

OPINION

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What an Antisemite's Fantasy Says About Jewish Reality

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A man travels 4,800 miles from the north of England to the heart of Texas.

Once there, appearing to be homeless, he gains entry into a synagogue just before its Shabbat services. The rabbi welcomes him with a cup of tea. With a handgun, he takes the rabbi and others hostage for 11 hours while demanding the release of a convicted terrorist held in a nearby prison. He phones a prominent New York rabbi to help push for the terrorist's release. A [hostage reports him as saying](#), "I know President Biden will do things for the Jews." A witness, [who sees the drama unfold on a livestream](#), watches him "ranting about Jews and Israel" and saying he has chosen his target because "America only cares about Jewish lives."

Antisemitism? You would think it could not be more obvious, as everyone from the prime minister of Israel to the president of the United States to the Council on American-Islamic Relations agrees. But first you'd have to climb over a strange wall of obfuscation, misdirection and doubt.

"He was singularly focused on one issue, and it was not specifically related to the Jewish community, but we are continuing to work to find motive," the F.B.I. special agent in charge, Matthew DeSarno, said shortly after the standoff ended, presumably referring to the assailant's bid to free the imprisoned terrorist. Both The Associated Press and the BBC parroted the line, [with the Beeb tweeting](#), "Texas synagogue hostage standoff not related to Jewish community — F.B.I."

The A.P. [later deleted a tweet](#) making a similar claim. And the F.B.I. amended its case on Sunday, calling the attack "a terrorism-related matter, in which the Jewish community was targeted." On Thursday, the F.B.I. director, Christopher Wray, [finally acknowledged](#) that it was an antisemitic attack.

Yet the only substantial reporting I found from a major American news organization that explicitly acknowledges the antisemitic

nature of the attack was one astute story [in The Washington Post](#). Instead, there was a focus on the assailant's supposed mental illness, along with additional reporting on the ever-increasing security-consciousness of synagogues worldwide.

Compare that with the mountain of reporting regarding the anti-Asian hate that allegedly animated the killer in last year's attacks on Atlanta-area massage parlors. Or compare it with the coverage of the unquestionably racist 2015 shooting at Charleston's Emanuel African Methodist Episcopal Church. For that matter, compare it with the naked Jew-hatred that drove the killer in the 2018 synagogue massacre in Pittsburgh, which has been extensively reported and discussed. (His immediate "motive" was opposition to immigration.)

In the days since the attack, the F.B.I.'s head-in-sand approach, along with so much of the media's strange pattern of omission, has been the chief topic of discussion in every Jewish circle to which I belong. How can it be, we ask ourselves, that Jews should be victimized twice? First, by being physically targeted for being Jewish; second, by being begrudged the universal recognition that we were morally targeted, too? And how can it be that in this era of heightened sensitivity to every kind of hatred, bias, stereotype, -ism and -phobia, both conscious and unconscious, there's so much caviling, caveating and outright denying when it comes to calling out bias aimed at Jews?

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The answer begins with the shape-shifting nature of antisemitism, which some perpetrate, others participate in (sometimes unwittingly), and a still greater number fail to recognize for what it is — in part because each successive mutation doesn't exactly resemble its predecessor.

What we generally call antisemitism is a 19th-century coinage that helped turn an ancient religious hatred into a racial hatred. As racial hatred came to be considered uncouth after World War II,

anti-Zionism (that is, blanket opposition to a Jewish state, not criticism of particular Israeli policies) became a more acceptable way of opposing Jewish political interests and denigrating Jews. Should Israel cease to exist, new forms of bigotry will surely develop for the next stage of anti-Judaism, adapted to the prevailing beliefs of the times.

The common denominator in each of these mutations is an idea, based in fantasy and conspiracy, about Jewish *power*. The old-fashioned religious antisemite believed Jews had the power to kill Christ. The 19th-century antisemites who were the forerunners to the Nazis believed Jews had the power to start wars, manipulate kings and swindle native people of their patrimony.

Present-day anti-Zionists attribute to Israel and its supporters in the United States vast powers that they do not possess, like the power to draw America into war. On the far right, antisemites think that Jews are engaged in an immense scheme to replace white, working-class America with immigrant labor. Tucker Carlson and others have taken this conspiracy theory mainstream, [much to the delight of neo-Nazis like David Duke](#), even if they are careful to leave out the part about Jews.

The man who attacked the synagogue entertained the same type of fantasy. Just as Willie Sutton was said to rob banks because “that’s where the money is,” this assailant took Jews hostage because that’s where the power was (or so he thought). The F.B.I.’s moral idiocy — there are no other words for it — in denying the specifically antisemitic nature of the attack lies in the idea that he could have imagined himself choosing just about any means to achieve his end, like taking hostages at the nearest church or convenience store. Similarly, the focus on his mental health evades the central fact that, crazy or not, his malice was not random. He aimed his gun at Jews.

The fantasy about Jewish power may seem outlandish, but it’s far more pervasive than many think — which gets to the point of

people participating in antisemitism even when they aren't knowingly perpetrating it.

Who, for instance, [is most responsible for devising the war in Iraq](#)? If your first-pass answer is “Wolfowitz, Feith, Abrams and Perle,” you might ask yourself why you are naming second- and third-tier Bush administration officials, all of them Jewish, when all the top decision makers — Bush, Cheney, Rumsfeld, Rice — are Christians. (If your response to *this* is that Wolfowitz et al. were the ones who pulled the strings, then you're an antisemite.)

Or take another example: if you think the reason Israel gets so much support in Congress is the money and influence of the pro-Israel lobby, you might be surprised to learn that that lobby ranks 20th on the [most recent list of congressional donors](#), giving away a paltry \$4.5 million compared with the \$95 million that retiree interest groups donated. “All about the Benjamins” it is not, [no matter what Representative Ilhan Omar might suppose](#).

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But there's a larger context here, which has to do with prevailing assumptions about power itself.

A moral conviction of our time, especially prevalent on the cultural left, is that the powerful are presumptively bad while the powerless are presumptively good. These categories aren't just political. They are also social, economic, ethnic and racial. It's why so many conversations today revolve around the concept of “privilege” — a striking redefinition of success that removes the presumption of merit from those who have it and the stigma of failure from those who don't.

It's also the likeliest reason there was so much obvious hesitancy to describe the attack in Texas as antisemitic. Unlike the Pittsburgh shooter or the “Jews will not replace us” crowd at Charlottesville — white, right-wing, mostly Christian and therefore “privileged” — the Texas assailant was a British Muslim

of Pakistani descent. Not white. Not privileged. Not right-wing. In the binary narrative of the powerful versus the powerless, his naked antisemitism just doesn't compute: Powerless people are supposed to be victims, not murderous bigots. If he had ranted against Israel for oppressing Palestinians, it might have made more sense. And if he had donned a MAGA hat, we would certainly have had a much fuller exploration of his antisemitism, without time wasted exploring his other motives or state of mind.

For American Jews, this small silence about what happened last week should be profoundly worrisome, and not just as a matter of a journalistic lapse. It's bad enough that the Jewish state, which gained what power it has because its neighbors threatened it with extinction, is still treated by so many as a global pariah — its sympathizers abroad risking social or professional ostracism by mere association. It's bad enough, too, that the foul antisemitism of the right, yoked to its old themes of nativism, protectionism, nationalism and isolationism, is erupting into the public square like a burst sewage pipe.

Now American Jews find ourselves at perhaps the most successful period in our history, at a moment when much of the progressive left has decreed that privilege is a sin and that those who hold power should be stripped of it. Anyone with a long view of Jewish history should know how quickly economic and social privilege can turn to political and personal ruin, even — or especially — in countries where it might seem unthinkable.

There's much to be thankful for about how things ended last week in Texas, and about the outpouring of love and support, across faiths, for a little Jewish community. But the wise counsel for Jews is to be grateful for last week's good luck, while taking it as a warning that our luck in America may run out.