Commentary

Anti-Semitism May Be Dead, But Can Jews Let Go of It?

■ Culture: Future generations won't accept a Judaism that requires them to pray for persecution to survive.

By ALAN M. DERSHOWITZ

Anti-Semitism, as it affects the average American Jew, is over. Perhaps not forever. But certainly for the foreseeable future.

There are still anti-Semites—in the militia movement, among Louis Farrakhan followers, in the Holocaust-denial movement and sprinkled throughout the general population, but for the most part, these bigots are marginalized individuals with little power or influence over the day-to-day lives of American Jews.

For the first time in our history, anti-Semitism is not being directed against Jews from above—from the government, employers, universities, churches and other powerful institutions. We no longer need to look up to anti-Semites who wield power. Now we look down on anti-Semites who can be annoying and even frightening, but at least at the present time are relatively toothless.

This important change explains why in a poll of Jewish Dartmouth students on whether they believed their Jewishness would hamper their career prospects, not a single one said yes. It also explains why so many of my students have difficulty understanding the decision made by Madeleine Albright's parents to hide their Jewish origins. When Albright was growing up, Jews knew that their Jewishness might well hamper their careers. Today, almost no one tries to hide their Jewish origins. Indeed, some Christians now are seeking out their Jewish roots and proudly proclaiming them.

The last decade of the 20th century has witnessed the end of institutional anti-Semitism. The fall of the Soviet Union, a nation that since the time of Stalin had been a major source of international anti-Semitism, had a domino effect on ending the state sponsorship of this oldest of bigotries. The Catholic Church—the single institution most responsible for the persecution of Jews over the past two millennia—approved diplomatic relations with Israel, thus annulling its entrenched view that Jewish "homelessness . . . was the divine judgment against Jews" for rejecting Jesus. The American Lutheran Church explicitly rejected Martin Luther's anti-Semitic teachings.

A Jew today can live in any neighborhood, even those that formerly were "restricted." And Jews have been welcomed into the "best" families, including the Roosevelts, Kennedys, Cuomos and Rockefellers. Economically, socially and politically, we have become the new WASPs, as a perusal of the sponsor list of any major charitable or cultural event will show.

Yet despite these enormous gains, many Jews do not seem to be able to give up their anachronistic status as victims. A recent book on the American Jewish community notes that about a third of affiliated Jews in San Francisco said "that Jewish candidates could not be elected to Congress from San Francisco. Yet three of our four congressional representatives were, in fact, well-identified Jews at the time the poll was conducted. And they had been elevated by a population that was about 95% non-Jewish."

Why then are so many American Jews so unwilling to accept this good news about the end of institutional anti-Semitism? Because they find in it a harbinger of bad news about Jewish continuity. It has long been argued that Jews need enemies to survive, that without persecution Jewish life will disappear.

This victimization perspective on Jewish survival has not been limited to fervently Orthodox rabbis. Theodor Herzl, the founder of political Zionism and a secular Jew, believed that "our enemies have made us one." He predicted that if our "Christian hosts were to leave us in peace . . . for two generations," the Jewish people "would merge entirely into surrounding races." Albert Einstein agreed: "It may be thanks to anti-Semitism that we are able to preserve our existence as a race." Jean-Paul Sartre, a non-Jew, went even further arguing that "it is the anti-Semite that makes the Jew."

I call this the *"tsuris* theory of Jewish survival." (*"Tsuris"* means trouble in Yiddish.) This negative theory seems to be supported by current trends. Just at the time when Jews have nothing to fear from remaining Jewish, they are shedding their Jewish identity in record numbers. I believe that this is happening because far too much of Jewish identity has been tied to our victimization and our long history of being persecuted. We are not prepared to face what I call the coming "post-persecution era of Jewish history."

As we enter that era, we must define a more positive Jewish identity based not on what our enemies have done to us, but rather on what we are able to contribute to the world. Unless Jewish life in America can thrive in good times, when Jews are accepted as first-class Americans, it will not survive the coming century. Our children will not accept a Judaism that requires them to pray for persecution so that they may survive.

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