A NEW ANTISEMITISM?

Jonathan Sacks

Foreword: June 2002

The following is the text, edited for publication, of a lecture I gave to the Inter-Parliamentary Committee against Antisemitism on 28 February 2002. As I explain in the lecture, the subject is one on which I was reluctant to speak. There is always the danger that, in speaking about antisemitism, (a) one can exaggerate or (b) by drawing attention to it, one can give it publicity that fuels the flames. As the Talmud says in another context: ‘Woe if I speak; woe if I am silent.’ I decided, none the less, to sound a warning. That is not because I believed, then or now, that there is a real and present danger in Britain. There is not. But the new antisemitism—and it is new—is a global phenomenon conveyed by Internet, e-mail, television and video, and we do not yet know how the new communications media will affect its spread. Under such circumstances, early warning systems are important.

My analysis, in February, was sombre. Much worse has happened since. In the first two weeks of April 2002, for example, in France synagogues, Jewish schools, student facilities and Jewish shops were attacked and firebombed. A synagogue in Marseilles was burned to the ground. Jews were attacked by gangs of hooded men wielding iron clubs. The French interior ministry reported, during those two weeks alone, 360 crimes against Jews and Jewish institutions. I was in Italy with my family at the time (it was the festival of Passover), when a Jewish couple from France, sitting next to us, received a phone call from their son, saying, ‘The time has come for us to leave and go to Israel. France is not safe for us any more.’

During the same period, in Kiev, Ukraine, fifty youths chanting ‘Kill the Jews’ attacked a synagogue, broke twenty windows and assaulted the director of the Jewish school. In Salonika, the Holocaust memorial was defaced with Palestinian slogans. In Slovakia, Jewish cemeteries were desecrated. In Brussels, synagogues were firebombed and a travel agency specializing in tours of Israel was set alight. There were violent anti-Israel demonstrations in Amsterdam, during which rocks and bottles were thrown and shop windows broken. In Berlin, Jews were assaulted, swastikas daubed on Jewish memorials and a synagogue spray painted with the words ‘Six million is not enough’.

More recently, in the United States, there has been intimidation of Jewish students. A student newspaper at Rutgers University carried an article containing the words, ‘Die Jew. Die, die, die. Do us all a favour and build yourself an oven.’ In Britain, two synagogues, one in London, another in Manchester, have been desecrated. One of my rabbinical colleagues was assaulted as he sat waiting for a train. Almost none of these acts was directed against an Israeli target. These are attacks on Jews, their schools and places of worship. This is not anti-Zionism, not generalized racism, not random violence, but antisemitism.

It is coming simultaneously from three different directions:
first, a radicalized Islamist youth inflamed by extremist rhetoric; second, a left-wing anti-American cognitive elite with strong representation in the European media; third, a resurgent far right, as anti-Muslim as it is anti-Jewish. It is being fed by the instability of globalization, the insecurity of the post-Cold War international arena, and the still undischarged trauma of September 11. It has been allowed to grow unchecked because of a general unwillingness among Europe’s political leadership to confront the problem head on (‘For evil to triumph’, said Burke, ‘it is necessary only for the good man to do nothing’). It has been aggravated by the breakdown of a morality of right and wrong acts in favour of a therapeutic ethic that ‘feels the pain’ of the perpetrators of violence. Taken in combination, these are powerful forces, to which the countervailing influences of reason, responsibility and restraint are as unequal now as they have been at any other time of populist ferment and generalized fear.

Antisemitism exists and is dangerous whenever two contradictory factors appear in combination: the belief that Jews are so powerful that they are responsible for the evils of the world, and the knowledge that they are so powerless that they can be attacked with impunity. Those two factors are in abundant evidence today in many parts of the world. That this has happened with such speed and so little protest, less than sixty years after the Holocaust, is profoundly shocking. No one—not Jews, not Muslims, not Christians, no one—should suffer this kind of hate, and the moral credibility of more than one civilization is at stake. On 28 February I thought it was sufficient to sound a warning. Now I think more is needed: a call to all those with a sense of history and humanity to say ‘Stop’. No problem was ever solved by hate, falsehood, racism, religiously inspired terror, and the willingness to deflect attention from real abuses of power, human rights and moral responsibility. Now is the time for good men and women to do something: to say ‘Never again’, and mean just that: Never again.

Sounding a warning

I am frankly reluctant to speak about antisemitism. First, I never experienced it. To the contrary, I have received nothing but kindness from this, my country, the nation that, from John Locke to John Stuart Mill to Winston Churchill, has been the matrix and defender of tolerance in the modern world. Even my late father, who came to this country as a refugee fleeing persecution, used to make a joke about it. Every time we were driving and the traffic lights went red, he used to say, ‘Antisemitic traffic lights!’ For him, as for me, it was the past; it was over; in Britain, at least, it was not serious. Second, we are wrong to see all criticism of the state of Israel as anti-Zionism, let alone as antisemitism. No nation is perfect. No nation is above criticism. A democracy must welcome criticism—and Israel is a democracy.

Indeed it was the prophets of ancient Israel who invented the institution of self-criticism three thousand years ago. To this day, Jews are gold medalists in the art of self-criticism. As Abba Eban once said: ‘We are the nation who can’t take yes for an answer.’ However, the most important reason for my reluctance is that it should not have to be Jews who condemn antisemitism; who see it, feel it and protest against it. It should be Christians, Muslims, secular humanists. As for me, in my annual message to the nation on BBC television last September, I protested against hatred of non-Jews: of Blacks, Muslims, immigrants and
asylum-seekers. I am proud that the Union of Jewish Students, who have been subject to much verbal and physical abuse recently, have led the fight against Islamophobia on campus, as well as against other forms of racial and religious hatred. I am proud that in the United States, just as Jews in the 1960s marched alongside Martin Luther King to fight for Blacks, so today they are among the leaders in the fight against persecution of Christians in Arab lands.

I salute the brave non-Jews who have raised their voices on this issue. Now, though, I have to add my own, because as God said to the prophet Ezekiel: ‘If the watchman sees the sword coming and does not blow the trumpet to warn the people, and the sword comes and takes the life of one of them, that man will be taken away, but I will hold the watchman accountable for his blood. Son of man, I have made you a watchman for the House of Israel.’ A prophet must issue a warning, and every rabbi, however humbly, is an heir to the prophets.

What, then, is antisemitism? This is so emotive a subject that it is best approached by way of a thought experiment. Let us suppose that someone claimed to have discovered a phenomenon he called anti-Kiwsim, a pathological hatred of New Zealanders. What would have to be the case to convince us that he was right and that there really is such a phenomenon?

The fact that the government of New Zealand is criticized? Clearly not. The publicly voiced claim that New Zealand has no right to exist? Perhaps. The fact that in the past twelve months—February 2001 to February 2002—there have been 7,732 terrorist attacks on New Zealand’s citizens, almost one every hour of every day for 365 days. Maybe. But in truth, not yet. What all these facts would amount to would simply be a tragedy, a human tragedy, a political tragedy, but not yet anti-Kiwsim.

Now, though, suppose that, at a United Nations Conference against Racism in Durban, New Zealand, because of its treatment of Maoris, is, alone among the nations of the world, singled out and accused of apartheid, ethnic cleansing and crimes against humanity; and that those making these charges carry posters inspired by Der Stürmer, the paper published in Nazi Germany. Suppose that there are calls to murder all those with New Zealand loyalties, even though they were born elsewhere and live elsewhere.

Suppose, on al-Jazeera television earlier this month, an official spokesman of the government of Saudi Arabia said: ‘The media of America is in the hands of the New Zealanders.’ And then adds: ‘I am surprised that the Christian United States allows the brothers of apes and pigs [his way of describing New Zealanders] to corrupt it. The New Zealanders are the most despicable people who walk the land and are the worms of the entire world.’

Suppose that New Zealand was accused of inventing AIDS to decimate the population of Africa. Suppose that, simultaneously, New Zealand was held, not merely to control the United States, but also to have engineered the attack on the World Trade Center and the Pentagon on September 11, 2001. Suppose that this claim—that it was not Osama bin Laden, but New Zealand who carried out the outrage—was not confined to fringe groups but was believed by 48 per cent of people questioned in Pakistan, 71 per cent of the population holding it to be at least possible.

Suppose Arab radio and television in the past year had broadcast a thirty-part series dedicated to proving the truth of The Protocols of the Elders of New Zealand; that Kuwaiti television had shown a satire in which the prime minister of New
Zealand was shown drinking the blood of Maori children, or that the current Syrian defence minister had written a book to prove that this was true.

Suppose you discovered that, in country after country, The Protocols of the Elders of New Zealand, along with Hitler's Mein Kampf, were bestsellers, and that the claim was commonplace that New Zealand is a satanic force, the embodiment of evil against whom a holy war must be fought. Then, I think, you might be reasonably convinced that there was such a thing as anti-Kiwism, that it was alive and well, disturbing and dangerous.

Every single statement I have just made—with New Zealand deleted and the words Israel or Jew substituted—has appeared in the past year. This might seem, to reasonable and dispassionate people, to be worthy of some concern. But putting it this way altogether fails to communicate the real pathos of the situation, because we are not dealing with anti-Kiwism. We are dealing with antisemitism. And antisemitism has a history.

Let me state the point as simply as I can. Antisemitism is alive, active and virulent in the year 2002, after more than half a century of Holocaust education, inter-faith dialogue, United Nations declarations, dozens of museums and memorials, hundreds of films, thousands of courses, and tens of thousands of books dedicated to exposing its evils. After the Stockholm Conference, 27 January 2000, after the creation of a National Holocaust Memorial Day, after two thousand religious leaders came together in the United Nations in August 2000 to commit themselves to fight hatred and engender mutual respect. After all this.

What more could have been done? What more could and can we do to fight antisemitism? Yet it exists today in many parts of the world: in the Middle East, Africa, South-east Asia and, yes, in Europe, in more virulent forms than at any time since the Holocaust. There can be little doubt that it has been the most successful ideology of modern times. Fascism came and went. Soviet Communism came and went. Antisemitism came and stayed.

How does antisemitism survive? Sadly, the answer is this. Antisemitism is not a belief system, a coherent set of ideas. In the nineteenth and early twentieth centuries, Jews were hated because they were rich and because they were poor; because they were capitalists and because they were communists; because they kept to themselves and because they got everywhere; because they were superstitious believers and because they were rootless cosmopolitans who believed nothing.

Antisemitism is not a belief. It is a virus and, like a virus, it mutates. The human body has the most sophisticated of mechanisms—the immune system—to defend itself against viruses. It develops antibodies. Viruses defeat the immune system because they mutate. They are then able to get past the body's defences, in effect by persuading them that they are friends, not foes. The immune system, alert to last year's virus, fails to recognize this year's.

The classic case of mutation happened in Europe in the nineteenth century. There was a belief that in an age of enlightenment—emancipation, the French Revolution, the secular nation-state—prejudice would die, not least the age-old Christian prejudice against Judaism and Jews. What happened instead was that religious anti-Judaism mutated into racial antisemitism.

The word 'antisemitism' itself was coined in 1879. What
made racial antisemitism so much worse than its religious precursors was that now Jews were hated not because of what they believed, or not because of how they lived, but because of who they were. You can eliminate a religion by forcibly converting all its followers. You can eliminate a race only by genocide. As Raul Hilberg put it: “There is a straight line from “You have no right to live among us as Jews,” to “You have no right to live among us” to “You have no right to live”.

What we are witnessing today is the second great mutation of antisemitism in modern times, from racial antisemitism to religious anti-Zionism (with the added premise that all Jews are Zionists). It uses all the mediaeval myths—the blood libel, poisoning of wells, killers of the Lord’s anointed, incarnation of evil—transposed into a new key and context. This could not have succeeded, however, without one mutation; a mutation so ingenious, demonic and evil that it paralyses the immune systems of the West built up over the past half-century.

The mutation is this: that the worst crimes of antisemites in the past—racism, ethnic cleansing, attempted genocide, crimes against humanity—are now attributed to Jews and the state of Israel, so that if you are against Nazism, you must ipso facto be utterly opposed to Jews. I regard this as one of the most blasphemous inversions in the history of the world’s oldest hate. I am shocked that so few non-Jews in Europe have recognized it and denounced it.

What then shall we do? I have three messages: one to Jews; a second to antisemites; the third to all of us, to humanity as a whole.

My first message is to the Jewish community in this country and throughout the world. We must not internalize this hate. The great mistake Jews made in the nineteenth century—and it was a mistake made by good and serious people—was that to believe that since Jews are the object of antisemitism, they must therefore be the cause of antisemitism.

That is untrue. We now have copious evidence that there can be fierce antisemitism in countries where there are no Jews at all. The moment we internalize antisemitism, the result is that tortured psychology—from ambivalence to self-hatred—against which my last book, Radical Then, Radical Now (published in the United States as A Letter in the Scroll), was directed. Ambivalence and self-hatred have injured Jewish life for a century, and we still suffer its after-effects today.

Some years ago, in the early years of Russian glasnost, the following episode occurred (I heard it from one of my rabbinical colleagues). Glasnost allowed Jews in the Soviet Union to live freely and openly as Jews for the first time in seventy years. Unfortunately, it also brought to the surface a degree of antisemitism that had been suppressed before.

A British rabbi went out to Russia in the late 1980s to help reconstruct Jewish life. One day he had a visit from a young woman. She said, ‘Rabbi, all my life I have hidden the fact that I was a Jew. No one ever commented on it. Now, though, when I walk in the street, people shout out, Zhid, Zhid [‘Jew, Jew’]. What shall I do?’

The rabbi said, ‘You don’t look Jewish. If you hadn’t told me, I would never have known that you were a Jew. Look at me. With my black hat and my black yamulka and my beard, people probably know that I’m a Jew. Yet in all these months that I have been here, no one has ever shouted out to me Zhid. Why do you think that is?’

The girl was silent for a minute, and then replied, ‘because they know that if they shout “Jew” at you, you will take it as a
compliment. If they shout “Jew” at me, they know I will take it as an insult.” The best way for Jews to combat antisemitism, beyond eternal vigilance, is to wear our identity with pride.

I turn now to the antisemite. I say to him or her: Forgive me, but I cannot return hate with hate. I fight my hatreds. You must fight yours. You cannot fight my battles and I cannot fight yours. But this I can tell you: When bad things happen to any of us, there are two different questions we can ask, and which we ask defines what kind of person we are. We can ask, ‘How can I put it right?’ Or we can ask, ‘Who did this to me?’

The first question—‘How can I put it right?’—defines me as a subject, a moral agent, a person with free will. The second question—‘Who did this to me?’—defines me as an object, a victim who, being a victim, can only experience resentment and rage. If there is anything that paralyses human freedom and destroys human responsibility, it is resentment and rage.

Throughout history, antisemitism has been the weapon of choice of tyrants, dictators and rulers of totalitarian states because, more effectively than anything else, it deflects all justified complaints—of the hungry, the poor, the uneducated, the sick, the repressed, those denied the most basic human freedoms—away from those responsible, and projects them on a mythical enemy elsewhere.

That is why those who care for freedom, democracy and human rights must realize that antisemitism or mythic anti-Zionism will not liberate the supposed victims of Jews but the opposite: it will perpetuate their self-definition as victims and thus perpetuate their victimhood. It will gain them sympathy but deprive them of all responsibility. It will allow them to embark on policies that, in more than one sense, are suicidal. The link between self-defined victims and their sympathizers (whose intentions are nothing if not noble) is what in therapeutic terms is called co-dependency and its effect is profoundly self-destructive. More than hate destroys the hated, hate destroys the hater.

Finally, I turn to us, all of us in our shared humanity. There is something I must say in its full depth and gravity. Since the destruction of the First Temple, nearly 2,600 years ago, Jews have known the bread of affliction. Think of the words Jewish history has added to our vocabulary: expulsion, inquisition, ghetto, pogrom, holocaust. I do not want to dwell on that history. It is too painful and, besides, I do not think it defines who and what we are. Judaism is about sanctifying life, not remembering death.

However, during those twenty-six centuries Jews adopted three strategies in order to survive. The first was initiated by the prophet Jeremiah at the beginning of Israel’s history of exile. He sent a letter to the Jews who had been forcibly taken from Israel or who had fled. He told them (Jeremiah 29): ‘Seek the peace and prosperity of the city to which you were exiled, and pray to God for it, for in its peace, you will find peace.’ That is an idea that was ancient even in Jeremiah’s day. It goes back to the opening words of Jewish history (Genesis 12) and to God’s first call to Abraham, in which God tells him to act so that, ‘through you, all the families of earth will be blessed’. That was, and remains, the Jewish vocation: to be true to our faith while being a blessing to others.

That is what Jews sought to do for some twenty-five centuries: to contribute to the countries in which they lived by developing businesses, enlarging trade, adding to the arts and sciences, to poetry and philosophy, and, above all, to the spiritual heritage of mankind.

That was the first strategy. It failed. It failed because, until
the nineteenth century, Jews had no civil rights. They lacked the protection of the law. They were dependent on the favour of the ruler and, when it was no longer in his interest to keep Jews, they were expelled: from England in 1290 and, then, in the course of the next two centuries, from virtually every country in Europe, culminating in 101 years of anti-Jewish persecution in Spain and, finally, the expulsion, in 1492. Thus, the first solution failed.

What was the second? It arose in nineteenth-century Europe, and came about as a result of Enlightenment, emancipation and the birth of the secular nation-state. For the first time in history, Jews were offered equal rights as citizens. The promise was that the rule of reason would dispel the ancient mists of prejudice.

The failure of that dream is one of the most devastating chapters in European history. The depth of its failure is measured by this: that virtually all the great philosophers of modernity—Voltaire, Fichte, Kant, Hegel, Schopenhauer, Nietzsche, Frege—made sharply antisemitic statements in the course of their work (these are documented in my book, The Politics of Hope, 98–108). The greatest German philosopher of the twentieth century, Martin Heidegger, was an enthusiastic member of the Nazi Party who, in the post-war years, recanted, atoned or apologized for his acts. Thus the Europe of reason, enlightenment and philosophy became the Europe of the Holocaust (I speak, of course, not of Britain, one of the honorable exceptions). The second solution failed.

Zionism was born in the consciousness of that failure. It began in 1862 with Moses Hess, friend of Karl Marx, and the first person to diagnose the emerging German antisemitism. It was followed in 1882 by the assimilated Russian Jewish doctor, Leon Pinsker, after the great Russian pogroms of 1881.

Then, in 1895, Theodor Herzl, a Viennese journalist covering the Dreyfus trial in Paris, heard the crowds cry _A mort les Juifs_ (‘Death to the Jews’). France at that time was widely regarded as the most civilized nation in Europe, the home of the revolution, the birthplace of the Declaration of the Rights of Man and the Citizen. When he heard that cry on the Parisian streets, Herzl knew that Europe was no longer safe for Jews. This is what he wrote a year later. It sums up the experience of a century of Jewish life in Western Europe:

_We have sincerely tried everywhere to merge with the national communities in which we live, seeking only to preserve the faith of our fathers. It is not permitted to us. In vain are we loyal patriots, sometimes super-loyal. In vain do we make the same sacrifices of life and property as our fellow citizens. In vain do we strive to enhance the fame of our native lands in the arts and sciences, or her wealth by trade and commerce. In our native lands, where we have lived for centuries, we are still decried as aliens, often by men whose ancestors had not yet come, at a time when Jewish sighs had long been heard in the country._

He added: ‘I think we shall not be left in peace.’

The idea of Hess, Pinsker and Herzl was simple. If the nation-states of Europe had no place for Jews, then Jews must have a nation-state of their own. Sadly, it took the murder of two-thirds of Europe’s Jews before the state was born.

_That solution must not fail._ For the only fourth solution is the one the Nazis called ‘the final solution’. _That is why Jews must have a safe collective home_, in the sense defined by the
poet Robert Frost, who wrote, 'home is the place where, when you have to go there, they have to let you in'.

From here on, we must stand and fight our ground. There is no other way. We must fight it with courage, integrity, honesty, cogency, with neither hate nor desire for revenge, but we must fight it—and Jews must not be left, yet again, to fight it alone.

Why have Jews been persecuted and hated throughout the ages? Not because they were better than anyone else, not because they were worse than anyone else, but because they were different and because there is a natural human tendency to dislike the unlike, to fear the stranger and hate what we fear.

But, surely, every nation, each faith, every culture is different. That is so. What made Jews singular is that, with more tenacity than anyone else, they insisted on the right to be different, the duty to be different, the dignity of difference. In the days of the Alexandrian empire they refused to be hellenized, so they were persecuted. In the days of Rome, they fought for the right to practise their faith, and they were persecuted. In Christian Europe, they resisted conversion, and they were persecuted. Today, in an Islamic Middle East, they are not Muslims, and so they are persecuted. Had the majority of Jews capitulated under any of these dispensations, they would have spared themselves and their children much suffering and grief, and today there would be no Judaism and no Jews.

Our ancestors believed—I dare still to believe—that no one should be forced to abandon his faith, traditions, history and loyalties to have the right to be free, to walk down a street without fear of being attacked, to build a place of worship without fear of it being burned down. I was a student at Cambridge. The synagogue in Cambridge, built in the 1930s, has no windows in the walls that face the street, because of the fear then that, if there were, they would be broken. That fear has now returned, if not in Cambridge, then in Paris, Marseilles, Brussels, Berlin.

Antisemitism is a crime against humanity, not because Jews are human beings (I hope that much will be conceded) but because human beings are Jews, by which I mean difference is the essence of our humanity. There is a fine rabbinic saying, 2,000 years old: 'When a human being makes many coins in the same mint, they are all the same. God makes every person in the same image—His image—and they are each different.' The miracle of creation is that unity in heaven creates diversity on earth. Or, as I have put it elsewhere, the fundamental challenge is to see God's image in one who is not in our image. A world that has no room for Jews has no space for difference; and a world that lacks space for difference has no room for humanity. That is why antisemitism is not a, but the, paradigm of a crime against humanity.

The unfolding tragedy in Israel will not be solved by demonization, myth, blood libels, reiterations of mediaeval fantasies, modern forgeries like The Protocols of the Elders of Zion, attacks on Jews and synagogues throughout the world, evasions, lies and conspiracy theories. Political problems have political solutions, and they require nothing less than truth, fact, relentless honesty, self-criticism, the capacity to compromise and a willingness to prefer an imperfect peace to the perfect purity of holy war, sacred suicide and murderous martyrdom. Antisemitism begins with Jews but never ends with Jews. Now is the time for those who care about humanity to join in the defence of humanity, by protesting this newest mutation of the world's oldest hate.