To Combat Antisemitism, Understand Its Variety

**By Gary Saul Morson**

If you ask students why they support Hamas’s call to eliminate Israel and murder Jews, many will deny – sincerely – that they are antisemitic. How is that possible? Some protesters chanting “from the river to the sea” may also sign statements condemning antisemitism and resent accusations that they hate Jews. We can’t move them by showing the harm antisemitism has done because they don’t regard themselves as antisemitic.

To reach them, we have to understand their way of thinking. Like nationalism and socialism, antisemitism comes in types. To counter it, we must respond to each type appropriately. I have often encountered resistance from Jewish scholars to drawing any distinctions, as if, as the French proverb has it, “to understand is to forgive.” Sometimes that is true: Apologists for antisemites often do insist on “historical context,” as if only simplistic people could condemn violating women and murdering babies. But not all serious efforts to understand are barely disguised apologies. Sometimes when I have come to understand the motivations of violent people, the motives turn out to be even worse than I had supposed.

At least three types of antisemitism are widespread. The core type, which most people have in mind, is hatred of Jews simply because they are Jews. Reasons may be advanced, but the hatred isn’t based on reasons. Rather, the reasons stem from the need to justify the hatred. If one justification won’t do, another will be sought. The readiness to switch between divergent, even contradictory, justifications is usually the best indicator of this incorrigible antisemitism.

History displays ample evidence. In one age or culture, the justification will be religious, in another economic, in yet another something else. Marx would have laughed at the religious antisemitism still widespread in Russia, but he justified economic antisemitism fitting has philosophical system. “What is the secular basis of Judaism?” he asked in his essay “On the Jewish Question.” “Practical need, self-interest. What is the worldly religion of the Jew? Huckstering. What is his worldly God? Money.”

In the 20th century, the same complex of ideas that justified eugenics underwrote Nazi racialist antisemitism, Stalin condemned the Jews’ “rootless cosmopolitanism, “while today we hear the rhetoric of “anticolonialism.” When this thinking prevails, argument based on evidence proves pointless. This hatred can even be its own justification. If so many people in so many cultures over so many centuries have persecuted Jew, the argument goes, there must be a reason.

On campuses today we see a second type of antisemitism, in which hatred of Jews isn’t the starting point but the consequence of another way of understanding events. Young people have been taught an “intersectionality” doctrine that divides people into good and evil: racists and antiracists, victimizers and victims, colonizer and colonized. Once such thinking becomes routine. It is almost inevitable that opponents in any new conflict will be pigeonholed. And so, Jews become colonizers and Palestinians, represented by Hamas, become their hapless victims. Since one side is entirely evil, anything done to them is justified. One must prevail “by any means necessary.” That is why Hamas’s brutality can be accepted, even praise.

People who think this way believe thy aren’t antisemitic because they didn’t start with some preconceived hatred. Rather, they applied a familiar, widely approved framework. Today the evil party is Israel; tomorrow another great Satan may be designated. Under different circumstance, Jews could have found themselves in the victim category.

In a third type of antisemitism, hatred is based on specific reasons, which aren’t merely excuses. Think of it this way: If I despise the Taliban and Hamas, it isn’t because I cherish an irrational hatred of Afghans or Palestinians, but because of what those terror groups have done and intend to do. By the same token, if one really believes that the elders of Zion plot to enslave the world or that Jews have constructed a state based on apartheid and genocide, then militancy against Israel will seem rational. These antisemites may really imagine they are drawing rational conclusions from the facts. The problem is that their facts are entirely spurious.

Why don’t these ignorant antisemites see the real facts? In Soviet Russia, where no alternative news sources existed, people could readily be led to believe anything. That isn’t true among us, where diverse source they close themselves off from any unapproved voice and commonly favor censorship of “misinformation.” I understand why Soviet citizens accepted absurdities but have much less sympathy from this willful ignorance.

It might seem that the first type of antisemitism is the worst, because it is defined incorrigible, but all three can lead to the same horrors. Antisemitism is a big tent, and in any group of antisemites we can find all types hating Israel. All the same, we must resist the temptation to see no differences. If we are to have any chance of reaching those being drawn into antisemitic thinking, we must recognize how to address each type.

To counter intersectional antisemitism, we must eliminate intersectionality from the curriculum. Once people accept it, any pro-Israel arguments will seem irrelevant. By the same token, to address ignorant antisemitism we need to counter the tendency to silo ourselves.

Among young Americans, intersectional antisemitism seems most common. We need to show young people that, a Alexander Solzhenitsyn explained, the line between good and evil runs not between classes, nations, or parties, but “through every human heart.”