

From Chapter 1: Anti-Semitism 101

How anti-Semitism works

Stereotypes, scapegoats, Jews in middle roles

The origins of Ashkenazi anti-Jewish oppression are *theological* and *economic*; racial anti-Semitism came later. What makes the system work? Ruling elites created demonizing stereotypes of Jews, which then justified scapegoating us for any number of disasters, thereby absolving themselves of wrongdoing.¹⁶ *The job of anti-Semitism is to set up Jewish buffers for the power elite, rendering the decision-makers invisible and so covering up the roots of injustice, while shifting responsibility to Jews.* So in many ways, anti-Semitism masks class power.

“CHRIST-KILLERS AND INFIDELS”

The first legendary stereotype, Jews as Christ-killers in league with secret “diabolical forces,” marked the birth of theological Jew-hatred and kicked scapegoating into gear, arousing anti-Jewish resentment for millennia.¹⁷ The Fourth Gospel of John made it official, charging Jews with “deicide.” The only possibility of forgiveness? To accept Jesus.

When the Holy Roman Empire anointed Christianity as the state religion in the fourth century, Jews officially became (hated) outsiders, despite our having lived in Europe for over two thousand years. Visionary activist and intellectual Melanie Kaye/Kantrowitz names the marginalizing of anyone/thing not Christian as *Christianism*, another spin on Christian hegemony or dominance—a system of oppression advantaging those whom analyst and activist-author Paul Kivel calls “all Christians, all those raised Christian, and those passing as Christian.”¹⁸ This ideology is based on dualism: cosmic good versus evil.

“We must never forget,” wrote Russian Tsar Alexander III, “that the Jews...crucified our Master and have shed his precious blood.”¹⁹ Enter the Christian Crusades, when mobs clutching crosses rampaged through thriving communities. Murdering tens of thousands of Jews on their way to attacking Muslims, they torched synagogues with Jews inside. Especially egged on through the centuries during Easter, writes Catholic ex-priest

James Carroll, crowds “poured out of churches in search of Jews to harass and kill.”²⁰

Once responsibility for crucifying Jesus had been diverted from the Romans, it became easy to fault Jews for succeeding tragedies. When Christian children died from uncertain causes, Jews were charged with sacrificing them to use their blood to make *matzoh* (unleavened bread). Such bizarre accusations birthed the blood libel/ritual murder myth.²¹ Another far-fetched allegation: that Jews were responsible for the Bubonic Plague, which wiped out over one-third of Europe, including Jews.

Almost two centuries later, after founding Protestantism in reaction to Catholicism, theologian Martin Luther was enraged that “infidel” Jews refused to convert, fuming, “May we all be free of this insufferable burden, the Jews,” and exhorting destruction of homes and synagogues.²² The Second Vatican Council finally exonerated Jews for Jesus’ death in 1965, but Pope John Paul II did not officially apologize until 2000. Yet the stereotype stuck: “the ultimate source of evil.”

ECONOMIC SHOCK ABSORBERS

In a second trademark stereotype, European Christians targeted Jews as “too powerful,” more powerful than we actually are. (See Chapter Three.) When the aristocracy needed our skills, they exploited Jews in middle roles, making them the public faces for actual decision-makers, so that Jews *looked* like the ones in control (often in some relationship to money). But we were simply the most visible, the first to be accused when catastrophe struck, conveniently available to absorb the brunt of mass outrage and violence.

Often denied access to land or to many trades, in the Middle Ages Jews turned to commerce, money lending (at interest), tax collecting, and eventually, banking: “odious” work that Christianity forbade its followers. These jobs situated Jews as a precapitalist middle class, leading to the stereotypes: misers, unscrupulous money lovers. Some Jews served the Polish, Russian, or French nobility doing such “dirty work”; others were court advisors. A clever strategy by the Christian elite: setting up Jews to rebel against when Christian peasants couldn’t

pay their taxes. Historian and poet Aurora Levins Morales dubs these buffer roles “shock absorbers”²³ for the real *responsables*.

The pattern unfolds: trading utility, sometimes sacrificing integrity, to secure communal protection. For Jews, becoming indispensable ensured security, at least for a while; and working with money became a survival tool, synonymous with safety.



The compelling formula: once gentiles are convinced that Jews are satanic God-killers or exploitive power-mongers—conspiring towards “evil” ends—it’s easy to hold us responsible when the economy nosedives or planes demolish the World Trade Center.²⁴ We also become guilty by deviating from Protestant behaviors. Jews are “different.”

Meanwhile, who benefits? The top government and corporate echelon, majority Christian, that calls the shots and consolidates power and wealth. And who suffers? Everyone exploited by those decisions who could be joining together to create systems that benefit most people. As Levins Morales clarifies, “Stereotypes about rich, secretive, conspiring... Jews are used to persuade non-Jewish oppressed people that the cause of their oppression is Jewish greed...rather than an economic system that requires the majority to have too little so a minority can have too much.”²⁵

Cycles of persecution

Anti-Semitism is tricky because its brutality has been intermittent, running in cycles. In feudal times, Jews were conditionally invited to fill gaps in the labor force and offered protection in exchange. Decades of relative calm and acceptance followed, sometimes prosperity. But highly visible in middle roles, Jews were highly vulnerable. Periodically, after sudden crisis came attacks, often state-sanctioned rampages, *pogroms*. In 1348, nearly every Jewish community in Europe was assaulted: 200 were demolished.²⁶ In 17th century Poland alone, 100,000 Jews were massacred.²⁷

Russian revolutionary Leon Trotsky described the 1905 pogroms:

A hundred of Russia’s towns...were transformed into hells...The gang rushes through the town, drunk on vodka and the smell of blood...hounded by police and starvation, [the rioter] now feels himself an unlimited despot... he can throw an old woman out of a third-floor window...rape a little girl

while the entire crowd looks on, hammer a nail into a living human body... He exterminates whole families, he pours petrol over a house, transforms it into a mass of flames.²⁸

SEPHARDIC AND MIZRAHI OPPRESSION

Persecution also became forced conversion. During the Spanish (Christian) Inquisition, Ferdinand and Isabella of Spain issued the Edict of Expulsion in 1492, followed by an order of King Manuel I from Portugal in 1497, condemning 200,000²⁹ Sephardic Jews to exile, while pocketing their resources (funds which possibly funded Columbus' voyage),³⁰ destroying a great Jewish civilization. Tens of thousands were killed as they fled, thousands more tortured and burned at the stake after pledging to convert—*Conversos*—but found (or assumed) to be secretly practicing Judaism.³¹

Though forced to become Catholics, many Spanish and Portuguese Jews did continue Jewish customs undercover. Over the generations, the “secret” was often lost, and they grew up covertly lighting candles in the cellar on Friday nights without knowing why. Today, conversos, or “crypto [hidden] Jews,” in the southwestern U.S. and Latin America have begun telling the stories, finding community, reclaiming mixed heritage.

Jews living in Islamic lands, Mizrahim, were often treated as second-class along with Christians, bearing the sub-status of *dhimmi*,³² enduring conversion, clothing restrictions, bans on holding office, and taxes, which also granted protection. Land was confiscated, property wrecked, cultures devalued. On rare occasions, they were tortured, expelled, or killed; in one example, in 1066 a mob in Granada massacred 4000 Jews. But in Muslim lands overall, argues Iraqi international relations scholar Avi Shlaim, the reality was complex. Being cast as second-class was the rule, persecution the exception, alongside tolerance, multiculturalism, and “creative coexistence.”³³

Still, in 1941, nearly 200 Baghdad Jews were murdered during the holiday of *Shavuot*, in the *Farhud* pogrom. Recalling her mother's memories, therapist Rachel Wahba describes, “the screams, the screams... When it was over my mother saw the Tigris River filled with pieces of Jewish...lives.”³⁴ After watching “mothers and daughters raped in front

of their families, babies pulled limb from limb,” her mother fled Iraq.³⁵

Also, during World War II, Libyan Jews were exterminated, and Algerian, Tunisian, and Moroccan Jews were deported to camps, even though Moroccan King Mohammed V managed to protect some. In the mid to late 1940s, anti-Jewish riots killed hundreds from Libya to Egypt, from Yemen to Iraq; and tens of thousands escaped Iran in the wake of the 1979 Islamic revolution.

Racially stigmatized bodies: a new(er) stereotype

Despite what St. Augustine preached, European Jews didn’t have horns or tails. But in some ways we looked different from most Christians: our hair, noses, body shapes. Our skin color was sometimes dark, even swarthy, the legacy of our Middle Eastern origins—another reason, ostensibly, to see us as a people apart. Jews were Europe’s “racialized Other.”³⁶

A portent of what would follow, the Spanish Inquisition deemed any converso who had one drop of Jewish blood to be impure, according to the *Limpieza de Sangre* (Christian blood purity standards). By the 1800s, *pseudo*-scientific racial determinism was sweeping through Europe, stamping Jews with a new stereotype: physically decadent, shifty bulging eyes, hooked noses, moist hands, and a “furtive nervous look.”³⁷

Anti-Semitism became racism, stigmatizing Jews not just as theologically guilty or economically exploitative, but as genetically inferior. Our bodies, supposedly scarred by God, reflected the sin within: “Being black, being Jewish, being diseased and being ‘ugly.’”³⁸ This accusation conveniently justified the right-around-the-corner Nazi ideology, that Jews contaminate Aryan blood—an ideology that would wipe out well over one-third of the world’s Jews,³⁹ two-thirds of all European Jews.⁴⁰

The Shoah: persecution to genocide

November 9, 1938, *Kristallnacht* (Crystal Night—for the broken glass), the state-orchestrated riot in Germany and Austria that launched the most massive extermination in Jewish history: the Shoah, or Nazi Holocaust. For two days, gangs terrorized Jews, smashing windows, looting homes and businesses, burning synagogues, killing one hundred. The Nazis fined German Jews a billion marks to pay for the damage.⁴¹



Krakow, September 2008—a sparkling afternoon: I’m in Poland for the first time, for a workshop on healing from World War II. My friends and I arrived early to explore, to steep ourselves in context. With our young Polish (Christian) guide Eva, my group of four U.S. Jews—including the daughter of an Auschwitz survivor, and a rabbi whose great-grandparents were killed in Auschwitz-Birkenau—approaches the site where Jews were deported to the camps: the Umschlagplatz. A simple square of red bricks, the edge of the former ghetto, it lies just across the Vistula River, now surrounded by shops, flashing neon, honking horns.

This is a memorial to the 64,000 Jews who lived in Krakow before the war, Eva explains; 6000 survived. Now only 200 Jews are registered here. We draw closer, and I stop, stunned. Before me are sixty-four empty metal chairs, planted throughout the square—waiting for most of the 64,000 who never returned.

We learn about the Christian pharmacist whose office bordered the square. Persuading the Nazis to let him remain so that he (ostensibly) could treat typhus, he saved Jews by hiding them in his office.

What else stands out? The ghetto wall, partially constructed using Jewish tombstones: “You are living in a graveyard,” the Nazis emphasized. “This is the end of the Jewish nation.” (A nation which, Hitler proselytized, was conspiring to destroy Germany.) Yet we also hear about Poles who tossed food over the walls, to keep Jews from starving. In the Warsaw Ghetto, children escaped through holes in the walls and smuggled food back in—if they weren’t discovered. There’s a note about one guard who shot two young smugglers, then returned to eating his sandwich.

Now at the workshop, with me are seventy others: from Europe, including Russia and Latvia, as well as Israel, the U.S., and Australia. One-third of us are Jews. The Auschwitz-Birkenau Memorial staff say we are the only group that includes descendants of Shoah survivors and descendants of Nazis. Our guide Franz (another Polish Christian) tells us that over 200,000 children were murdered in the gas chambers, as soon as they arrived at Birkenau. “The Nazis working in the crematoria drank alcohol and used drugs to kill their conscience,” he continues. “We call them monsters—but they were human and felt great shame. They had to numb that feeling.”

On the trip, I am reading Daniel Mendelsohn's The Lost: A Search for Six of Six Million. I learn that 1.5 million Jews were shot by mobile killing squads, Einsatzkommandos: in the forests of Ponar, the ditches of Babi Yar, the woods at Rumbula (throughout Russia, Poland, Ukraine). I read about mass graves in the Galicia forests, how, after hundreds were stripped and shot, "the earth continued to move for days...because not all of the victims were...dead when the grave was filled in."⁴²

I also read "The Germans and Ukrainians preyed especially on children. They took the children...and bashed their heads on...the sidewalks, whilst they laughed and tried to kill them with one blow."⁴³ Yet I also learn from Mendelsohn that the up-close mass shootings of Jewish children, women, and the elderly in 1941 were traumatic for some soldiers. Deeply shaken, they had mental breakdowns. Mendelsohn says that this psychological effect on the young recruits was one factor leading to more impersonal modes of murder: gas chambers.⁴⁴

Later, in Warsaw, I meet Martin, a Polish Christian from Lublin, who tells me about the "Memory Stones," stolperstein, in Berlin and Budapest: small brass stones, a name emblazoned on each—plus where they were born and where they were killed—placed in front of their homes.

I also remember: somewhere between five and eleven million non-Jews were victims as well.⁴⁵ And there have been other unimaginable genocides—Pol Pot's killing of two million Cambodians; Stalin's starvation of five to seven million Ukrainians; the Turks' slaughter of 1.5 million Armenians; also, the horrendous conditions of the Middle Passage. The U.S. ethnic cleansing of many millions of indigenous peoples.

{End of chapter 1 excerpt}