

Antisemitism: Combating the recurring virus

By Robert Hersowitz

I RECENTLY had my first injection of the shingles vaccine. Shingles is caused by the varicella-zoster virus, which remains in your body for the rest of your life. Years later, the virus may reactivate as shingles. Antisemitism, which we are all experiencing, can be compared to this virus. Antisemitism is not a physical phenomenon, it is a sociological and ideological malaise that has plagued Jewish people for centuries.

Author and historian Harry Freedman in his superb new book, *Shylock's Venice*, writes about the changing phases of antisemitism. Unlike most people's understanding of the phenomenon, Freedman reminds us that antisemitism and hatred of Jews predates the death of Christ. He refers to anti-Jewish riots that broke out in Alexandria in 38 CE. He describes three main reasons why Jews, particularly in the Diaspora, experienced antisemitism. They are all connected to three types of "otherness."

The first type of antisemitism concerned the de facto "otherness of the Jews." He refers to Moses as an example of this. "Moses is presented as the stranger, the Jew who looks and acts just like everyone else, yet will destroy everything that his compatriots cared about or believed in." This form of antisemitism is something that many Jews experience when living among gentiles. I experienced this on several occasions when I lived in the UK and worked in Europe. There was always a need to "blend in." I remember explaining to our somewhat baffled Israeli relatives that in England, we lived two lives. In the suburbs of northwest London, where we went about our business quite openly, I always wore my *kippah* and did not feel the need to hide my Jewishness in the neighborhood where more than 50% of the population were Jewish. However, when I left the confines of Finchley and Golders Green, I always traveled incognito. At least I thought I was incognito. In these times when antisemitism has reared its ugly head in places like London, the guise of a man wearing a head covering on a warm summer's day is more likely to make him appear as a Jew who is hiding his identity. I had many non-Jewish colleagues, among whom were good friends. It was always very difficult to explain to them why I could not eat with them, particularly on Saturdays. One of these individuals was a man whom I shall call Andrew. We worked very closely together and became good friends – until he became engaged married and asked me to be the best man at his wedding.

"You're one of my closest friends," he entreated me. "Why on earth can't you make an exception and come and celebrate my wedding on Saturday afternoon?" No amount of explaining would help. In the end, I offended him to such an extent that we ceased being friends.

I experienced this sense of "otherness" when I worked as a consultant at the Royal Household in Buckingham Palace and Windsor Castle. It took me 16 years to realize that my Jewish identity did not sit so comfortably with the way of life within the household. I discovered this just before I made *aliyah* when I announced that I would be taking Israeli citizenship. The reaction I got was an astonished "Oh!" This was not followed by "How nice" or "We are so happy for you." The reaction I got was to be told that I could no longer work as a consultant with the household and still retain my security pass, which had allowed me to have free access to all the royal houses in the UK. Strangely, my work as a consultant at NATO headquarters in Brussels continued without any restrictions on my security pass, even though the authorities at NATO knew that I was living in Israel.

In his book, Freedman goes on to talk about the Jew who is perceived as a monster:

"One of the very earliest images of Jews as monsters was portrayed by the Stoic philosopher Posidonius. He claimed that when the Greek King Antiochus IV Epiphanes invaded Jerusalem in 168 BCE, he found a Greek prisoner in the Temple miserably sitting in front of the splendid feast. The prisoner told him that every year the Jews would capture and fatten a Greek citizen, kill him, and eat him as part of an anti-Hellenistic ritual."

This is clearly the hideous antisemitic trope of the blood libel promulgated again and again by our enemies throughout the centuries. The final example of antisemitic "otherness" is the Jew as some kind of outsider god.

Freedman writes: "It is how contemporary antisemites think of Jews, who are said to control the banks, manipulate the media, and run the world. It is quite flattering. If only it were true."

Freedman's observations describe what most loyal Jews in Israel and around the world are currently experiencing. Instead of seeing the war with Hamas as an existential war where we are defending ourselves against a

morally depraved enemy, onlookers – including gentiles and Jews in the Diaspora – are being told that Israel's war against Hamas and its terrorists is a war against courageous militants and innocent civilians. They are being told by the media that Israel is a military superpower with unlimited arms and fighting resources that are used to crush, conquer, and occupy Arab lands. There are constant attempts to demonize Israel in every form of the media. Graphic images taken straight out of Goebbel's *Der Sturmer* depict Jews as hideous people with hooked noses and claw-like hands trying to take over the world. Israelis and their leaders are depicted as jackboot-wearing Nazis adorned with swastikas. The true history of the State of Israel, and all the wars fought against us over the past 75 years, are conveniently ignored. Threats by our enemies to conquer our land and drive us "from the river to the sea" are completely disregarded.

It is as if antisemitism, like shingles, lurks in the body of society and suddenly erupts into a contagion. The advice for those who contract shingles is to catch it early, and nip it in the bud before it gets out of hand. Sadly, if we look around the world, we see that this contagion has indeed spread from country to country. It would be more comprehensible if we saw antisemitic hysteria breaking out in the lands of our traditional enemies; however, what is most alarming to us now is how this malignant plague has spread around nations that were always level-headed, democratic, and morally principled. The once respected, politically strategic organizations such as the UN have infused antisemitic bile into all their institutions. When the Security Council is chaired by countries like Syria, Iran, and other evil regimes, it's hardly likely that there would be any sympathy for Israel or the Jewish people. The current secretary general, António Guterres, openly expressed his deleterious views when he said, "The conflict in Gaza did not take place in a vacuum." Such outrageous remarks reflect decades of anti-Israel bias within the organization that he purports to represent.

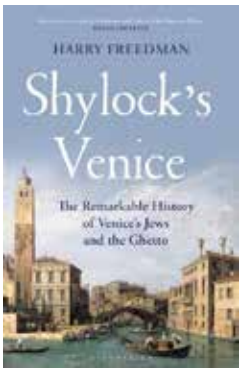


WIKIPEDIA

Shylock portrayed by actor Ernst von Possart, c. 1904.

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So, what is the remedy or the cure for this viral ailment? After many decades of designing and delivering leadership programs in the public and private sector, I have come up with a first-aid kit that could help to combat antisemitism. It goes by the acronym EACH.



BLOOMSBURY

The cover of Harry Freedman's new book.

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Education: Promote education about Jewish history, culture, and contributions to society. Teach people about the Holocaust and other instances of antisemitic persecution to raise awareness about the consequences of hatred and discrimination. Books like Harry Freedman's *Shylock's Venice* provide a revealing backdrop to understanding the origins of antisemitism.

Another aspect of education includes promoting media literacy and critical thinking skills to help individuals identify and challenge antisemitic narratives in traditional and social media.

Before I made *aliyah* in 2014, our synagogue in London used to hold sessions on Sunday mornings where volunteers were trained on how to write letters to the media (primarily the BBC) to challenge the misreporting of news in Israel.

Advocacy: Advocate for legislation and policies that address hate crimes and discrimination against Jews. Ensure the enforcement of existing laws and support initiatives to combat online hate speech and extremism. Be in touch with your political representatives in whichever country you hail from. Sign petitions through organizations such as change.org that seek to right the wrongs against Jewish individuals or groups. Embrace those non-Jewish heroes who stand up for us, such as Nikki Haley; Dr. Phil (McGraw); Ken Griffin; Douglas Murray; Nick Ferrari; a,d Col. Richard Kemp.

Challenge: Challenge stereotypes and misconceptions about Jews in media, education, and public discourse. So many people who live outside Israel are unaware of the facts, especially about the atrocities that took place on October 7. The news that they receive is often filtered through just one lens – the anti-Israel perspective. One should support organizations such as HonestReporting, led by Gil Hoffman. This organization takes on the international media and calls out falsehoods, lies, and ambiguity in the way the current war is being reported. This is incredibly important, as so much of the antisemitic contagion is being spread by dishonest reporting. Individuals should also be encouraged to speak out against antisemitism in their personal and professional lives and should lobby their employers to include Jewish staff in initiatives that promote inclusivity and respect for all people.

Help: Help foster community engagement by building strong Jewish communities and networks to provide support and solidarity against antisemitic incidents. These organizations encourage the reporting of hate crimes and provide resources for victims. In the US, the UK, Australia, and South Africa, organizations such as CSS (Community Security Service) and CST (Community Security Trust) do an amazing job such as patrolling neighborhoods, guarding schools and synagogues, and protecting students on campus (Stand With Us).

As the shingles virus remains latent within our bodies, so viral antisemitism continues to persist within society. We may never find a cure, but as we reflected on Passover, we Jews not only need to remind ourselves of our past, we also need to be aware of our present and our future. The difference between antisemitism in 2024 compared with the darkest days of history – such as the Holocaust, the pogroms of Western and Eastern Europe, the expulsion from Spain and Portugal – is that today we have our own land, the State of Israel, where we can defend ourselves against those who seek our demise. In this ancient biblical land of only 8,630 square miles (260 miles long and 71 miles wide) lies our destiny and our God-given right to exist and flourish and not be infected by the disease of antisemitism. ■