Antisemitism, American Jewish Historians, and their Publics

Shari Rabin

Pamela Nadell’s testimony to Congress on the Anti-Semitism Awareness Act not only engages with the material of American Jewish history but is a fascinating episode within it. Nadell, a distinguished historian of American Jews, places her experience in the context of ongoing Jewish communal infighting, but her account also opens onto other histories worth revisiting as Jewish Studies scholars navigate the rocky shoals of what we are increasingly coming to understand as post-Charlottesville or post-Pittsburgh America.¹

The phenomenon of “Anti-Semitism Awareness Acts” in and of itself needs to be explained as a product of a range of historical forces, many of which are explored in more depth elsewhere in this issue.² It does not exist without the politicization of college campuses since at least the 1960s, the rise of a pro-Israel consensus in American politics, or the intensification of the Israeli/Palestinian conflict.³ It gains its power because of the seeming innocuousness of what Nadell describes as its “bland title.” Decades-long efforts by Jewish organizations, Holocaust educators, creators of popular culture, and others have convinced most Americans that “antisemitism” is bad.⁴ The pervasiveness of liberal mul-

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¹ My thanks go to the participants in the American Jewish Studies Working Group seminar on “Looking Out, Looking In,” hosted at Lehigh University in September 2019, for our conversation on this point.
ticulturalism—perhaps especially in the Internet age of “likes,” “shares,” and “slacktivism”—means that most also agree that “awareness” is good. As Nadell notes, however, there is no universally agreed upon definition of antisemitism. And “awareness” seems purposely vague. In fact, in recent history, the majority of congressional “Awareness Acts,” like the Scleroderma Research and Awareness Act and the Ovarian and Cervical Cancer Awareness Act, have targeted various medical ailments. The Byron Nash Renal Medullary Carcinoma Awareness Act, for instance, provides federal funding for states that educate individuals with sickle cell disease on that condition. Perhaps this language seemed appropriate because of popular associations of antisemitism with disease; but whereas most such acts center on education, this one instead offers a definition in order to assist in enforcement. The cure is not preventative medicine, but surgery—on a malignancy whose symptoms and root causes are highly contested.

Beyond the bill itself, I am struck by the fact of the hearing and by the dynamics among its participants. First, a debate about antisemitism on the floor of the United States House of Representatives seems noteworthy because of the complex history of Jews and the American state, especially around the politics of antisemitism. The United States Constitution of 1789 and the Naturalization Act of 1790 never mentioned Jews, thus subsuming them under the category of “free white person[s],” and understanding them to be different from the majority primarily in matters of belief and worship. And yet Jews have long been visible in

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ways that overflow this categorization. At various points—from the Damascus Affair in 1840 to the plight of Soviet Jews in the 1970s and 1980s—Jews have petitioned presidents and members of Congress to act against anti-Jewish discrimination, usually in other countries. Antisemitism, often framed as a violation of “religious freedom,” was something that mostly happened elsewhere and that helped buttress narratives of American exceptionalism.9

The US state, and Congress in particular, has also been a producer of antisemitism. I regularly teach a document from the 1920 Congressional Committee on Immigration that is reprinted in the reader The Jew in the Modern World. Entitled “Temporary Suspension of Immigration,” the document explicitly states, “the committee has disregarded all statements that might give a religious bias of any kind to the matter under consideration,” even as it explains that most of the new arrivals are “of the Semitic race,” “of Jewish extraction,” or “Jews.” Reports provided by American consulates indicate, for instance, that the majority of migrants in Rotterdam were “of the usual ghetto type” and that those from Warsaw were “deficient” physically, mentally, economically and socially: “Eighty-five to ninety percent lack any conception of patriotic or national spirit.”10 Nadell’s former colleague Ibram X. Kendi argues in his National Book Award-winning Stamped from the Beginning: The Definitive History of Racist Ideas in America that “hate and ignorance have not driven the history of racist ideas in America. Racist policies have driven the history of racist ideas in America.”11 While anti-Jewish ideas certainly predated the existence of the United States, an antisemitic policy like the Immigration Act of 1924—the result of the congressional committee report mentioned above—further fueled the development of


antisemitic ideas to justify itself. It seems striking, then, to find the US Congress considering legislation on antisemitism at home rather than abroad and with little to no reference to “religious freedom” as an animating feature.

The closest antecedent I am aware of for the hearing on the Anti-Semitism Awareness Act comes from the US Supreme Court’s decision in the case of *Shaare Tefila Congregation v. Cobb*. As religious studies scholar Annaliese Glauz-Todrank has explained, the Court had to decide whether antisemitic vandalism of a synagogue could be classified as a race-based hate crime. The justices ultimately decided in the affirmative but argued for a much narrower rationale than they might have. While the congregation’s lawyer had argued that the intent of the racist perpetrators was what made their crimes race-based, the majority instead argued that it was because Jews would have been considered a race in 1866, when the relevant Civil Rights Act was passed. This was a matter of classifying a crime that everyone agreed was antisemitic. By contrast, the question for Nadell, the bevy of men testifying alongside her, and the House Judiciary Committee, was how to define antisemitism in the first place and in the realm of speech rather than action.12

Nadell describes the hearing as a case of “Jew v. Jew,” but it is important that it is specifically a case of Jewish communal leader v. Jewish studies scholar (who in fact, need not be Jewish herself). After all, Nadell notes that Abraham Cooper of the Simon Wiesenthal Center described her and Wake Forest University’s Barry Trachtenberg as “people from the Flat Earth Society [invited] to a hearing about NASA.” While the comment is absurd on its face, it also points to the complex relationship between Jewish communal institutions and the academic field of Jewish studies. Jewish studies in the United States emerged in earnest in the 1960s and 1970s, simultaneous to the development of Religious Studies and Ethnic Studies; the Association for Jewish Studies celebrated its fiftieth anniversary in 2018. It developed on various campuses not only because of student demand or intellectual merit but because of support from members of the Jewish community.13 And yet, the goals of these two groups have not always aligned. Jewish studies scholars—including

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increasing numbers of women and non-Jews—tend to critique narratives of Jewish identity and to situate Jewish history and culture in the context of broader human experiences. For the most part, continuity-minded Jewish donors, along with traditionally male-dominated communal institutions, seek to nurture Jewish identities and to emphasize Jewish uniqueness. These tensions can be seen most clearly in periodic battles between Jewish studies programs and campus Hillels, which compete to define the contours of Jewish discourse.¹⁴

The hearing on the Anti-Semitism Awareness Act is a new frontier in this struggle, now undertaken in the halls of American power. A rabbi first offered a prayer before Congress in 1860, and I suspect there have been far more rabbis in that space than Jewish studies scholars.¹⁵ The moment that Nadell chronicles, then, in addition to being about free speech and Israel politics, is about the relationship of Jews to the American state and of academic Jewish studies to the Jewish community. It raises serious questions about power and authority. How can the US State best secure Jewish safety? Who gets to speak about the nature of Jewish history and identity? What responsibility do Jewish studies scholars have to these publics in the face of antisemitism’s resurgence and politicization?

In the end, I find myself thinking most about my responsibility to my students, eighteen-to-twenty-two-year-olds who are trying to make sense of the world that others have made for them. In Stamped from the Beginning, Kendi refutes the idea—implicit in the title of the Anti-Semitism Awareness Act if not in its content—that education alone can fix racist ideas. If policy shapes ideas, as he argues, now that the key pillars of the Anti-Semitism Awareness Act have been enacted at the federal level, the question is: how will it shape public discourse about antisemitism and about Jews? And how can I prepare my students inside the classroom to engage these debates with integrity once they leave it?

¹⁵. Sarna, When General Grant Expelled the Jews, 57, 152.