Jews in ancient pagan Rome and Greece, generally because Jews wanted to maintain their own religious way of life and didn't want to become like the others. There was a resentment of those who wanted to be able to maintain their difference. When you have, of course, those that come with universal claims, that ours is the right way and everybody should be like us, and Jews resist that, then you also have the certain further overlay of religious prejudice. In the case of Christianity, it was particularly acute because they saw themselves as the continuation of that biblical heritage of the Hebrew Bible and of the, if you like, the promises given to the children of Abraham, Isaac, and Jacob. And therefore the resentment of the fact that the Jews did not accept the Christian dispensation as the fulfillment of that original heritage led not only to friction, but to a demonization of the Jew, who was literally portrayed as being in league with the devil, the enemies of God, responsible level for all evil and therefore condemned to wander forever.

The Jewish homelessness was seen as therefore divinely visited upon the Jews until the final advent. And this of course created a kind of culture and environment in which atrocities against the Jews could easily be performed. The Holocaust was not, God-forbid, a Christian innovation, but it could not have succeeded to the degree it did if the land had not been tilled with hostility against the Jew, as a Jew, for his or her own religious loyalty in and of itself.

Then we have the question, related to this, of economic prejudice, because what was really fascinating is, as I mentioned, Jews were invited in to be able to help develop trade, but then you would get resistance from locals with regards to having "others" involved in their fields of activity. Accordingly, Jews were generally prohibited from doing anything other than trade and not allowed to be part of guilds, merchants, and specific skills that were there.

The one area that they were actually encouraged to be involved in by the church was precisely the field of money lending, because money lending involved taking interest which the Bible prohibited. Judaism had adapted this legislation to changing economic realities, but the mediaeval church discouraged money lending among her faithful. But Jews were going to burn in hell anyway, so what did it matter?

Therefore, Jews were actually encouraged to be money lenders. Understandably, not everybody wanted to pay their debts and the easiest way to deal with that was to cast out the Jews. As a result, Jews were exiled from one place to the other, while accused of being the cause of any economic distress, in a classic case blaming the victim. Accordingly, a whole culture of blame builds up in terms of economic prejudice. The communists claimed that the Jews were capitalists. The capitalists claimed the Jews were communists. Each one blamed the Jews for whatever they particularly did not like.

Racial antisemitism is a relatively modern phenomenon, very much born out against a background of nationalism of the 19th century, where people therefore more and more sought to affirm their own identity in an exclusive national context. And this therefore produced xenophobia and fear of loss of identity. This developed in particular, of course, within Germany where the theories of racial antisemitism were arguably most sophisticated. One of the most notable personalities in that regard was William Mahler who warned against the dangers of Jewish infiltration of Germanness and therefore the need to be able to maintain the purity of the latter against the danger of the Jews positive. Of course, this racial antisemitism found its ultimate catastrophic expression in the Shoah, the Holocaust.

In modern times, political prejudice has particularly targeted the Jewish state. Obviously not everything that the Jewish state does is necessarily acceptable, and criticism of it is perfectly legitimate. But the way in which Israel is often presented as the source of all problems and particularly for example, as the origin of the problems in the Middle East, as if it's somehow related to the Shia-Sunni conflict or the catastrophe in Syria or to the prosecution of Copts, or with regard to the collapse of other failed states in the Middle East, is fascinating in itself. In some senses, the Jewish collective entity has become a kind lightning conductor for all kinds of hang-ups or senses of historical injury that were transferred in some particular way to a Jewish collective entity.

These different aspects of antisemitism are paradigmatic of different kinds of hate expressions targeted against various kinds of minorities, ethnic, religious, and racial.

Today, we also have the phenomenon of Holocaust denial. Now, why should people want to deny the Holocaust? Part of that has to do with what I alluded to above, which is therefore blaming the victim. In other words, it's a form of transference of one's own guilt. A sense of guilt regarding the treatment of the Jew is easily handled if one can actually claim that the Jew is ultimately responsible for it, or that the Jew is completely exaggerating the phenomenon, and that therefore it is a manipulative tool to control others in some way.

Thus, Holocaust denial is often expressed for political reasons by those who fear that Jewish interests are able to gain some advantage by virtue of the tragedy of their own particular history. But it is a dangerous phenomenon as the former Grand Mufti of Bosnia Dr. Mustafa Cerić has pointed out, because Holocaust denial in a way is trying to prepare the way for the legitimization of atrocities, not necessarily against Jews. Once one diminishes from its significance, the capacity to be able to act on hatred is so much greater.

Accordingly, the latest Facebook decision that was taken yesterday to restrict Holocaust denial and hateful expressions related thereto is a significant one in the shadow of the resurgence of Antisemitism. This resurgence reflects the passing of time from the Shoah, from the Holocaust, and thus the memory of its horror is far more distant. But it also reflects a kind of brutalization within our society, which relates very specifically to so-called social media.

Today people who would have been totally marginal and hardly heard at all in the past, have the capacity to be able to spew their filth out to masses, against whoever it is, Muslims, Christians, Jews, or any particular community, in a way they were never able to do before. So, part of the resurgence of hatred, has been facilitated by modern technological capacities (in which the blessing is often as curse.)

We have seen this particularly during the COVID-19 period. This demands of us to ensure not only that we identify these prejudices, but that we engage these remarkable tools of technology to be able to combat hate effectively, firstly through control, which means limiting them despite the challenges that this poses for freedom of expression. It also demands that enlightened forces engage these tools to ensure more positive, fair, just, and righteous expressions, to neutralize as much as possible the impact of those that seek to utilize these vehicles, to advance their own malevolence and hostility.