

Everyone agrees that antisemitism is on the rise. But no one seems to agree on what antisemitism actually is.

Several years ago, scholar Jonathan Judaken published an article in *The Forward* entitled "Ten Commandments For Thinking About Modern Anti-Semitism."¹ His first commandment is: "Thou Shalt Not Be Anti-Semantic"—a clever pun that acknowledges how difficult it is to agree on a definition of the term.

Currently, the most contentious debate around defining antisemitism centers on whether anti-Zionism is, by definition, antisemitism. Supporters of this position argue that because Israel is a Jewish state, any opposition to that state is inherently anti-Jewish. This perspective has driven efforts to adopt the International Holocaust Remembrance Alliance (IHRA) definition as a legal standard.

The IHRA document was originally developed to help European governments create a common metric for assessing antisemitism in their countries. It includes eleven examples of antisemitic behavior, seven of which involve criticism of the State of Israel.

However, Kenneth Stern, a human rights lawyer who was the lead author on the original IHRA definition, is adamant that it was never meant as a fixed or legal definition. Now Director of the Bard Center for the Study of Hate, Stern expresses serious concerns about its use to suppress free speech:

¹ <https://forward.com/community/391443/ten-commandments-for-thinking-about-modern-anti-semitism/>

I think it's comforting to people to think, 'IHRA is a simple tool and it'll address the problem.' It won't. The problem with IHRA is that it divides the fight against antisemitism based on what you think about Israel.²

Recognizing these concerns, the Reform movement has publicized four alternative definitions. One focuses on the relationship between antisemitism and white supremacy, while three seek to distinguish antisemitism from legitimate criticism of Israel. This distinction is particularly important in the United States, where we've seen concerns about antisemitism used to suppress free speech.

One text endorsed by the URJ comes from T'ruah: The Rabbinic Voice for Human Rights. It carefully distinguishes between legitimate criticism of Israel and antisemitism. T'ruah identifies as antisemitic:

depictions of Israel or Israelis using antisemitic stereotypes (such as global domination or blood lust); holding individual Jews responsible for Israeli state actions; and calling for displacement of or violence against Israelis.

In contrast, T'ruah argues—and I agree—that it is not antisemitic to criticize Israeli government actions on the same basis as any other government, including its human rights record or military conduct. Displaying a Palestinian flag or wearing a keffiyah to show support for Palestinian national aspirations is comparable to displaying an Israeli flag. More controversially, but consistent with both American and Jewish values, T'ruah maintains that "support for arrangements that accord full equality to all Israelis and Palestinians, whether in two states, one state, a binational state, a confederation, or any other form," is not antisemitism.

² Mari Cohen, "The ADL's Antisemitism Findings, Explained," *Jewish Currents*, April 4, 2023

T'ruah's pamphlet addresses another source of miscommunication: like "antisemitism," the term "Zionism" has no single interpretation. There is a profound generational difference in how "Zionism" is perceived. For those who remember the Six Day War, the word evokes pride and the words of Hatikvah: "to be a free people in our own land." Those who grew up witnessing settlement expansion, learning about the occupation, and embracing Judaism rooted in social justice values often identify Zionism with Jewish supremacy and brutality against Palestinians.

From this perspective, anti-Zionism is not antisemitic when it means:

sincere support for a single democratic state granting equal rights to Jews and Palestinians; commitment to building Jewish life outside Israel; criticism of Israeli policy or the state's founding process; or opposition to all nationalisms.

Anti-Zionism becomes antisemitic when it means: "Israeli Jews should be expelled from Israel; Jews who don't denounce Israel are unwelcome; Israeli Jews are unwelcome; or opposition only to Zionism while accepting other nationalisms."³

I dwell on this definitional debate because it's deeply intertwined with autocratic developments in American society. In the name of combating antisemitism, universities have lost research funding and struggled to maintain academic freedom; individuals have been detained; employees across numerous sectors have been fired; and free speech suppression has been justified.

Disturbingly, Project Esther, the policy document guiding these actions emerged, not from Jews or any Jewish community consensus, but from the Heritage Foundation. The Foundation's director told *The New York Times Magazine* that its purpose is "institutionalizing Trumpism." Project Esther was developed by three Christians who couldn't find Jewish organizational

³ T'ruah, *A Very Brief Guide to Antisemitism*, <https://truah.org/antisemitism/>

partners and even alienated some Christian Zionist groups with their right-wing partisanship. Critics note that the document itself employs antisemitic tropes and targets Jews, like George Soros, while declaring any anti-Israel expression as terrorism and any group supporting Palestinians—even Jewish ones—as part of a " Hamas Support Network." *The New York Times* described Project Esther's goal as "branding a broad range of critics of Israel as 'effectively a terrorist support network,' so that they could be deported, defunded, sued, fired, expelled, ostracized and otherwise excluded from what it considered 'open society.'"⁴

Jewish groups have labeled this approach "smokescreen antisemitism"—hiding right-wing antisemitism behind a facade of concern for Jews while using accusations of antisemitism to attack democratic values. Suppressing civil liberties in the name of protecting Jews will not benefit Jews and reflects no genuine concern for our community. This approach is particularly pernicious because it exploits legitimate Jewish fears in ways that fragment our coalitions with other vulnerable groups.

The last time I spoke about antisemitism, I emphasized its differences from anti-Black racism. While distinctions exist, I've come to understand why scholars and activists emphasize connections among all forms of racism. This brings me to Judaken's second commandment: "Thou Shalt Think Historically."

Like sexism or homophobia, all systems of oppression are rooted in specific historical conditions and evolve over time. As Rachel Shabi observes in her book, *Off White*, "the history of racism [is] a constant cross-pollination of bigotries, one influenced by the other, each directed against a

⁴ Katie J. M. Baker, "The Group Behind Project 2025 Has a Plan to Crush the Pro-Palestinian Movement," *The New York Times*, <https://www.nytimes.com/2025/05/18/us/project-esther-heritage-foundation-palestine.html>

different group, at different times."⁵ When we focus on antisemitism while excluding other hatreds, we fail to understand these mechanisms and distort our perception.

In his groundbreaking article "Skin in the Game," Eric Ward examined antisemitism's essential role in white supremacy. One difference between anti-Jewish and anti-Black racism is that Jews are vilified for supposed superiority while people of color are demeaned as inferior. From this perspective, successful social justice movements like civil rights or Black Lives Matter couldn't be organized by Black people alone—therefore, the reasoning goes, it must be conniving, manipulative Jews behind them.⁶

This thinking underlies the Great Replacement Theory—the belief that Jews orchestrate immigration from non-Anglo countries to replace white Christian Americans. It is important to understand that the Great Replacement Theory was not only the motivation behind the 2018 Tree of Life Shooting, but the 2019 El Paso Walmart shooting and the 2022 Buffalo Tops shooting as well. It is essential to understand that our safety is inextricably linked to the safety of others. It was, after all the Jewish poet Emma Lazarus who declared, “Until we are all free, we are none of us free.”

Finally, I turn to Judaken's tenth commandment: "Thou Shalt Be Vigilant, But Avoid Alarmism." This means understanding that our situation isn't unique. Mass shootings and political violence have targeted other groups, including Blacks, Latinos, migrants, and LGBTQ+ people. Ben Lorber from Political Research Associates notes:

⁵ Rachel Shabi, *Off-White: The Truth About Antisemitism*, Simon & Schuster

⁶ Eric K. Ward, “Skin in the Game,” <https://politicalresearch.org/2017/06/29/skin-in-the-game-how-antisemitism-animates-white-nationalism>

Groups who are out there putting up flyers about Jews are also taking to the streets to attack drag queen story hours and Pride events...Whenever anyone talks about rising antisemitism, it's important to remember that these groups are also attacking queer folks and communities of color. And we need a strategy to fight all these kinds of oppression together.⁷

American Jews frequently hear that antisemitic incidents have greatly increased, but tracking hate crime statistics is actually very difficult. One problem is that incidents aren't categorized by severity. Brandeis sociologist Matthew Boxer observes:

A small piece of graffiti that most people won't notice is a minor thing. But Tucker Carlson talking about Jewish conspiracies to control the world on Fox — that's affecting millions of people, and it's encouraging antisemitism. So, each might count as one incident, but they're not the same.

Boxer also questions whether increased reporting means increased antisemitism: "Does [sic] more recorded incidents inherently mean more antisemitism? My answer to that is no...It could mean that the ADL did better job of recording, or that more people felt comfortable reporting incidents...

This doesn't deny that abhorrent antisemitic acts occur in our country, or that those with antisemitic views increasingly feel free to express them. But I suspect few of us have ever been in real danger due to antisemitism. We must acknowledge this as we assess our actual vulnerability, both comparatively and absolutely.

⁷ Mari Cohen, "The ADL's Antisemitism Findings, Explained," *Jewish Currents*, April 4, 2023

The challenges are real: antisemitism does exist and does harm. Yet how we respond to these challenges matters deeply, both for our safety and our values.

Our tradition offers guidance. The opening words of Genesis teach us that every person is created in the image of God, the Exodus narrative commands us to care for the stranger because we ourselves were strangers, Leviticus instructs us to love the stranger as ourself, the Talmud declares that whoever saves one life saves an entire world—throughout our sacred texts, Judaism reminds us that our wellbeing is connected to the wellbeing of others. This isn't merely idealism; it's wisdom born from millennia of experience.

This doesn't mean dismissing legitimate concerns about antisemitism or being naive about genuine threats. Rather, it means carefully examining which responses actually enhance our security and which might inadvertently compromise the democratic protections we all depend upon. History suggests that Jewish communities have thrived most in societies where civil liberties and equal rights are protected for everyone.

The question before us isn't whether to be vigilant about antisemitism—we must be. The question is how we can address real concerns while maintaining our commitment to truth and the democratic values that ultimately serve as our best protection. This requires us to think critically about proposed solutions and to distinguish between approaches that genuinely address antisemitism and those that might serve other agendas.

Our task is to navigate these challenges with both wisdom and integrity: staying informed about genuine threats, building relationships across communities that face different forms of hatred,

supporting responses that enhance everyone's safety and dignity, and bringing our full selves—both our legitimate concerns and our deepest values—to these conversations.

In doing so, we honor our ancestors' resilience and our tradition's moral vision. We create the conditions for a society where our children, and everyone's children, can flourish without fear of persecution.

As Judaken's final commandment reminds us: we must be vigilant without being alarmist. This balance isn't easy, but it's essential. It allows us to take antisemitism seriously while keeping our perspective, to protect our community while strengthening the broader social fabric that protects us all.

Ken yehi ratzon—may we find the wisdom to walk this path with both courage and care.