JERUSALEM LETTER / VIEWPOINTS

Jerusalem Center for Public Affairs

No. 255 12 Iyar 5752 / 15 May 1992

# ANTISEMITISM IN THE UNITED STATES, 1992: WHY ARE JEWS WORRIED?

Jerome A. Chanes

**85 Percent Believe Antisemitism is Serious / What Do We Know? / What Do Americans Think About Jews? / Anti-Jewish or Anti-Power? / Dormant Antisemitism / Unfulfilled Predictions / Bush and Buchanan: Weakening Inhibitions / Black Antisemitism / The Gap Between Jewish Perceptions and the Surveys / What We Need to Know**

## 85 Percent Believe Antisemitism is Serious

Recent dramatic, indeed appalling, developments — the events during the past summer in Crown Heights, the remarks of Professor Leonard Jeffries, the unpleasant surprises visited upon us by Pat Buchanan, the candidacy of David Duke — raise serious questions for American Jews. Clearly these developments — individually and cumulatively — indicate that certain taboos long thought to inhere in the society may be at risk. At bottom is the fundamental question: what do these developments — that have been giving Jews in America heartburn and worse — mean in terms of the larger picture of the nature and extent of antisemitism in the United States?

There are a number of specific questions that ought to inform our analysis. First, what do we know? What are the current available data on antisemitism in the United States? What is really happening out there, and what is *not* happening?

Second, how do we explain perceptions within the Jewish community of an antisemitism ascendant, even as data along a broad range of evaluative criteria tell us that antisemitism has declined and probably continues to decline in this country? In 1983, in a survey conducted among American Jews by the American Jewish Committee, approximately one-half of the respondents disagreed with the statement "Antisemitism is currently not a serious problem for American Jews." By 1988, the proportion had risen to 76 percent. In 1990, the National Jewish Population Survey numbers indicated that some 85 percent of American Jews said that antisemitism in the United States is a serious problem.

If things are so good out there, why do so many people think that things are so bad? What accounts for the perception among most in the Jewish grass-roots that antisemitism is a serious problem in America, that the status and security of Jews is at risk?

Third, when Jews say that antisemitism is a serious problem, what do they mean? What exactly are they talking about?

Daniel J. Elazar, Editor and Publisher; Zvi R. Marom, Associate Editor; Mark Ami-El, Managing Editor. 13 Tel-Hai St., Jerusalem, 92107, Israel; Tel. 02-619281, Fax 972-2-619112.  ISSN: 0334-4096.

Fourth, what do we know — and what do we *not* know — about antisemitism in the black community?

Fifth, what *don't* we know about antisemitism? What areas of study and research are indicated?

**What Do We Know?**

First, on the question of the nature and extent of antisemitism in the United States, there are some fairly concrete data. To paraphrase the political commentator Ben Wattenberg, the good news is that the bad news is not all bad.

The data on antisemitism, along a broad range of evaluative criteria, generally indicate that both behavioral and attitudinal antisemitism have declined over the past forty years, even as there are some serious danger signals. Behavioral antisemitism is manifest, of course, in different ways — everything from swastika daubings to political rhetoric. Behavioral antisemitism "where it counts" — large-scale anti-Jewish discrimination; political antisemitism, arguably the most virulent form of antisemitism; the inability or reluctance of the Jewish community to express itself on issues of concern to the body politic — is simply no longer a factor in American life. This kind of antisemitism — the kind that makes a difference in terms of the security and status of American Jews — has declined steadily and dramatically.

This suggests, as a general observation, that in any analysis of antisemitism in the United States, an important distinction must be made between antisemitism, which does exist and must be repudiated and counteracted, and Jewish security, which is strong largely because of a history and tradition of constitutional protections that inform democratic pluralism. While antisemitism and Jewish security are concentric circles and therefore obviously related, the distinction between them is crucial when discussing the issue in the context of America in the 1990s.

With respect to attitudinal antisemitism, this area unfortunately has been a relatively little-studied phenomenon over the past two decades. No wide-ranging, national study of attitudinal antisemitism has been carried out since the Yankelovich/Clark and Martire study of 1981 commissioned by the American Jewish Committee. Most comprehensive, indeed landmark, studies were conducted during the 1960s. Notable among these were the Anti-Defamation League's "Berkeley Studies" (published during the 1960s as a series of seven volumes under the general title *Patterns of Prejudice*) which developed a scale of antisemitic beliefs of non-Jews and articulated the now-classic formulation that the higher the education level, the less likely are non-Jews to hold antisemitic beliefs.

**What Do Americans Think About Jews?**

What do Americans think about Jews? On this fairly narrow question there are fairly conclusive findings. The cumulative data of attitudinal surveys conducted by Yankelovich, Roper, Glock, and their fellow researchers have consistently substantiated the view that the level of conventional antisemitic beliefs has continued in its forty-year decline. Simply put, there are fewer Americans who profess unfavorable images of Jews.

The usual explanation for this transformation is generational. It is not that the antisemites are being converted, but that each succeeding age-group tends to display fewer antisemitic attitudes than the preceding generation of that age group. Committed antisemites are swayed to virtue neither by events nor by prejudice-reduction programs. Antisemites do not fade away; they simply die. Research findings clearly, strongly, and consistently suggest that a younger, better educated, more affluent population is less antisemitic, including, in all likelihood, blacks.

While attitudinal surveys are always suspect, sometimes even for the right reasons, the lack of a truly comprehensive study has greatly hindered the examination of contemporary antisemitism. One has to be able to assess, in some measure, the *latent* aspect of antisemitism; the way antisemitism relates to anti-Zionism and to other intergroup pressures; and other dynamics of antisemitism.

Most recently, the University of Chicago's National Opinion Research Center 1990 General Social Survey — a comprehensive survey of 58 ethnic groups conducted by NORC's Tom W. Smith — provides valuable information on attitudes toward and interaction with Jews. These data, along with others from the University of Michigan's American National Election Studies and from various public opinion polls conducted in recent years (including the annual Roper poll commissioned by the American Jewish Committee), were "massaged" by Tom W. Smith for the American Jewish Committee to elicit specific information about anti-Jewish attitudes (*What Do Americans Think About Jews?* New York: AJC, 1991).

NORC analyzed data related to six areas: perceived social standing of Jews; images of Jews; Israel and antisemitism; the perceived power and influence of Jews; "favorability" ratings of Jews; and social interaction between Jews and non-Jews.

On the question of how Jews are perceived, in terms of social standing relative to other groups, NORC reported that Jews factor out 20th out of 58 ethnic groups — below old-stock nationalities, and above all Eastern European and Middle Eastern groups. This represents an increase in rating over the past quarter-century. Among religions, Jews come in 10th out of 20 religious groups, below "Protestants" and Catholics, but above Mormons, Greek Orthodox, Christian Scientists, Unitarians (!), Spiritualists, and Jehovah's Witnesses. "Clearly Jews are not pariahs," sums up NORC, "but Jewish identification still places them at a relative social disadvantage."

With respect to images or stereotypes that people have about groups — an indicator closely related to perceived social standing — NORC found that with one exception — Jews — minority groups are evaluated more negatively than whites in general. Indeed, Jews are rated most positively on industry, wealth, non-violence, intelligence, and self-support; but third (after southern whites and Asians) on patriotism. However, cautioned NORC, while images of Jews as rich, industrious, self-supporting, intelligent, and hard-working were generally positive, those very images, as they identify Jews as a possible target of envy and resentment, might contain the seeds of renewed antisemitism.

Particularly intriguing are NORC's findings on Israel and antisemitism. It has long been known that anti-Israel and antisemitic attitudes are linked, that antisemitic attitudes are more common among those with negative attitudes toward Israel, and that anti-Israel attitudes are stronger among those with antisemitic beliefs. But NORC found this linkage was not especially strong. Attitudes toward Israel may be related to causes other than antisemitic attitudes — oil, Arabs, a particular world-view, and so on. With respect to the related question of feelings toward Israel, positive feelings have remained high, although they have declined somewhat over the past two decades.

The linkage of dislike of Israel and less favorable attitudes toward Jews is especially noticeable with respect to the patriotism question. NORC found that among those who *liked* Israel, 29 percent rated Jews as less patriotic than whites; among those *disliking* Israel, 45 percent considered Jews as less patriotic.

**Anti-Jewish or Anti-Power?**

It is in the area of "Jewish power" — perceived power and influence compared to other groups — that the results of various surveys are arguably most significant. One of the most common prejudices about Jews is the belief that they exercise too much influence and hold too much power in society. NORC (and Roper) asked the "Jewish-power" question not as "Do Jews have too much power in the United States?" — the question ought not be asked in this way — but, as it should always be asked, as a contextual question: "Which of the following groups — 23 were listed in one survey including Arab oil nations, the media, labor unions, Orientals, blacks, the Catholic Church, the banks, etc. — do you believe have too much influence and power in the United States?" Compared to economic interests in the society, relatively few people view Jews as having excessive power and influence. When Jews are compared with other ethno-religious groups, a somewhat more mixed picture emerges. In most surveys Jews generally come out way down, at between 8 and 20 percent (depending on the question and survey instrument). In one annual survey, the Roper poll, Jews consistently fall below several other minorities; about the only ones lower than the Jews are the Hispanics. (In other surveys, Jews rated above other minorities, but below establishment groups.) Seymour Martin Lipset suggests with regard to this issue that those answering "yes" are not antisemitic, they are anti-power. People think that many groups have too much power in this society.

At bottom, NORC found that the lack of a relationship between low income and social alienation and concern about Jewish influence indicates that envy of Jews is not at present an active force, a potential for increased antisemitism, among the economically distressed.

Mention ought be made of another area related to power and influence, also studied by NORC, that of willingness to vote for a Jew for president. This willingness has increased dramatically over the past thirty years, from 61 percent in 1958 to 89 percent in 1987.

In the area of interaction between Jews and non-Jews, the findings are consistent with NORC's data in other areas. For example, Americans are generally more opposed to "integration" (i.e., living in the same neighborhood or having a close relative marry a person from a specified background) with all other minorities than they are to integration with Jews. Further, acceptance of Jewish/non-Jewish intermarriage has increased, from a 58 percent approval rating in 1968 to 77 percent in 1983.

To sum up NORC's general findings: Antisemitism — negative attitudes in general — are at a historic low point, with no indication of a reversal in its long-term

decline. Further, only few members of certain minority groups harbor some negative attitudes toward Jews, and that conflict between Jews and non-Jews is less serious than are clashes between many other ethnic groups. NORC tells us also that latent sources of antisemitism are not closely connected, and therefore are not likely to sustain one another. The behavioral antisemitism that does exist in one area is almost always unconnected to that in another area. These are important findings. Concludes NORC: "Today antisemitism in America is neither virulent nor growing."

**Dormant Antisemitism**

Having said this, NORC cautions that antisemitism in America is not a spent force, that Jews are yet recognized as an ethnic or religious out-group and are often accordingly judged and treated in a distinctive manner. There remains a linkage of attitudes toward Israel and toward Jews. This linkage could have greater implications if there came to be a growing perception that unqualified American support of Israel is less than essential to American interests. Antisemitism has not disappeared; it has become dormant, and latent antisemitism does have the potential to become actualized. Antisemitic incidents do occur; indeed, the audit of such incidents, prepared annually by the Anti-Defamation League, shows an increase in such manifestations, indicating that there may be a breakdown in certain taboos long thought to be strong.

**Unfulfilled Predictions**

While the data that NORC and other studies provide are useful indicators of what Americans today think about Jews, attitudinal surveys, of course, do not tell the whole story and have any number of inherent problems. Cogent lessons about antisemitism may be learned as well from the reaction to recent experiences. Often it is not what happened that matters, but what did *not* happen. One way of measuring antisemitism is by looking at responses to "conflict" situations, situations that could tend to polarize society, with the expectation that antisemitism would increase in their wake. Over the past four decades there were a whole range of conflict situations, from the Rosenbergs to the oil crises of 1973-74 and 1979 — remember the "Burn Jews, Not Oil" bumper stickers that nobody saw?; the Iran/Contra affair, with its Israel connection; the conviction of Jewish public officials in New York and Maryland; the Boesky insider-trading case; the farm crisis in the mid-1980s; the intifada; and, most, dramatically, the Pollard matter, invoking clearly the question of "dual loyalty." All were situations that everyone confidently expected would trigger expressions of antisemitism, yet, it is most instructive that none of these resulted in an increase of antisemitic expression or attitude in the United States.

**Bush and Buchanan: Weakening Inhibitions**

Two events over the past two years do suggest that some inhibiting factors may be weakening somewhat. When President George Bush, at a news conference on September 12, 1991, characterized Jewish grass-roots activists who had come to Washington to press for loan guarantees to Israel as "powerful political forces," his comments were a direct response to a conflict situation, and were very troubling. Those remarks evoked such an outpouring of antisemitic mail to the White House that the president himself was shocked.

Also serious were the August 1990 remarks of columnist Pat Buchanan prior to the Persian Gulf War. Buchanan charged, "There are only two groups that are beating the drums for war in the Middle East — the Israeli Defense Ministry and its 'amen' corner in the United States." Buchanan's "amen-corner" remarks, together with others in the context of this conflict situation, were troubling.

Related, of course, was the response to Buchanan's candidacy for the Republican Party's 1992 presidential nomination. Two trends emerged as Buchanan ran in a number of primaries: First, the Buchanan candidacy served in large measure to take the wind out of the sails of the presidential candidacy of former Ku Klux Klan leader David Duke (who had garnered 55 percent of the white vote in a 1991 gubernatorial race in Louisiana). Second, in an effort to appear more respectable, Buchanan toned down his rhetoric considerably as the campaign progressed. Nonetheless, at a rally in Marietta, Georgia, Buchanan told a group of Jewish protestors that his rally was "of Americans, by Americans, and for the good old U.S.A.," a classic statement of impugning the loyalty of American Jews.

Who are the Buchanan supporters? Most analysts suggest that Buchanan's support — and Duke's as well — comes not from committed antisemites who are supporting his antisemitic views, but from the large majority of Americans who are indifferent — people for whom Jews are not an issue, but who will vote for a Buchanan *despite* his antisemitic views if self-interest in another area is served.

**Black Antisemitism**

The most difficult questions today have to do with antisemitism in the black community, a major source of communal *angst* for Jews. The fact is that we know very little about the nature and extent of antisemitism in the black community. There has never been a comprehensive study of black attitudes toward Jews, an issue complicated by black attitudes toward whites in general. The data that we have are limited and fragmentary — and mostly old. Until the 1960s the question of black views was sidestepped completely; since then, there have been bits and pieces of a number of other studies, and more than a bit of anecdotal evidence.

Conventional wisdom about black antisemitism is mostly unfounded. For example, the view that as education levels rise in the black community, so does antisemitism, is contrary to the standard and well-documented pattern of the *inverse* relationship between antisemitism and education level. What we can say, based on the little that we know with certitude, is that the level of antisemitism drops steeply for both whites *and* blacks as education level rises, but less so for blacks. Blacks do appear to be relatively more antisemitic than whites at the same education level, but there is little agreement and less clarity on this matter. A serious, comprehensive study of the black — not merely the African-American — population is called for.

In August 1991, an antisemitic murder was committed in Crown Heights. But, in analyzing those conditions in Crown Heights that led to the tragic events, this observer would suggest that a more nuanced analysis is called for. These events had more to do with long-standing "tribal rivalries," to use the words of Columbia University sociologist Jonathan Rieder — rivalries of real estate, power, and culture — than with a deep-seated antisemitism that indeed may not be present among a black population, one that is hardly monolithic, in that neighborhood.

Further, is the antisemitism of the black street kid yelling "Kill the Jew!" the same as the antisemitism of Professor Jeffries, or the same as that of the white skinhead in Jersey City? We will not know very much about what goes on in neighborhoods like Crown Heights, where "Kill the Jew!" is directed at the most visible manifestation of white power, until we are ready to mount a serious ethnographic study on the street. Can we, and indeed ought we, extrapolate Crown Heights to the black population in general or to other communities around the country? A NJCRAC survey of twenty-five communities of significant Jewish and black populations confirms that we cannot.

Let us recall that Williamsburg has the same ingredients as did Crown Heights: "tribal" rivalries over land and power, a well-organized and politically-savvy Hasidic group, a minority group that feels it has been given the short end of the stick. It is a tinder-box that may explode, except the rivalry is with Hispanics. From this perspective, it was not black antisemitism that caused Crown Heights, it was tribal warfare, exploited by outside agitators.

**The Gap Between Jewish Perceptions and the Surveys**

How, then, do we explain the "perception gap" between grass-roots Jewish concerns and the survey data? First, it is important to understand what Jews are saying when they say that antisemitism is a serious problem. A study by Brandeis University's Perlmutter Institute for Jewish Advocacy revealed that when asked about specific areas of "seriousness" of the antisemitism they were reporting, 8 out of 10 respondents did not pinpoint economic, power, or political areas, but rather incidents of vandalism and "Israel-related activity." Or they said something like "I heard from my neighbor that he/she heard on the radio...".

At bottom, it appears that much of the anxiety felt by many American Jews is obviously related to our historical experience, particularly the Holocaust. Our history has made us unusually sensitive, and it is a sensitivity worth maintaining. Thus gut reaction — the "*kishka*" factor — is a response not to antisemitism but to a foreboding of latent antisemitism possibly turning into actual. What is the definition of a Jewish telegram? "Start worrying. Letter follows." It may well be that the 85 percent who agreed that antisemitism is a significant problem for American Jews are responding not to antisemitism but to the Jewish telegram.

The foreboding of Jews, as has been described by Earl Raab and other analysts of antisemitism, can take two forms. One small but vocal group believes that antisemitism is innate in most members of the society and that very little stimulus would be needed to arouse active antisemitic expression. This engenders a Jewish fortress mentality: everyone is out to get us. This state of mind is not only flawed in its premise but self-destructive. By putting Jews constantly on the defensive, it diverts their resources from the constructive programming that Jewish survival and continuity desperately require: Jewish education at all levels, programming in family-life areas, community education on such issues as the protections of the Bill of Rights,

efforts to improve Israel's image, increased budgeting to care for needy Jews, and so on. "It won't help us much," argues Raab, "if we just see anti-Israel activity as the latest version of atavistic Jew-hatred. At best, the foreboding does lead to an understanding that the best fight against latent antisemitism is the fight to strengthen positive American self-interest attitudes toward Jews."

The other foreboding, a more realistic and constructive one, is based on the notion that at a certain stage of serious social decontrol, of a radical breakdown of societal constraints, antisemitic expression could rise. This foreboding is well-documented in our history; danger signals indeed may be out there, and they are not to be ignored.

But there is more than just the foreboding of latent antisemitism. Sociologist Steven M. Cohen has found that more than half of all American Jews continued to hold traditional negative stereotypes of non-Jews. Whatever the data on antisemitism's actual decline, these negative images resonate in the perception of an antisemitism reemergent. This dynamic reenforces itself when, according to surveys, the perception that non-Jews are hostile leads Jews to avoid non-Jewish intimacies and associations. In turn, the absence of such contact sustains the negative image of the non-Jew and reinforces Jews' fear of non-Jews and, in a word, of antisemitism.

Further, Steven Cohen and Charles Liebman suggest that the perception of antisemitism found among many American Jews may be a vestige of a time when antisemitism in America was very real and when every Jew was insecure vis-a-vis non-Jews. There is a time lag. If these outmoded social and cultural perceptions of the non-Jew persist, it may be too soon to measure American Jews' reactions to questions about Jewish security against the *true* state of Jewish security.

**What We Need to Know**

What don't we know about antisemitism? First, we need to know more about the taboos surrounding the expression of antisemitism. The security of Jews does not depend on people being non-antisemites; for most people, Jews are simply not an issue. Indeed, in the David Duke campaign in Louisiana, people voted for Duke not because of his racial views but *despite* those views; when self-interest is a factor, non-antisemites may ignore the antisemitism or racism of a candidate. The real security of Jews lies in people being *anti*-antisemites, for whom antisemitism is totally illegitimate and must be repudiated. We do not know much about anti-antisemitism and it is clearly an area for study.

A second needed area of study would be the nature and extent of antisemitism in the black community.

Third, our surveys are antiquated. Some things we ask about — for example, certain stereotypes — may have fallen by the wayside. Other areas — the impact of Israel — should be more deeply probed. Also, are we formulating the questions correctly? We need to revisit the surveys.

Fourth, we need to establish a hierarchy of antisemitism. Not all forms of antisemitism carry equal weight. Political antisemitism — perhaps the most virulent and dangerous form — is simply not the same as the telling of a JAP joke or an incident of antisemitic vandalism. This is not to minimize any form of antisemitic expression — any person who is the recipient of such expression is a person in pain — but until we develop some serious weighting system we will be at the mercy of those who would exploit antisemitism, especially the kind of antisemitism that does not make a difference in terms of overall Jewish security and status.

Fifth, we need to probe the different thresholds at which different people perceive antisemitism. What yardstick are people using when they measure situations that they themselves perceive or experience as antisemitism? This is a difficult and sensitive area that needs to be explored.

At bottom, how do we assess, not antisemitism, but our own attitudes and perceptions? Why are American Jews worried about antisemitism?

* * *

Jerome A. Chanes is National Affairs Director of the National Jewish Community Relations Advisory Council (NJCRAC) and is Adjunct Professor of Jewish Communal Issues at Yeshiva University's Wurzweiler School of Social Work. This *Jerusalem Letter/Viewpoints* is based on a presentation at the 23rd Annual Conference of the Association for Jewish Studies.