Editors' Introduction

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In the 2016 presidential campaign, Donald Trump employed what many saw as antisemitic tropes in ads, tweets, and speeches. There was, for example, his campaign’s use of the slogan, “America First,” associated (perhaps especially by people like the readers of American Jewish History) with Charles Lindbergh’s role as spokesman for the isolationist America First Committee, and his infamous 1941 Des Moines speech charging Jews’ with trying to drag the country into war. There was a tweeted image of his opponent, Democrat Hillary Clinton, against a backdrop of dollars with a prominent six-pointed star, proclaiming her the “most corrupt candidate ever.” And there was the final ad in the campaign that featured two prominent Jewish financiers and a Jewish financial regulator as prime representatives of “global special interests.”

The following year brought further alarming episodes. Early in 2017 dozens of bomb threats were made to synagogues and Jewish community centers across the country. Several Jewish cemeteries were vandalized. And at a series of demonstrations in Charlottesville, Virginia, that culminated in a mass rally in August, rightwing protesters chanted “Jews will not replace us,” among other slogans.

Adding to American Jewish unease were ongoing controversies on college campuses, where, some charged, anti-Israel and anti-Zionist actions by leftwing students and faculty members often spilled over into more or less open antisemitism.

But none of these episodes were easily explained, and American Jews were divided in their reactions. After all, Donald Trump counted many Jews—including family members—as close advisors. And a substantial minority of American Jews, especially among the Orthodox and immigrants from the former Soviet Union, voted for him, often enthusiastically. The bomb threats turned out mostly to be the work of a mentally ill American-Israeli Jewish teenager (and, secondarily, a slightly less mentally ill non-Jewish journalist who wanted to pin them on his ex-girlfriend). And many Jewish academics and students denied that the atmosphere on campus was a particularly threatening one. It didn’t seem that American Jews could even agree on a definition of antisemitism, let alone where the main source of the threat lay.

This was the backdrop to our decision as the then new co-editors of American Jewish History to plan a special issue on antisemitism in America. But we didn’t issue a call for papers until the end of 2019, by which time deadly attacks had taken place at the Tree of Life Synagogue.
in Pittsburgh, the Chabad center in Poway, California, a kosher grocery in Jersey City, and a Hanukkah party in Monsey, New York. Added to these were a series of less lethal and largely unheralded assaults on Orthodox Jews on the streets of Brooklyn. The problem, sadly, was not going away.

The call for papers specified a number of possible topics for articles, including specific incidents of violence against Jews, or the role of violence in American antisemitism in general; discrimination against Jews in employment, housing, or higher education; antisemitism in particular social groups, including social elites, the working class, students, other ethnic or religious communities, etc., or opposition to antisemitism within those groups; the role of antisemitism in American politics, law and government; Jewish communal or individual responses to antisemitism or perceived antisemitism; Intellectual, literary or artistic expressions of, or opposition to, antisemitism; transnational aspects of American antisemitism; American antisemitism in comparative perspective; and antisemitism and other forms of hatred and racism in the United States.

The articles in this special issue join the ongoing debate over “American exceptionalism.” As it applied to Jewish history, the exceptionalist paradigm held that the American experience was unique in that Jews secured equal citizenship from the start, without having to go through a long and uncertain process of emancipation. Moreover, in the exceptionalist view, America was different in that it lacked a strong tradition of outspoken, and especially of overtly political, antisemitism. In recent years, this latter claim has come under attack, as scholars point out that in many ways, American Judeophobia could be just as virulent, and just as damaging, as that found elsewhere—depending on exactly when and where. These scholars argue for the importance not only of chronological and geographic specificity, but also for a transnational lens through which to view the ways in which patterns within America intersected and interacted with antisemitic dynamics beyond its borders.

The seven research articles in this double issue deal with many of the questions raised in our call for papers, and in current critiques of American exceptionalism. Andrew S. Winston provides the long genealogy of “replacement” fears on the white right. But perhaps more surprising than the antisemitism of traditional white supremacists is the way in which American libertarians sometimes found common cause with virulent antisemites in Holocaust denial, largely because of their hostility to the New Deal and, by association, the American war effort in World War II. This is the subject of John P. Jackson Jr.’s contribution. In his examination of populist antisemitism in a South Carolina congressional race in 1978, Robert David Johnson shows how antisemitism might crop up unexpectedly in mainstream politics. Nina Valbousquet most explicitly
explores the role of exceptionalism in American Jewish thinking about transnational antisemitism in her examination of the American Jewish Committee’s interwar efforts. Geoffrey P. Levin and Matthew Berkman each look at Jewish perceptions of, and responses to, antisemitism. Both historicize the rise of the “new antisemitism” paradigm in the 1970s by uncovering previous alternative understandings of the phenomenon. Riv-Ellen Prell demonstrates the ways in which antisemitism worked in conjunction with racism and red-baiting at the University of Minnesota in the interwar years, as well as how university administrators worked with rightwing activists in their attempt to marginalize Jews on and off campus.

In addition to these research articles, this issue includes a number of special features. Pamela S. Nadell explains how she came to testify before Congress in opposition to the Anti-Semitism Awareness Act, a bill that would have codified a definition of antisemitism that she and others feared would be used to target legitimate political speech, especially on campus. The debate over the bill, and over the virulence of antisemitism on college campuses, pitted many Jewish studies scholars against many representatives of the larger Jewish community. We include the text of Nadell’s testimony as well as several responses. We also include an assessment by David Gerber of the work of Leonard Dinnerstein, a scholar who devoted much of his career to studying American antisemitism, and who died in January 2019, in the midst of its apparent upsurge. Rachel Kranson reflects on the attack on the Tree of Life Synagogue in her neighborhood in Pittsburgh, both in terms of what it has meant for her personally, and what it might mean for the study of American antisemitism. Finally, Britt Tevis investigates the evolution of the field in the study of American antisemitism. She argues that the lasting influence of Oscar Handlin and John Higham has led American Jewish historians to underestimate the persistence and seriousness of antisemitism in the United States. Tevis calls on historians to recognize not only violent manifestations of antisemitism, but legal ones as well.

We hope that the articles in this special issue of American Jewish History will make a significant contribution to the literature on American antisemitism. But we know that there is still much to be done. Among the topics listed in the call for papers, for example, there are no pieces on antisemitism (or opposition to it) among other ethnic or religious minorities, in literary or artistic works, or on the political left. Moreover, given historians’ current interest in American exceptionalism, there is much more room for transnational and comparative studies of antisemitic thought and action. At the very least, this issue should fill some holes, and inspire historians revisit a theme that is unfortunately so relevant to our current historical moment.