

Review

Alvin H. Rosenfeld (ed):

Resurgent antisemitism: Global perspectives

Bloomington: Indiana University Press, 2013. 568p.

ISBN 9780253008787

Deborah E. Lipstadt:

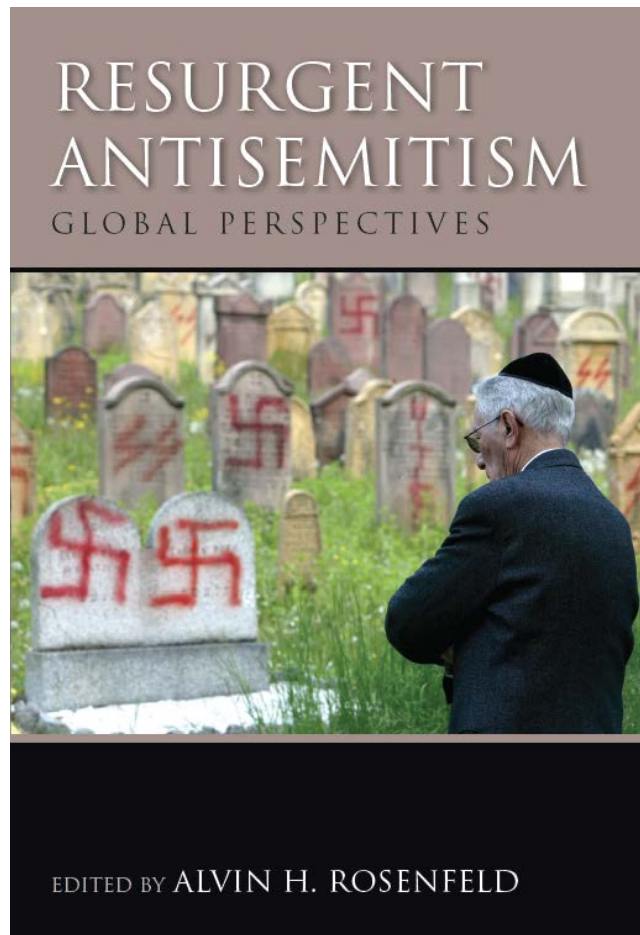
Antisemitism: Here and now

New York: Schocken Books, 2019. 304 p.

ISBN 9780805243376

Reviewed by Sol Goldberg

Since antisemitism continues to plague our world, the investigation of its forms and causes will, and should, continue to occupy scholars. Both Alvin H. Rosenfeld's edited volume, *Resurgent antisemitism: Global perspectives*, and Deborah E. Lipstadt's epistolary monograph, *Antisemitism: Here and now*, take up this explanatory task as a moral imperative. Indeed, beyond any light which they respectively shed on what antisemitism has looked like over the past few decades and what conditions have led to its recent rise, their most significant contribution resides perhaps in their efforts to convince readers that contemporary antisemitism deserves serious attention within and beyond the academy. To some, this point might appear obvious. No reasonable and respectable person could deny that acts of blatant antisemitism, like the mass shooting at the Tree of Life Synagogue in Pittsburgh, should be understood so that they could be more successfully inhibited. But not all antisemitism is so incontrovertibly blatant, and some reasonable and respectable people seem either unable to recognize its various manifestations or unwilling to regard their occurrence with the urgency that other social ills require. Changing such people's attitudes towards antisemitism, it seems to me, is the best way to understand the general purpose of these two books. Since, however, they pursue this common purpose in very different ways and are otherwise quite dissimilar, I mostly discuss each book separately in this review.

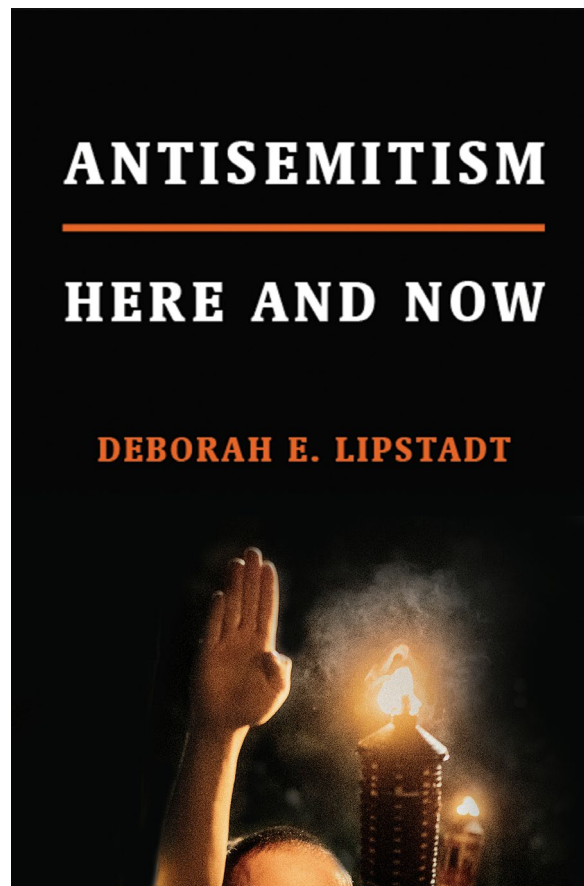


It is, to be frank, difficult to speak in a single breath about the Rosenfeld volume as a whole. One could perhaps say that all nineteen chapters in it address the recent history of antisemitism in one way or another. But even that capacious summary would require some qualifications as soon as one began to look more closely at each chapter. Several chapters have as their theme the “new” antisemitism, that is, anti-Zionism (often) in contrast to criticism of Israel, while in some chapters the focus is the continuation, until now, of “traditional” (which is not to say unchanged or unchanging) antisemitism. Most chapters discuss antisemitism or anti-Zionism in a particular national context. Great Britain, Spain, Poland, Norway, Turkey, Iran, and Israel each get a chapter, while Hungary and Romania are considered comparatively in a single chapter. But there are also chapters that zoom out to a region, whether the European Union, the Middle East,

or formerly Communist states, as well as one chapter which zooms in on the campus politics at San Francisco State University. Additionally, some chapters, which are more philosophical than historical, consider in abstracter or less contextual terms anti-Zionism/antisemitism as, say, an immoral project of delegitimation, as a rhetorical strategy that vilifies its victims and champions its perpetrators, or as a phenomenon helped by Jewish alibis. And, finally, there are the historically oriented chapters that range across contexts when considering Holocaust denial and minimization, the connection between communism and radical Islam, or the growing distance from the Holocaust, which, so goes its thesis, consequently, no longer inhibits antisemitism as it once did. Little, in short, warrants the volume's subtitle: *Global perspectives*. Put aside the fact that large chunks of the globe are discussed either not at all (for example, the Far East, Africa, and South Asia) or only scantily (such as, Central and South America). Most chapters offer a decidedly "local perspective" without much bearing on each other. The kind or cause of antisemitism in, for instance, Norway, has little to do with the antisemitism elsewhere, like in Iran or Poland. Nor are these accounts local in any uniform way, for some chapters focus on the social conditions that produce antisemitism whereas others analyze antisemitism as expressed in film or literature. In other words, the volume overall shows – probably contrary to its intention – that the resurgence of "antisemitism" today actually takes a variety of forms stemming from several mutually independent causes.

Considered individually, the chapters vary in quality, as one might expect in a volume of this size. At the more disappointing end of the spectrum is Robert Wistrich's chapter, "Communism, radical Islam, and the Left." It endeavors to correct the view of "Most historians [who] tend to regard the ideologies of communism and radical Islam as mutually incompatible" (402). The mass of details offered to support the contrary shows, as far as I can tell, nothing more than that both contain, perhaps centrally, antisemitic elements. Is the discovery of antisemitism in variants of communism or Islamic factions a claim still or ever in need of defense? And is this single point of intersection enough to call, in any interesting way, the two ideologies compatible? I doubt it. Fortunately, though, several chapters do present interesting theses that deserve scholars' attention, even where they might ultimately disagree. Elhanah Yakira's "Antisemitism and anti-Zionism as a moral question" builds to the interesting hypothesis that "Judeo-phobias have always been enterprises of deligitimation," which strikes me as a novel way to situate the extreme version of the anti-Zionist project within the history of antisemitism. Likewise, though not persuaded by Dina Porat's "Holocaust denial and the image of the Jew," which attempts to connect the now more prevalent tendencies to trivialize, minimize, or relativize the Holocaust with hard-core denial of it as not only effectively analogous but also jointly motivated by a

negative image of the “Jew” as other, I found the claim compelling enough to want to argue against it. Most of the chapters fall somewhere in between. Although some pieces suffer from tunnel vision in that they discuss antisemitism without consideration either of other forms of discrimination and prejudice or of counter-tendencies like antiantisemitism or philosemitism, they are generally yeoman efforts to report on elements of antisemitism’s recent history for scholars who share specific regional or theoretical interests.



Lipstadt’s book, by contrast, isn’t for scholars of antisemitism primarily. It targets instead the interested non-specialist – or, more accurately, certain types of interested non-specialists. Her intended audiences are obvious in the very form in which Lipstadt presents her account of antisemitism, namely, “a series of letters to [...] ‘Abigail,’ a whip-smart Jewish student” and “‘Joe,’ a colleague [of Lipstadt’s] who teaches at the law school” (xi-xii). Lipstadt divides her exchange with Abigail and Joe into seven sections. The first four present what might be called her general

theory of antisemitism. It consists of (I) a definition (an endorsement of Helen Fein's (1987, 67); (II) a taxonomy (from extreme, through enabling, to polite and clueless antisemitism); (III) some contextualization (how it fits into broader discourses about racism of various sorts); and (IV) a prominent technique of rationalization (a discussion required because Lipstadt regards antisemitism as irrational and many people who appear rational are or contribute to antisemitism). The exchange next moves on to (V) Holocaust denial, a phenomenon with which Lipstadt is acquainted not only as a scholar but also through her legal victory in the libel suit brought by notorious Holocaust denier David Irving. Then the final two sections cover (VI) antisemitism on university campuses, especially in the form of BDS (Boycott, Divestment, Sanctions) and (VII) the Jewish responses to antisemitism that tend either to emphasize victimhood and isolation or to rest on a more expansive engagement with Jewish culture and an appreciation of non-Jewish allies. Although Lipstadt addresses Abigail and Joe throughout as friendly rather than skeptical interlocutors, it is in this final section, "Oy versus joy," where she speaks to them as sharing in a common cause not only against antisemitism, but also for Jews as one of several minority groups in a democratic, inclusive, multicultural society.

Lipstadt's book won't change how scholars understand or investigate antisemitism, and the more discerning among them will find reasons to nitpick. For instance, her account waffles about whether the ideational dimension of antisemitism causes or follows from its emotional component, hatred. And her taxonomy of antisemites includes antisemitic enablers, who, though they take advantage of stereotypes about and hostility towards Jews, aren't obviously antisemitic according to her account. (By analogy, it would be odd if a taxonomy of drug users listed, alongside the addict and the recreational pot smoker, the drug peddler, who does, however, obviously belong in the explanation of the drug problem.) One might therefore lament that her fictional interlocutors, largely deferential to her expertise, never challenge Lipstadt by, say, voicing contrary positions from within the scholarship on antisemitism. An opportunity might have been missed here. But there is still something in the book that might nevertheless interest some scholars, namely, Lipstadt's "hot takes" on countless cases of antisemitism in leftist and rightist politics, culture wars, campus debates, and more. If I were her colleague, I could imagine asking for her breakdown of each item when it hit the news. Are Steve Bannon and Breitbart News antisemitic? What about Trump? What's going on with Britain's Labour Party? Her analyses of individuals and episodes are interesting, even if they don't amount to, or perhaps even strive for, a theory of antisemitism free of internal contradictions. Most conversations over a long period don't coalesce into a well-wrought account of a complex phenomenon like antisemitism; but their ad hoc insights are not therefore any less

valuable. In gathering and thoughtfully analyzing a wide variety of cases, Lipstadt has provided a real service for everyone interested in understanding contemporary antisemitism.

Resurgent antisemitism and *Antisemitism: Here and now* have limitations of different sorts. But both also make valuable contributions to the academic and extra-academic efforts to sort out what antisemitism is and why it continues to occur. Hopefully this review helps readers maximize the distinct utility of each book.

Reference

Fein, Helen. 1987. Dimensions of antisemitism: Attitudes, collective accusations, and actions. In *The persisting question: Sociological perspectives and social contexts of modern antisemitism*, edited by Helen Fein, 67-85. Berlin: Walter de Gruyter.

About the reviewer

Sol Goldberg is an associate professor (Teaching stream) in the Department for the Study of Religion and the Anne Tanenbaum Centre for Jewish Studies at the University of Toronto (Ontario, Canada). He earned his Ph.D. in philosophy from the Hebrew University in Jerusalem (Israel) in 2009. He coedited (with Scott Ury and Kalman Weiser) and contributed to the recently published volume *Key concepts in the study of antisemitism* (Palgrave, 2021).