

Ruth Wisse
What Happens Next – 03.20.2022

Ruth Wisse:

Today, I'll talk about Anti-Semitism. Do I want to? Not particularly. After a lifetime, I'm tired of having to pay it close attention, and maybe you are, too. But that's only because Anti-Semitism shows no signs of tiring. Harassing Jews is fun. As you can see by its name, this is the only modern ideology that's entirely negative, inviting some form of aggression against others. It's the politics of the pointing finger, holding Jews responsible for the assault against them, whereas other political movements like socialism or democracy promise some improvement, and then have to deliver.

Anti-Semitism harnesses the energy of attack, and the removal of Jews yields rewards of property or influence or positions that they are forced to abandon. Anti-Semitism also offers something even better than an excuse for aggression: an explanation for whatever is going wrong. Wilhelm Marr coined the term in the 1870s to define Jews as the threat to Germany. He didn't trust modern liberal democracy, which he called a Jewish scheme to concur Germany from within, saying, "Are you unemployed? It's because the Jews have your jobs. Are you poor? Well, the Rothschilds are stealing your money." And so on.

Decline of traditional authority, overcrowded cities, rising crime, it's the Jews, stupid. And the explanations that Marr provided for Germany, others adapted for their countries and their needs. Jews are a small people with a hugely inflated image, who want only to be accepted by those among whom they live. Since they have no incentive for counter aggression, they are the perfect foil. The no fail target.

Anti-Semitism is not hate. Calling Anti-Semitism hate is like calling COVID a summer cold. Anti-Semitism is the organization of politics against the Jews, and it is virally adaptive. Think of how many different factions it has served and continues to inspire. The first politicians in Vienna were elected on a platform of Anti-Semitism in the 1890s, and Adolf Hitler rode that movement to victory in Germany in 1933. Nationalists called Jews the dangerous aliens. Nazis said they polluted the race.

But Anti-Semitism was no less useful to the political left. Its founder, Karl Marx, said that the God of the Jews is money. Marxists blame the Jews for capitalism. Socialists identify Jews as exploiters of the proletariat. When Bolsheviks took over Russia and established the communist international on the idea that the world proletariat would join together in a unified world, they identified Zionism as the chief spoiler. How dare the reactionary Jews return to the land of Israel when we insist that everyone transcend their national states?

So, Anti-Semitism of the right blamed Jews for living among the nations. Anti-Zionism of the left blamed Jews for returning to their homeland. They called the Jews of Israel imperialists, colonizers, exploiters. And if this sounds familiar, it's only because of how many others have

adopted the same strategy. What possible use could Anti-Zionism have been to Arab leaders of 21 countries with more land than the United States of America?

Well, are you kidding? Think of the functions of anti-Jewish politics, the politics of the pointing finger. It unites otherwise contentious parties in a coalition of grievance and blame. It deflects attention from domestic crises, redirects frustration to a common enemy. Blame the Jews for displacing the Palestinian Arabs, and no one will blame you for displacing and persecuting the Jews and your other minorities.

Keeping attention on Israel kept attention from their own inequities and iniquities. Not all, but many Arab and Muslim leaders took the national self-liberation of the Jewish people, one of the most amazing recoveries in history, and trashed that example of human accomplishment for their own mean political ends. Blame Israel and build a coalition of human rights abusers at the United Nations. Import Zionism is racism into America and harness it to African American grievances.

Thankfully, some Arab and Muslim leaders are now reversing themselves, modernizing their societies and accepting their Jewish fellow Semites. But not before anti-Jewish politics has spread to this continent. Jews ask themselves how Anti-Semitism could have revived in North America, when we had thought we had seen the end of it. They don't understand, because they call it hate. They treat the most effective, operational ideology of modern times as just your common cold.

Larry Bernstein:

Why is there increasing anti-Semitism on college campuses?

Ruth Wisse:

What began was actually discrimination against the Jews. It was quotas against Jewish admissions. When there is discrimination, it's usually discrimination against others, as well as the Jews. Harvard discriminated against Blacks, Catholics, and women. The people who formed Harvard, and other American institutions felt that the Jews were not citizens in good standing. I choose to define antisemitism as something much more consequential, not just to the Jews but in modern politics and in world affairs. The organization of politics against the Jews penetrated American universities from exactly the time that the Zionism is racism resolution was passed at the United Nations. It was pushed first and foremost by representatives of Arab and Muslim countries who were coming to the United States. And they blamed Israel for the displacement of the Palestinian Arabs. This is nonsense because it is the Arab states that refuse to accept the partition of Palestine and insisted on keeping the Palestinians as refugees.

This was a complete inversion, the people who denied the Jews a state blamed the Jews for denying the Arabs, a 22nd state. Now, what made it really astonishing in the way it caught on, is that the Arab anti-Zionism defined itself as a left-wing rather than a right-wing movement. I think this is the crucial point, that when the Arab war against the Jews began in 1948, five

armies coming in from all sides against this little state. You could see that this was the same kind of thing that we see in Ukraine today.

Their multiple armies coming from all sides and trying to crush this state. It's the Arab world that has defined itself to eliminate the Jewish state. Now most openly represented by Iran. It's Zionism that is racism, it's Israel that is colonizing. They adopted the anti-Zionist rhetoric of the Communist movement in the 1930s, The Palestinians became the poster children for all the grievance movements on campuses.

You have many grievance movements on campuses. Black student movements pressing the buttons of grievance and blame. Women's movement saying it is being oppressed. All these grievance movements, what do they actually stand against? It's so difficult to define, and yet if you use the Palestinians, who are already there waving their flags and spreading propaganda, that became the common cause of all these protest movements.

Larry Bernstein:

Why are so many American Jews anti-Zionist?

Ruth Wisse:

There's no other group in the United States against whom a full-scale ideological movement is being waged. You are told, "You're the aggressor, you're the abuser persecuting the Palestinians? Why are you doing this?" It takes a very strong moral confidence to push back. You have to have the facts at your disposal. You have to be ready to stand up and confront this series of lies. Because the fight against them is well-armed with social media.

People who don't have a solid Jewish innate sense of identification, who don't know the history, who aren't used to being aggressed against. It's very hard for ordinary people to stand up to this. And you see Jews capitulating, "Oh yes, it's the fault of Israel, if only Israel pushed back five miles." "It would all work." It would be easier to acquiesce, it would be easier to surrender than to fight. It's not difficult to explain although it is very painful to observe.

Larry Bernstein:

What do you make of the Abraham Accords?

Ruth Wisse:

The Abraham Accords were one of the most hopeful signs in world affairs. The Arab Muslim world leaders are saying, "We know that what we have to reform, modernize and improve our own societies. We cannot keep holding Israel responsible for our failures." The Abraham Accords are a sign of a new maturity evolving in certain Arab and Muslim countries.

The differences between a mature country and an immature country is its ability to accept the principle of coexistence. Until now, many of those Arab countries simply did not accept the principle of coexistence, and they organized their politics against Israel as a manifestation of their rejection of the western world. The Abraham Accords represents their acceptance of

coexistence with not just Israel, but what Israel represents, namely another sovereign state as part of their region.

Larry Bernstein:

How do you compare anti-Semitism in American politics between the right and the left?

Ruth Wisse:

What is the anti-Semitic right? These are groups of very angry people. They are small groups of people, locally organized. They lash out against others whom they call anti-American.

They cast themselves as the protectors of America. Of course, it's terrible. But it's such a minor blip in the politics of the United States at this moment. That the desire of so many liberals and so many Jews to equate the anti-Semitism on the right with the anti-Semitism on the left. I mean, this is a self-delusion.

What is the anti-Semitism on the left at this point? There's so much of the liberal world that has been engulfed by this idea. The New York Times running a puff piece on a person who is most responsible for importing the Arab War against Israel into the United States of America, and is an elected member of Congress, Rashida Tlaib, just imagine that.

Giving voice to a person who wants to blame Israel for the responsibilities of her suffering and her grandmother's suffering? This is simply unbelievable. This is a far more extreme form of anti-Semitism than one had ever seen in America.

The Anti-Zionism that has been deliberately introduced into the American university, American culture, the American media, and American elected bodies is something new.

Fascist anti-Semitism appealed to some Americans in the 1930s. Many Germans in North America were supporters of Hitler. And they brought right-wing fascist anti-Semitism into this country.

In World War II that form of anti-Semitism was decisively defeated. It is hated by most Americans. If you want to portray evil in the United States today, you do it in a black uniform with those boots. And the Nazis are the enemies for the American popular imagination. Contrast that with the effectiveness of the penetration of the same anti-Jewish propaganda in the name of anti-Zionism. There are one-third fewer Jews in the world than there were in 1939. Israel is such a small country that most people cannot locate it on the map.

And yet, on every campus you see student bodies embracing the Divest, the Boycott, BDS Movement. They just take it for granted that taming or even destroying Israel would be to the benefit of the Middle East.

What anti-Semitism is against, is not the Jews.

What Israel stands for is the right of free nations to exist. It's probably the closest country to America in its values.

Larry Bernstein:

Support for Israel used to be bipartisan. Why has the Democratic Party reduced its support for the State of Israel?

Ruth Wisse:

There are parts of the Democratic Party that now hold Israel responsible for the Arab War that means that they have really accepted the politics of grievance and blame. It's a real problem for the Democratic Party.

Israel hasn't changed.

The Democratic Party like the Labour Party in the UK where anti-Zionist element penetrates. Look at the New York Times. It has become openly identified with an overtly anti-Jewish position. It has a visceral detestation of the kind of freedom that the Jewish people represents.

Larry Bernstein:

In the American school curriculum, the only time that you would study the Jewish people is about the Holocaust. What is your opinion of Holocaust studies?

Ruth Wisse:

In the first five years of the 1940s, one third of the Jewish people was destroyed, what the Germans called The Final Solution. Final solution being the fact that the Jews were the problem, and that the solution would be extermination.

This was an unprecedented war against a civilian population and in its effectiveness. Then you have the aftermath. What has happened to them is traumatic, and many of them want their stories told. They want the commemoration of those who did not survive. Jews have always done that. We mourn the destruction of the temples in Jerusalem.

One understands that feeling to commemorate and having a Holocaust Museum on the Mall in Washington and to ask for Holocaust education was very mistaken. It was done by people who thought that they were doing good. I think that all the people who are doing Holocaust education probably think that they're doing God's work.

I don't think they're doing well pedagogically, for America, or for the Jews. They're not teaching anti-Semitism at all. They're just teaching about evil, as if one could teach about evil in that way. What possible good can come out of that? The assumption must be, if you see how much evil people have done, you're going to be better, you're never going to do that. That's not education. Nobody educates by showing you bad examples. If they had wanted to do real education tell the story the way Passover tells the story. You can raise a museum and one third of it, you tell the story of the destruction of the Jews of Europe so that you can show that this

same people in the 1940s did the most remarkable thing in human history, they recovered their sovereignty in the land of Israel that had been under foreign domination for two millennia.

That's never been done. The ground had been prepared by a minority of the Jewish people that had already come to reclaim the land in the face of enormous obstacles, on the part of the British as well as those who were trying to destroy them. It's not just that the Holocaust is being talked about, but it's the rise of the state of Israel is not being talked about. How can one possibly explain that? Tell me. On the one hand you have the story of evil, destruction, misery, people being ground to dust. Sadism. And on the other hand, you have a story of a people rising. I mean talk about resurrection. This is astonishing.

Taking the Hebrew language that had been preserved and bringing it back to life as a spoken language. No country has ever integrated as many refugees as successfully as Israel has. You want to tell a story of resilience, that's the story that should've been told.

Forget about Holocaust education. It's the worst kind of education. And it makes you see Jews in the worst possible form. It's the miseducation of more than one generation and ongoing. And nobody seems to understand how this has affected America.

If you wonder now why every group wants to present itself as being the victims of America. "Women victims, black victims, Native American victims."

Part of that is because the Jews magnified their victimhood instead of magnifying their achievements. There is absolutely nothing redemptive that I can see about Holocaust education. As a Jew, the last thing that one wants is the sympathy of the world. It's not the guilt of the world that anyone wants.

If you're interested in what makes the Jews able to do this remarkable thing look at the Jewish texts.

The Bible Museum, if the Jewish people had had any common sense in America, that's the museum that they should have built. And bless those who built it. Because the Bible Museum is what should stand at the heart of America. The Holocaust Museum, only if it becomes the museum of the destruction and resurrection of the Jewish people.

Larry Bernstein:

Ruth, I end each session on a note of optimism, what are you optimistic about?

Ruth Wisse:

I'm very fortunate in my family, blessed with children, who are magnificent. And then grandchildren, who are fantastic. That makes me very optimistic. I'm ultimately optimistic about America. I have never seen it in a worse condition, nevertheless, I think that it can pull through.

And I'm very optimistic about Israel and the return of the Jewish people to its homeland. To have one's life coincide with the rise of the state of Israel has been a blessing. And that makes me optimistic.

I live in Manhattan. One can see people's faces again, who smile at you when you pass. Not long after I moved to New York in 2014, I got into the bus one day, and I didn't yet have a bus pass, and I didn't have the change that I thought that I had. And I was fumbling, and I saw that I didn't have it. I said to the bus driver, I'm sorry. I think I'm going to have to get off."

The next thing I knew, a girl came from where she was sitting. And she put in her bus pass and then took me by the arm. And I said, "What are you doing? You paid for me?" "Come with me," she said, and she put me in her seat. And the other people who were standing around had not taken the seat. They had seen what she had done. They waited for me to come and to sit down in that seat.

Well, when I sat down on that seat, I started to cry because I was so moved by this. It was so unexpected. And I don't expect kindness from strangers. I don't even expect it from people I know very well.

I started to cry. And the woman who was on the window seat, patted my hand and she said, "Don't take it like that." She said, "You do the nice thing for someone else next time.". This was sort of my introduction to New York. So how could I fail to be optimistic? I ask you.

Larry Bernstein:

That was beautiful. Thank you, Ruth.