Response

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Response

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I thank Doron S. Ben-Atar, Jonathan Judaken, Sharon Musher, Shari Rabin, and Kenneth Stern for thoughtfully reflecting on my congressional testimony on the proposed Anti-Semitism Awareness Act. I certainly never anticipated that what Doron Ben-Atar has called my “fifteen minutes of fame” would extend into the pages of this historic journal, where, for a decade, I edited the book reviews. One day, when a future historian updates Jeffrey Gurock’s terrific history of this journal, my words and those of these respondents will be taken into account, whereas my testimony has already faded into obscurity in the millions of pages of the Congressional Record.

Four of the respondents join me in opposing the Anti-Semitism Awareness Act; one abstains. This small sample of colleagues adds their names to the long list of those sharing my opposition to the bill whom I consulted before agreeing to testify.

I wrote my testimony early in November 2017. As Sharon Musher has pointed out, and I agree, antisemitism, as well as “other forms of hate, including racism and Islamophobia, [have] been growing both on our campuses and in our broader society.” Were I to testify today after Pittsburgh and Poway—the cities already metonyms in the Jewish world for the murders at the Tree of Life Synagogue (October 27, 2018) and Chabad of Poway (April 27, 2019)—I would have noted the tragedies and emphasized the dangers of online proliferation of white supremacy spreading communities of hate.

Shari Rabin’s historical lens deepens our understanding of the phenomenon of “anti-semitism awareness acts.” A recent book substantiates her speculation that far more rabbis than Jewish studies scholars have ever appeared before Congress. She reminds us of the legal bases of discrimination against Jews, African Americans, and other minorities.

Quoting Ibram X. Kendi, who succeeded Elie Wiesel as Boston University’s Andrew W. Mellon Professor in the Humanities, she reiterates that education cannot obliterate racist ideas because what has driven them are racist policies.

This leads to Jonathan Judaken’s brilliant assessment of the politics of anti-antisemitism at the core of the Anti-Semitism Awareness Act. I appreciate Judaken’s critique of the International Holocaust Remembrance Alliance’s definition of antisemitism, whose lead author was Kenneth Stern. Since testifying, I have joined colleagues around the country, including Michael Brenner, Paola Tartakoff, and Britt Tevis, in developing new courses on antisemitism. When we teach, we scrutinize multiple definitions of the term, and I include Judaken’s scholarship. Nevertheless, I presumed that the busy members of Congress, who flitted in and out of that three-hour long hearing, are little interested in semantics and scholarly debates.

But Judaken has raised a very important issue, which I did not address, about the shifting conceptions of the term “racism” and how they have led to “the exclusion of Jews from the struggle against racism.” Just this academic year (2020–2021) while in the midst of the COVID-19 pandemic, my American University colleagues Michael Brenner, Lauren Strauss, and I organized the virtual lecture series, “Antisemitism since the Holocaust: America, Israel, and Europe.”

When I asked our campus Antiracist and Research Policy Center to co-sponsor the series, my request was politely declined. Disturbingly, educating about antisemitism, even if such education cannot eradicate it, is not seen as anti-racist work.

I appreciate Kenneth Stern’s bringing me into this conversation, even if Doron Ben-Atar suggests that I was a puppet doing “his bidding.” Stern’s recent book, *The Conflict over the Conflict: The Israel/Palestine Campus Debate*, provides the fullest account I have seen of this history.

Jewish advocacy groups sitting at the Judiciary Committee’s hearing table, like the Simon Wiesenthal Center, would learn much by reading it.

But mostly I am grateful because we never know what conversation, event, or chance encounter will spark an idea. While I had long taught


5. Episodes may viewed here: https://www.youtube.com/playlist?list=PLH1gskVWCFhrtCag8SucZM1-Lna9G3fX. The series included David Nirenberg, Paola Tartakoff, Lisa Moses Leff, Tony Michels, Annie Polland, Riv-Ellen Prell, Kirsten Fermaglich, Marc Dollinger, Cheryl Greenberg, Robert Satloff, Mehnaz Alfridi, Omar Boom, Elizabeth Thompson, David Myers, and Anita Shapira.

about antisemitism, it was primarily through the lens of the Holocaust. Now, looking back, I see that entering into the fray over the Anti-Semitism Awareness Act at the same time that I was finishing my most recent book, *America’s Jewish Women: A History from Colonial Times to Today*, influenced its narrative. Antisemitism—from the right, the left, or in between—made its way into every chapter because anti-Jewish animus impacted Jewish women’s lives from the moment the first ones set foot in New Amsterdam.

Shari Rabin asked: “What responsibility do Jewish studies scholars have to these publics in the face of antisemitism’s resurgence and politicization?” My testimony was one answer. My current research, “It Can Happen Here”: Antisemitism, Gender and the American Past, is another.

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