The Pandemic, Antisemitism, and the Lachrymose Conception of Jewish History

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On April 18, 2020 a protest against lockdowns enacted to stop the spread of COVID-19 took place at the Ohio Statehouse.[1] The protestors waved Trump banners and yellow Tea Party "Don't Tread on Me" flags, and they held signs reading "Open Ohio" or "Open My County." Among protesters were some with antisemitic signs. Some spotted signs depicting a blue rat with a star of David and a caption "The Real Plague." Soon, conspiracies around George Soros, the Hungarian-born Jewish American philanthropist and a Holocaust survivor, began to circulate in far-right circles.[2] This has come on the heels of the upsurge of antisemitic attacks that have intensified in the US since 2016, leading to responses in op-eds, blog posts, and reports that almost invariably make sweeping statements about Jewish history and antisemitism. "COVID-19, like any crisis in history since the inception of the Jewish people, will ignite a wave of antisemitism," wrote Michael Laitman on the online platform JewishBoston.com.[3] NPR reported: "American Jews are finding themselves in a historically familiar position: Scapegoated for a plague."[4] "All of this can feel medieval," wrote Aviya Kushner in *The Forward*.[5]

Many of the articles refer to the premodern era, with the Black Death, which peaked in western Europe in 1348–49, and the persecution of Jews that followed repeatedly becoming a focal point of their examples. Aviya Kushner homed in on the word "burning." Brian

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Schrauger, in *The Jerusalem Post*, discussed Jews being "slaughtered," "murdered," "bludgeoned to death, herded into houses to be burned alive en masse, stripped naked and marched to a collective massacre," before asking "Could COVID-19 ignite an outbreak of antisemitism?"[6] Dan Freedman, in *Moment Magazine*, sought to explain "why Jews were blamed for the Black Death"; doing so, he too repeated the language of persecution by highlighting "episodes of violence," "slaughter," "burning," "torture," and more.[7] Although Freedman did not answer the question asked, the answer seems implicit in the vocabulary he employed.

Even before the COVID-19 crisis, recent acts of antisemitic violence, including shootings and stabbings, have prompted widespread responses. In their discussions of the issue, members of the news media and Jewish community leaders alike commonly cite the string of anti-Jewish attacks that have occurred in recent years in the United States—in Pittsburgh, Poway, and Brooklyn. Commentators analyzing the December 2019 Hanukkah attack in Monsey, New York commonly referred back to these and other recent cases of anti-Jewish violence to emphasize the rise of antisemitic violence.[8] A headline to Deborah Lipstadt's piece published in *The Atlantic* following the Monsey attack declared: "Jews Are Going Underground."[9]

The intention of these media articles has been to combat antisemitism by pleading that we learn lessons from the past. Yet, the act of recounting horrifying violence underscores the dangerously narrow context of news about Jews and the limited common vocabulary deployed in such reports about past and contemporary events alike—a vocabulary that has been marked, not without good reasons, by the language of persecution. But the relentless repetition of the language of violence does nothing to explain the cause of such anti-Jewish violence. It only suggests to the public that Jews have always been hated by others, with no alternative offered. Showing that kind of persistent hatred does not answer the "why" and thus does not provide readers with tools to combat this hatred. In fact, it may do the opposite; it may encourage hatred and violence as evidenced by the fact that some of the perpetrators of anti-Jewish attacks today have been known to have Googled questions like, for example, "Why Did Hitler Hate Jews?"[10] The current popular writing about American Jews in the era of the pandemic (and Trump) feels eerily like *Leidensgeschichte* (the history of suffering), but without the *Gelehrtengeschichte* (the history of learning) that was equally a hallmark of much nineteenth-century Jewish historiography.

The narrow vocabulary used in public media is not just descriptive. It has a longer and darker history that is rooted in Christian anti-Jewish stories that appeared in medieval and premodern Christian chronicles and anti-Jewish polemical works. Such chronicles recorded noteworthy, and often unusual, events or rumors, much like headline news does today. Among them were attacks on Jews. But because nothing else about Jews was recorded in these premodern works, this relentlessly monothematic form of representation created patterns of thinking about Jews as victims of violent acts. Such attacks were often retroactively justified by spurious tales of Jewish "crimes," such as killing Christian children, poisoning wells, or acting as "usurers" and exploiting European Christians. Premodern Christian readers were thus exposed to repeated stories of massacres of Jews. Over time, this pattern of thinking shaped a perception of Jews' place in, or rather exclusion from, Christian society. Today, as we witness again the horrifying attacks against Jews, we are also witnessing a replication of this limited premodern vocabulary.

There are costs to this: this language focused on persecution and killing has left little space for alternative ways of thinking (or speaking or writing) about Jews and their place in society. It continues to marginalize them and to set them apart as targets of hatred and violence.[11] Such emphasis on persecution not only distorts the Jewish past but also does damage *now*.[12] By repeating this language of persecution, even well-meaning writers are participating in the perilous normalization of violence against Jews. Recounting ostensibly historical patterns of violence against Jews marks them as perpetual subjects of hatred and prompts those who do not know much about Jews or Jewish history to turn to Google for answers about "why Jews are hated," only to find themselves directed to self-perpetuating results. This is only amplified by stories highlighting Haredi Jews, whose visual otherness serves to cement perceptions of the Otherness of Jews more generally.

By focusing on persecutions, journalists and other intellectuals who write about Jews in times of COVID-19 and Trump are distorting Jewish history. As noted, Aviya Kushner proclaimed in her piece on pandemics and antisemitism in *The Forward*, "All of this can feel medieval."[13] By identifying the "medieval" with persecutions, Kushner and others have sidestepped a much more complex past, as well as decades of scholarship that has tried to argue otherwise—as if confirming the observation by historian Salo Baron in 1939 that the "Jewish public [was] sort of enamored with the tales of ancient and modern persecutions" and underscoring how resistant to scholars' findings the collective historical consciousness is.[14]

Jewish history is replete with much more than examples of anti-Jewish violence and persecution, and, for generations now, scholars of Jewish history have worked to move away from what Salo Baron termed in 1928 the "lachrymose conception of Jewish history," a history focused on recounting persecution, or *Leidensgeschichte*. Baron sought to challenge his contemporaries' "habit of thinking" about the medieval and modern in terms of black and white by rethinking the prevailing view of the premodern period as one defined by Jews' suffering. Yet, he also called for a radical reevaluation of "Jewish progress under Western liberty" in the modern period.[15] Baron's vision of Jewish history thus allowed for less of a stark break between the two eras than had his predecessors. Just as the premodern was no longer the drearily bleak period of relentless suffering—an image that, alas, has made a resurgence now in the popular press—the modern period was equally less sanguine. Baron's work displays a palpable disenchantment with modernity.

Salo Baron, trained in Vienna but working within the American academic context, was not alone in his quest. He was joined by Cecil Roth, a British historian of Jews whose books were aimed at popular audiences, and who, for that reason, has been shunned by professional historians, though he also published broadly in scholarly journals.[16] Like Baron, Roth was a scholar of premodern history, a period perceived then and now as dominated by persecution. In 1932, four years after Baron's seminal essay "Ghetto and Emancipation," Roth published an essay in the Italian journal *La Rassegna Mensile di Israel* titled "The Most Persecuted People?" in which he sought to complicate the notion of Jewish suffering and the traditional notion of Jewish martyrdom. In his piece, Roth challenged the idea that all violence from which Jews suffered was automatically antisemitic.[17] Episodes of "Jewish martyrdom," Roth argued, were very often episodes of "general history," with Jews caught in bigger events.[18] A few years later, Roth published his popular *A Short History of the Jewish People*, in which he declared his desire "to break with" earlier Jewish historiography that tended to overstress "the traditional tale of woe."[19] Roth sought to "prevent the wood from being obscured by the undergrowth, and to convey above all the glorious sweep and continuity which makes Jewish history the most fascinating."[20]

Both scholars wrote their major works at the height, or in the immediate aftermath, of the Nazis' genocidal campaign against Jews. In fact, both authors explicitly or implicitly used their scholarship to combat antisemitism, in part by expanding the existing understanding of what Jewish life and experience had been like in the past.[21] Both

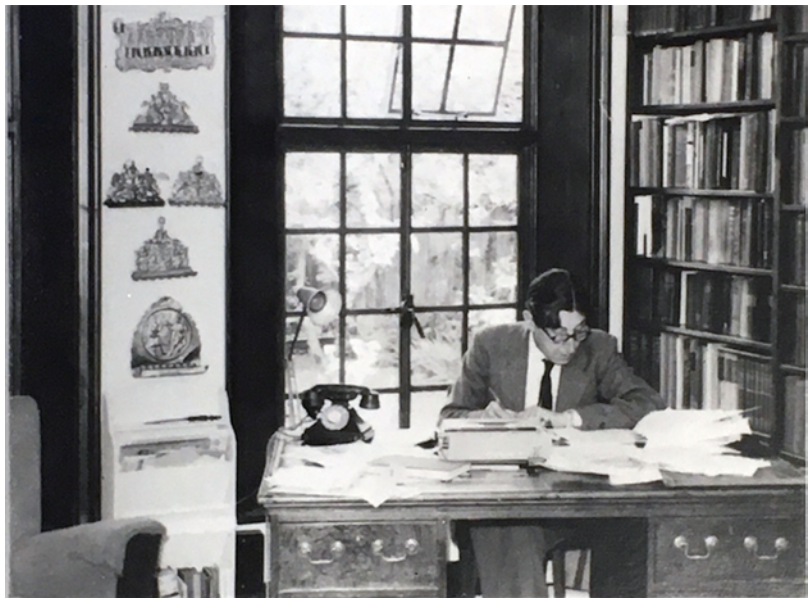

Figure 1. Cecil Roth at Charlbury Road, Oxford c. 1955, Special Collections, Leeds University Library, MS Roth (pers) 15, item 3.

Baron and Roth, in different ways, strove to show Jews not as insular victims of violence but as historical actors integrated into the societies in which they lived, even in the premodern period. Both were early proponents of what is now called "shared history." Roth insisted that, historically, "the Jew was . . . thoroughly acclimatised in Europe and identified with that European civilization." Jews, he stressed, "associated permanently with Europe, with European culture, with the European outlook, and (for many generations at least) with European soil."[22] In fact, he asserted boldly, "Jews were the only real Europeans," able as they were to bridge different regions and cultures.[23] Even in the "ghetto," "in many ways the life was as characteristically Italian, or German, or French, as that of the great world outside," Roth wrote.[24] And, as such, "Jews played a vital part in the intellectual process to which modern Europe owes its birth."[25]

At the same time, neither Baron nor Roth denied Jewish suffering. Indeed, parts of Roth's *A Short History* is very lachrymose, as is, understandably, the testimony Baron gave during the Eichmann trial in 1961, in which he recounted Nazi policies of genocide and drew a sharp contrast between them and those of the earlier eras.[26]

Figure 2. Salo Baron testifying at the trial of Adolf Eichmann, 1961. Source: The Government Press Office, Israel.

In its "Daily News Bulletin," the Jewish Telegraphic Agency reported that, during his testimony at the Eichmann trial, Salo Baron "turned the court room into a college classroom as he recited the history of European Jewry, showing that, despite oppressions and persecutions over the centuries, the Jewish communities in Europe had made vast contributions to learning in all fields until "the Nazi movement set the clock back."[27] In his testimony, Baron recited the Jews' accomplishments and flourishes of their culture to amplify what was lost due to Nazi genocidal policies that led to the destruction of Jewish life and culture in Europe, unprecedented "in the entire history of the Jewish people" and "in [its] scope, geographic extension, and murderous intention."[28]

But Baron understood what seems now lost on many of the modern writers responding to antisemitism: the perilous turn to the Middle Ages as an era of anti-Jewish persecution. Baron argued that the Nazis deceptively used the Middle Ages and the accounts of anti-Jewish persecution and legislation to "camouflage" their novel policies concerning Jews. "Even progressive people in and outside Germany were often deceived," Baron wrote, "and throughout the 1930s one frequently heard that the Nazis wished to turn the clock back to the 'dark' Middle Ages. Such assertions maligned the Middle Ages, which tried to establish the reign of morality and order." Baron acknowledged that "the medieval system certainly had many shortcomings and was guilty of many injustices, particularly against the Jewish minority," but he warned (already in 1935), "a mere perusal of the basic privileges of medieval Jewry (enacted by Henry IV, Frederick I, Frederick II, etc.) and of the recent Nazi laws reveals the difference between a primarily positive and constructive and a purely negative type of legislation."[29]

While Baron stayed within the confines of scholarship accepted within the academy, Roth unabashedly sought to reach out to the public and touted in his popular books the "Jewish contribution to civilization."[30] In the process, both Roth and Baron pointed the spotlight in Jewish history away from narratives of persecution, suffering, and antisemitic stereotypes toward many of the more positive aspects of Jewish history.

Ultimately, this was because both men were interested in the "perseverance" and "survival" of Jews—evidence of the historical context in which they were writing—and as such they knew that they needed to study more than moments of defeat and destruction.[31] Instead, both Baron and Roth sought to place Jewish suffering in its broader historical contexts, while also emphasizing other aspects of Jewish

social, religious, and cultural experiences through the ages. For both, religion played a key role in that story of Jews' vitality and survival. As Baron put it, "What really matters in Jewish religion is not the immortality of an individual Jew, but that of the Jewish people."[32] It was thus that Baron's, but also Roth's, scholarship pursued questions of the continuity rather than the destruction of the Jewish people. As Baron noted in 1945, "Without an inner determination to survive, without strong beliefs and rich culture and powerful institutions, the Jewish people could not possibly have come down the ages."[33] Both authors sought to show that Jews were not "mere objects" of historical developments, for, as Baron put it in his essay on "Newer Emphases in Jewish History," which appeared in *Jewish Social Studies* in 1963, "were Jews mere objects of general historical evolution, they could not possibly have survived the successive waves of hostility throughout the ages."[34] For all their efforts to move beyond a paradigm of suffering, theirs was not an idealized history. Baron, for his part, was careful to acknowledge "a multicolored, sordid reality" against another extreme of Jewish historiography—"oversimplified and hence somewhat distorted idealized generalizations."[35]

As a corollary, both Baron and Roth provided an expanded vocabulary and imagery of the Jewish past that they felt was "more in accord with historical truth" than the more lachrymose portrayals of Heinrich Graetz and Simon Dubnow.[36] While Baron left a mark on the academic world, first with his *A Social and Religious History of the Jews,* published by Columbia University Press in 1937 and then in an enlarged multivolume edition, which started to appear in 1952, Roth's books, all published by non-academic presses, reached far more people. He also revised his *A Short History* in response to changing historical circumstances. As Roth wrote in his preface to the fifth revised edition of his book in 1958:

> The first edition of this work (1936) appeared when the Nazi persecution had already begun its deadly work and the noble fruits of Jewish Emancipation were being destroyed in Germany. The second (1943) was distributed to the fighting forces when the reaction had already engulfed, in a manner too ghastly for belief, almost all of the continent of Europe, and the note of optimism at the end of the new material was justified only by faith. The third (1948) had to chronicle in its additional pages the virtual annihilation of European Jewry. But the fourth (1953) was privileged to tell the amazing story of national resurrection and the establishment of the State of Israel, whose first ten years of heroic achievement are briefly summarized in the final section that has now been added (1958).[37]

In the 1969 edition, revised after Roth had moved to Jerusalem and witnessed from his roof terrace the taking of the Old City by Israeli forces during the Six Day War, he noted "Thank God that I have been privileged to witness and to record the crowning mercies inadequately described in the new pages now appended to this work."[38] Roth's *A Short History* enjoyed multiple editions and printings in England, the US, Italy, Germany, France, Spain, and Portugal. Similarly, Roth's *The Jewish Contribution to Civilization* boasted repeated international editions and translations after it was first published in 1938 until its last Hebrew edition in 1961.

Despite the pessimism Roth expressed in his preface to the 1948 edition of *A Short History*, even after the devastation of European Jewry in World War II, both scholars continued to labor to move beyond death and persecution in their accounts of Jewish history: Cecil Roth, by bringing the splendor of Jewish art and material culture to scholarly and popular attention at a time when few institutions focused on Jewish art or art history, and Salo Baron, for his part, unapologetically reaffirming his position against the lachrymose conception of Jewish history in his 1963 essay.[39] In both cases, this was a conscious choice. Both scholars knew precisely what had happened to European Jewry. Baron had lost his family in Poland, and both he and Roth were engaged in the recovery of European Jewish cultural heritage following World War II. As Roth remarked, "the indescribable horrors of the decade of Nazi domination," put Jews' medieval and early modern suffering in perspective. "[T]he martyrdom of the Jews" in the premodern period was "paradise" in comparison to the Nazi period, he ventured.[40]

What has often been misunderstood about the shift away from the history of suffering epitomized in Baron's oft-quoted but still misunderstood phrase "lachrymose conception of Jewish history" is that it was not intended as a denial of suffering but rather as an affirmation of Jewish history and life, in all its diverse aspects, precisely during and after moments of vicious antisemitic attacks and violence.[41] Doing so, historians of the Jews like Baron and Roth sought to provide an alternative vocabulary—a vocabulary of belonging and not only of exclusion and violence. For both men—as historians and activists within their respective Jewish communities in the US and the UK—this approach to Jewish history would help new generations identify with the Jewish past. But it would also reveal a more complex "general history," an unfortunate term still commonly used to denote non-Jewish history. (There is nothing "general" about this history, which is

as particular as any other, but it does represent a dominant narrative and perhaps should be more properly called "the dominant history.")

Just as Nikole Hannah-Jones's "The 1619 Project" for *The New York Times* was about expanding the lens of American history in order "to reframe the country's history by placing the consequences of slavery and the contributions of black Americans at the very center of our national narrative," so too was the quest for "historical truth" beyond the "lachrymose conception of Jewish history" in our own field an attempt to hold many things to be true at once.[42] Scholars and popular writers concerned with rising antisemitism today would do well to revisit and appreciate Baron's and Roth's efforts to move away from traditional tales of woe and report and reflect instead on a much more multifaceted Jewish historical experience.

Notes

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10 Shayna Jacobs, Deanna Paul, Maria Sacchetti, and Hannah Knowles, "Hanukkah Stabbing Suspect Searched 'Why Did Hitler Hate The Jews,' Prosecutors Say," *Washington Post*, Dec. 31, 2019, https://www.washingtonpost.com/nation/2019/12/30/monsey-stabbing-grafton-thomas-suspect/.

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12 Salo W. Baron, "Newer Emphases in Jewish History," *Jewish Social Studies* 25, no. 4 (1963): 240.

13 Kushner, "Pandemics Have Always Incited Anti-Semitism." Kushner raised a similarly problematic vision of the Middle Ages in another piece in *The Forward*: idem, "For Jews, Curfews Bring Eerie Reminders of Medieval and Holocaust Eras," *Forward*, June 2, 2020, https://forward.com/culture/447861/for-jews-curfews-bring-eerie-reminders-of-medieval-and-holocaust-eras/. The Salo Baron quote comes from Salo Wittmayer Baron, "Ghetto and Emancipation," *Menorah Journal* 14 (1928): 516.

14 Salo W. Baron, "Emphases in Jewish History," *Jewish Social Studies* 1, no. 1 (1939): 37.

15 Baron, "Ghetto and Emancipation," 516.

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17 Cecil Roth, "Il Popolo Più Perseguitato?" *La Rassegna Mensile di Israel* 7, no. 3 (1932): 83–92.

18 Ibid., 85.

19 Cecil Roth, *A Short History of the Jewish People 1600 B.C.–A.D. 1935* (London, 1936), vii.

20 Ibid.

21 Cecil Roth's *The Jewish Contribution to Civilization* (London, 1938) was written to debunk antisemitic myths; his *The Ritual Murder Libel and the Jew: The Report by Cardinal Lorenzo Ganganelli (Pope Clement XIV)*, ed. Cecil Roth (London, 1935) was written in response to the May 1, 1934 issue of *Der Stürmer*. On Salo Baron's activism to combat antisemitism, see Elisabeth Gallas, *A Mortuary of Books: The Rescue of Jewish Culture after the Holocaust* (New York, 2019), 197.
22 Roth, *A Short History* (1936), 137, 167, 305.
23 Roth, *The Jewish Contribution to Civilization* (1938), 43; idem, *The Jewish Contribution to Civilization* (London, 1956), 38.
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25 Roth, *The Jewish Contribution to Civilization* (1938), 41.
26 Salo Baron, "European Jewry Before and After Hitler," *American Jewish Year Book* 63 (1962): 3–53.
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28 The Eichmann Trial, Session 13, Apr. 24, 1961; Baron, "European Jewry," 5.
29 Ibid., 37.
30 Roth, *The Jewish Contribution to Civilization* (1938). Just in 1938, the book was reissued four times. A US edition was issued in 1940. A pocket edition was then published in 1943 and 1956. And the book was translated into several languages. On "contributionism" in Jewish historiography, see Moshe Rosman, "The Jewish Contribution to (Multicultural) Civilization," in *How Jewish Is Jewish History?* (Oxford, 2007), 111–30.
31 See, for example, Baron, "Emphases in Jewish History," 37.
32 Salo Wittmayer Baron, *A Social and Religious History of the Jews*, 3 vols. (New York, 1937), 1: 13. See, also, Gallas, *A Mortuary of Books*, 198.
33 Quoted in Gallas, *A Mortuary of Books*, 216.
34 Baron, "Newer Emphases in Jewish History," 244.
35 Baron, "Emphases in Jewish History," 18.
36 Baron, "Ghetto and Emancipation," 526.
37 Cecil Roth, *A Short History of the Jewish People* (rev. ed., London, 1969), v.
38 Ibid.
39 Baron, "Newer Emphases in Jewish History," 240; Gallas, *A Mortuary of Books*, 192.
40 Cecil Roth, *A Short History of the Jewish People* (rev. ed., London, 1948), vi.
41 For a discussion of how Baron's phrase has been misunderstood, from a different angle, see David Engel, "Crisis and Lachrymosity: On Salo Baron, Neobaronianism, and the Study of Modern European Jewish History," *Jewish History* 20, no. 3 (2006): 243–64.
42 "The 1619 Project," *New York Times*, accessed Aug. 8, 2020, https://www.nytimes.com/interactive/2019/08/14/magazine/1619-america-slavery.html.

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