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Rethinking the Historiography of American Antisemitism in the Wake of the Pittsburgh Shooting

Rachel Kranson¹

The shooting that ravaged a synagogue in my neighborhood forced me to re-learn every aspect of my Jewish life. From basic weekly and daily rituals to my most profound political and scholarly engagements, enactments of Jewishness that once seemed second nature felt unfamiliar, labored, often impossible. Stepping into a synagogue became an excruciating lesson in how to walk, physically propelling myself forward while my mind kept telling me to turn back, to run away, to grab my family and hide. Once there, I lost my ability to follow along in the prayerbook. Well-known Hebrew letters became undecipherable glyphs as I frantically scanned the room for exits, plotting my family's escape from a murderer's assault rifle. I rediscovered how to send my nine-year-old to his Jewish day school with a quick hug and a smile, a transition we had mastered when he was a toddler.

The shooting rendered my political investments no less fraught. Since 2016, I had been quietly trying to minimize the harm of a Trump presidency with Bend the Arc: Pittsburgh, a collective of progressive, local Jewish activists affiliated with the national organization. We had been supporting the work of seasoned activists in Pittsburgh, largely immigrants and Muslims who found themselves particularly vulnerable under the new administration. The shooting thrust us from behind the scenes into the spotlight. In an open letter followed by a protest march, we used our platform to decry this antisemitic shooting as one facet of a broader white supremacist ideology that President Trump's rhetoric both encouraged and legitimated. While it was gratifying to see our analysis gain traction, the attention came at a cost. Our names and faces appeared in national newspapers and on television, our inboxes inundated with press requests and personal commentary—both positive and negative—from friends, acquaintances, and strangers. Coming so soon after the attack, the public scrutiny made me feel like a target. Within

1. My thanks to Lila Corwin Berman, D Clarke, Tony Michels, and Avigail Oren for their feedback on this essay.

days, I took down my faculty page, refused to speak with journalists, and withdrew from social media.

In the midst of this, friends and colleagues alike asked how my training in American Jewish history helped me think through the violent attack on my own Jewish community. More than once, I asked myself the same question . . . and came up short. I found myself struggling to apply the scholarly frameworks that had long moored my understanding of Jewish life in the US to the situation at hand. In the immediate aftermath of the shooting, I found that the informal discussions I had within my embryonic activist collective about the relationship between antisemitism, xenophobia, racism, and white supremacy sustained me more than the academic field to which I had devoted the previous sixteen years of my life. Like so much else, I had to rediscover how to be a scholar of American Jewish history.

Admittedly, in the days and weeks immediately following the shooting I found it difficult to maintain focus on anything other than my fear, hopelessness, and rage.² But it was not just trauma that prevented me from using the historical scholarship on American antisemitism to think about the shooting. Fundamentally, the central debates of the field did not address my most pressing concerns. Arguments over whether American Jewish historians have taken antisemitism seriously enough—or whether, conversely, they have echoed Baron’s lachrymose conception of Jewish history and made too much of it—could not help me gain perspective on why the building in which I had so recently celebrated a bat mitzvah had become a blood-soaked crime scene. In the wake of the shooting, I could only take for granted that antisemitic violence in America mattered, that it was dangerous and devastating. Neither did I feel inclined to ponder the question of why antisemitism in the US tended to be less deadly than antisemitism in Europe. It offered little clarity to recall that the deaths of my neighbors did not register a statistical blip when compared to the carnage of genocide.³

2. I’ve written about this elsewhere: Rachel Kranson, “After Pittsburgh: a Scholar Cries for Justice,” *AJS Perspectives*, Spring 2021, 88–9; Rachel Kranson, “When Scholars are Political, Human, and Shattered,” *PoLar: Political and Legal Anthropology Review*, series “Speaking Justice to Power: Local Pittsburgh Scholars Respond to the Tree of Life Shooting,” ed. Heath Cabot and Michal Rose Friedman, March 23, 2019, <https://politicalandlegalanthro.org/2019/03/23/when-scholars-are-political-human-and-shattered/>.

3. Books and essays discussing some of these debates include John Higham, *Send These To Me: Immigrants in Urban America*, Revised Edition (Baltimore: Johns Hopkins University Press, 1975 and 1984); Jonathan Sarna, “Anti-Semitism and American History,” *Commentary*, March 1981, 42–7; Edward Shapiro, “John Higham and American Anti-Semitism,” *American Jewish History* 26, no. 2 (1986): 201–13; David

What I sought were critical, historical analyses of how American antisemitism worked in tandem with racism and xenophobia to produce violent and deadly outcomes. After all, the gunman who ravaged my neighborhood blamed Jews for sponsoring immigrant caravans. He had been radicalized by white supremacist conspiracy theories that portrayed Jews as the puppet masters behind everything from immigration, to racial integration, to feminism. I needed my field to help me think through how these hatreds shaped and magnified one another over the course of American history. After a year in which seventy-eight percent of extremist-related murders in the United States were committed by white supremacists as deeply invested in racism and xenophobia as by animosity against Jews, such an approach felt crucial to understanding what happened in my own neighborhood.⁴

Gerber, "Anti-Semitism and Jewish-Gentile Relations in American Historiography and the American Past," in *Anti-Semitism in American History*, ed. David Gerber (Urbana: University of Illinois Press, 1987), 3–54; Jeffrey Gurock, "Preface: Anti-Semitism in America," in *Anti-Semitism in America*, ed. Jeffrey Gurock (New York: Routledge, 1998), xv–xviii; Leonard Dinnerstein, *Anti-Semitism in America* (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 1994); Naomi W. Cohen, *Jews in Christian America: The Pursuit of Religious Equality* (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 1992); Naomi Cohen, "Anti-Semitism in the United States," *American Jewish History* 71, no. 1 (1981): 5–9; Henry Feingold, "Finding a Conceptual Framework for the Study of American Antisemitism," *Jewish Social Studies* 47, nos. 3/4 (1985): 313–26; Stephen J. Whitfield, "The Presence of the Past: Recent Trends," *American Jewish History* 70, no. 2, (1980): 149–67. On how the question of antisemitism impacts the question of American exceptionalism, see Tony Michels, "Is American Different?: A Critique of American Jewish Exceptionalism," *American Jewish History* 96, no. 3 (2010): 201–24, and for a counterpoint, Hasia Diner, *How America Met the Jews* (Providence: Brown University Press, 2017). On how the Pittsburgh shooting impacted the narrative of Jewish American exceptionalism, see Lila Corwin Berman, "American Jews Always Believed the US was Exceptional. We were Wrong," *Washington Post*, November 1, 2018. For the most part, American Jewish historians haven't spent much energy on the question of whether antisemitism is more pernicious when it comes from the "left," the "right," or both, a formulation that flattens complexities across the political spectrum and does little to shed light on what happened in Pittsburgh and Poway. That being said, the two volumes that garnered the most popular attention after the Pittsburgh shooting made much of this question. See Deborah Lipstadt, *Antisemitism Here and Now* (New York: Schocken Books, 2019) and Bari Weiss, *How to Fight Anti-Semitism* (New York: Crown, 2019).

4. In essence, what I wanted to see was what Natalia Molina terms a *relational* approach toward these hatreds. A relational approach examines how hatreds work together, as opposed to a *comparative* approach that highlights the ways they might be similar to or different from one another. See Molina, *How Race is Made in America* (Berkeley: University of California Press, 2014). According to an ADL report, seventy-eight percent of extremist-related murders were committed by white supremacists, sixteen percent by anti-government ideologues, four percent by "incel" misogynists, and two percent by Islamists (though at least one of the "Islamists" also had ties to white supremacists). See "Murder and Extremism in the United States in 2013," 13, <https://www.adl.org/media/12480/download>.

For the most part, scholars in our field have not tackled antisemitism through this lens. Instead, there has been a tendency to treat antisemitism not as intertwined with other forms of hatred, but in competition with them. Numerous scholars have posited that the reason European antisemitism has been more deadly than American antisemitism is precisely because American bigots had a wider selection of targets upon whom they could unleash their vitriol. In a now classic article on American antisemitism, Jonathan Sarna summarized the argument thusly: "American anti-semitism has always had to compete with other forms of animus . . . Because the objects are so varied, hatred is diffused, and no one group experiences for long the full brunt of national odium." According to this line of thinking, other targets of American hatred deflected some of the brutality that would otherwise have been aimed at Jews and rendered American antisemitism "less potent than its European counterpart."⁵

The Pittsburgh shooting compels us to interrogate these assumptions about the relationship between American antisemitism, racism, and xenophobia. Of course, it is a historical truth that Americans of color, and particularly Black Americans, have suffered a great deal more bloodshed, as well as economic, legal, and social discrimination, than have white American Jews. Just as certainly, American Jews of European descent garnered significant material and legal advantages from being legally situated on the white side of the color line. Though they may not always have been cognizant of doing so, they invested in their unjust racial privilege.⁶

5. Jonathan Sarna, "American Anti-Semitism," in *History and Hate: The Dimensions of Antisemitism*, ed. David Berger (Philadelphia: Jewish Publication Society, 1997), 115–128; an earlier version of this influential essay appeared in *Commentary*, March 1981, 42–7. Interestingly, we see this idea that antisemitism has been in competition with other forms of hatred even from those scholars who tend to view antisemitism largely as a facet of nativist xenophobia. For instance, John Higham wrote: "The relative mildness of American, as compared to European, anti-Semitism must be attributed not only to the more tolerant traditions of the United States but also to the presence within the country of a great variety of ethnic targets. Since the fire of American nationalists was scattered among many adversaries, no one minority group bore the brunt of the attack. Hatred of Catholics, or Chinese, of the new immigration as a whole, and above all a diffuse nativist hostility to the whole immigrant influx overshadowed specifically anti-Jewish agitation." Higham, *Send These To Me*, 108–9. Also note Henry Feingold's speculation that American Jewish historians have been confounded by antisemitism in the Black community specifically because "the conventional wisdom among Jews has long since concluded that the animosity toward blacks have served as a major deflector of hatred against themselves," Feingold, "Finding a Conceptual Framework for the Study of Antisemitism," 317.

6. On how Jews of European descent have benefited from white privilege, see Hasia Diner, *How American Met the Jews*, 37–54; On how white American Jews of the 1960s

But white Jews could both benefit from white supremacy and, at the same time, be made vulnerable by the racist ideology undergirding it. Recognizing the virulence of American racism ought not lead to the assumption that it distracted bigots from antisemitism or shielded Jews from antisemitic violence.

On the contrary, the historical record points to the opposite conclusion—that American racism does not *compete* with antisemitism but *amplifies* it, rendering Jews (of all racial backgrounds) more vulnerable at moments of heightened racial tension. Time and again in American history, antisemitic violence peaked when white racists fought hardest to maintain their racial supremacy. This was certainly the case in Atlanta in 1890, when rapid industrialization after the civil war created new economic opportunities that disrupted the racist hierarchy of the agrarian South. It was in this context that an angry mob kidnapped Leo Frank from his jail cell and lynched him, an act of brutality most often leveled against black people. A similar situation arose in late 1950s, as the civil rights movement gained momentum in the struggle to dismantle Jim Crow. As part of their attempts to thwart racial equality, white supremacists bombed synagogues in North Carolina, Florida, Tennessee, Alabama, and Georgia, their explosives eventually ripping through the side of the Atlanta Reform Temple on Peachtree Street. In both instances, and in Pittsburgh, racists were not distracted from anti-Jewish violence as they fought to subjugate Black Americans or ban Latinx immigrants. Rather, their racism and xenophobia fed their antisemitism as they blamed Jews for changes within the entrenched social order.⁷

both supported structures of white supremacy and backed the civil rights movement, see Marc Dollinger, *Black Power, Jewish Politics* (Waltham: Brandeis University Press, 2018). For a relevant theoretical explication on the relationship between Jews and whiteness see David Schraub, “White Jews: An Intersectional Approach,” *AJS Review* 43, no. 2 (2019): 379–407.

7. These are far from the only examples of this pattern of antisemitic violence. For just a few other recent instances, consider the Los Angeles JCC shooting (1999), Richard Baumhammer’s racist shooting spree in the suburbs of Pittsburgh (2000), the attacks on a JCC and Jewish retirement community in Overland Park, Kansas (2014), and others. Not only have racism and antisemitism worked in tandem to provoke violence against Jewish targets, but there is evidence that at least on one occasion, this mix has resulted in violence against Black Americans as well. William Holmes’ research demonstrated that the antisemitic invective unleashed by late -nineteenth century “whitecappers” in Mississippi against Jewish merchants who bought farmland formerly owned by white Christians did not result in personal violence against Jews (though it did lead to destruction of Jewish property.) Rather, whitecappers preoccupied with their hatred against Jews beat and killed Black tenant farmers who lived on farms owned by Jews. William Holmes, “Whitecapping: Anti-Semitism in the Populist Era,” *American Jewish Historical Quarterly* 63, no. 3 (1974): 244–61, reprinted in

Much of the historical record supports Deborah Lipstadt's assertion—presciently published just before the Pittsburgh shooting—that “antisemitism flourishes in a society that is intolerant of others, be they immigrants or racial or religious minorities. When expressions of contempt for one group become normative, it is virtually inevitable that similar hatred will be directed at other groups.” But if we are going to build a historiography of American antisemitism that will help us think through the murders in Pittsburgh, we will have to add significantly to the scholarship exploring the relationship between these hatreds.⁸

What I've yearned for since the shooting is not just theoretical acknowledgement that antisemitism is shaped and exacerbated by racism and xenophobia (and vice versa). I chose to become a historian instead of investing in more abstract or journalistic fields specifically because I find intellectual satisfaction in deeply researched arguments supported by concrete, archival evidence. What I've been missing are historical studies as deeply embedded in the literature and archives of antisemitism as they are in the scholarship and sources related to American racism, xenophobia, and misogyny. I've sought historical articles and monographs that interrogate not only how these hatreds are similar to or different from one another, or even how they affected Black-Jewish relations (a topic that has, indeed, been amply researched). Instead, I want to know how these various manifestations of American bigotry and violence have

Gurock, *Anti-Semitism in America* vol. 1, 325–42. On the Leo Frank case, see Leonard Dinnerstein,

The Leo Frank Case (New York: Columbia University Press, 1968). Treatments of Leo Frank that do the crucial work of examining the gender and sexual dimensions of the case include Nancy MacLean, “The Leo Frank Case Reconsidered: Gender and Sexual Politics in the Making of Reactionary Populism,” *Journal of American History* 78, no. 3 (1991): 917–48 and Sarah Imhoff, *Masculinity and the Making of American Judaism* (Bloomington: Indiana University Press, 2017), 225–43. For an analysis of how the public image of Leo Frank impacted Black-Jewish relations, see Jeffrey Melnick, *Black-Jewish Relations on Trial: Leo Frank and Jim Conley in the New South* (Jackson: University Press of Mississippi, 2000). On the synagogue bombings in the South see Melissa Faye Green, *The Temple Bombing* (Cambridge: Da Capo Press, 1996); Clive Webb, “Counterblast: How the Atlanta Temple Bombing Strengthened the Civil Rights Cause,” *Southern Spaces*, June 22, 2009, accessed September 23, 2019, <https://southernspaces.org/2009/counterblast-how-atlanta-temple-bombing-strengthened-civil-rights-cause>.

8. Deborah Lipstadt, *Antisemitism Here and Now* (New York: Schocken Books, 2019), xi. For a journalistic take, see Talia Lavin's analysis of the relationship between antisemitism and white supremacy in *Culture Warlords: My Journey into the Dark Web of White Supremacy* (New York: Hachette Books, 2020) and “White Supremacy Can't be Untangled from Anti-Semitism,” *Huffpost*, November 5, 2018, accessed September 9, 2019, https://www.huffpost.com/entry/opinion-pittsburgh-synagogue-shooting-mid-terms-white-supremacy-anti-semitism_n_5be0b21ce4b09d43e321e46a.

intersected with and shaped one another over the course of American history, and the impact this had on the lives of targeted minorities. I've wondered how much the field of American Jewish history—not to mention the broader field of American history—has missed by not thinking through antisemitism in this manner.⁹

While the extant scholarship on American antisemitism has yet to offer me the intellectual grounding I've been searching for, I am also not surprised that the Pittsburgh attack prompted the need for new approaches. The murders have already compelled popular writers to reassess the status of Jews in America. They certainly forced me to reevaluate much of what I had taken for granted in my own life, personally and professionally. Recognizing that historians always look toward the past at least in part to understand the present, it seems likely that the violence in Pittsburgh will also prompt scholars to rethink the field.

9. One example of what this approach might look like is Clive Webb's "Freedom for All: Blacks, Jews, and the Political Censorship of White Racists in the Civil Rights Era," *American Jewish History* 94, no. 4 (2008): 267–97. It may also be worthwhile to engage with the scholarship on the role of antisemitism in white supremacist ideologies, as civil rights strategist Eric Ward does in his influential, largely autobiographical essay, "Skin in the Game: How Antisemitism Animates White Nationalism," *The Public Eye*, Summer 2017, 9–15, <https://www.bmoreincremental.com/post/2017/09/22/skin-in-the-game-how-antisemitism-animates-white-nationalism>, also discussed in Kathleen Belew's *Bring the War Home: The White Power Movement and Paramilitary America* (Cambridge: Harvard University Press, 2019). On how antisemitism and racism impact Black-Jewish relations, see the essays in Jeffrey Gurock, ed., *Anti-Semitism in America* vol. 2 (New York: Routledge, 1998) and Jeffrey Melnick, *Black-Jewish Relations on Trial*.