



PROJECT MUSE®

The Conspiracy Exposed

Richard Jeffrey Newman

American Book Review, Volume 41, Number 2, January/February 2020, p. 30 (Review)

Published by American Book Review



➔ For additional information about this article

<https://muse.jhu.edu/article/745318>

**ANTISEMITISM:
HERE AND NOW**

Deborah E. Lipstadt

Schocken Books

www.knopfdoubleday.com/imprint/schocken/

304 Pages; Cloth, \$16.99

Over and over again, as I read *Antisemitism: Here and Now*, by Deborah E. Lipstadt, my mind kept returning to a year or so ago, when my wife, my son, and I were having dinner with other members of my wife's family at my sister-in-law's house. As we sat around the table drinking tea, the conversation turned to the Trump administration's open hostility towards Muslims — something my wife and her family take very personally, since they were all born and raised Muslim in Iran. Perhaps to lighten the mood, my brother-in-law's wife decided to tell a joke, which involved poking fun at the relative positions of privilege, or lack thereof, occupied by Christians, Jews, and Muslims in United States society. When she got to the part about Jews, she said, "And Jews fund the United States government."

"No, we don't," I interrupted her.

"It's a joke," my brother-in-law's wife responded, her tone suggesting I ought not to take it so seriously.

I don't remember exactly what I said in response, but my sister-in-law, trying to defuse the tension that was starting to build, turned to her brother's wife and said, "You can't say that about Jews — about Israel, yes, but not about Jews."

"Israel does *not* fund the United States government," I gave my sister-in-law a pointed look.

"I know," she said, a slightly pleading tone creeping into her voice. She did not want me to make a big deal out of this, "But at least there's a connection..."

"No!" I interrupted her, "There's not..." and I was going to say a good deal more, but then two things happened at once. My brother-in-law's wife turned to him and, in Persian, said, "But Israel is Jewish, isn't it?" Then my wife cut in with a much more measured, but no less appropriate response than I would have continued with, and I decided, in the interests of family harmony, hers was the wiser tack to take.

In the end, it didn't matter. My brother-in-law's wife told her joke anyway, either (at this point willfully) oblivious to its antisemitic content or, having been perfectly aware of that content from the start, determined not to let my "overly delicate sensibilities" get in the way of her making her

point. Given enough time and more patience than I had at that moment, I could have unraveled for all who were present the knot of antisemitism that exchange was tied up in, but now that I've read Deborah Lipstadt's book — she is Dorot Professor of Modern Jewish History and Holocaust Studies at Emory University — I just wish I'd been able to hand each of the people at that table a copy.

Antisemitism: Here and Now takes the form of a correspondence between Professor Lipstadt and two composite characters she has created — Abigail, a Jewish student, and Joe, a non-Jewish colleague. Through these two characters, Lipstadt gives voice to "the confusion, worries, and distress about antisemitism" that people have expressed to her over the years. While I personally found the letters Lipstadt wrote for these characters somewhat stilted and emotionless, the epistolary convention serves her well nonetheless, in that it constructs for her letters a well-defined audience with a practical

This is one of Lipstadt's main points: you can find antisemitism almost anywhere, and unless you address it everywhere you find it, you're not really addressing it.

need she is being asked to address. Abigail, after describing an experience not unlike the one I had at my sister-in-law's, articulates this need in the very first letter:

The most distressing part of the entire encounter was that I didn't know what to say to [the people expressing antisemitic views] without sounding defensive. I guess I am asking for your help in both understanding what is happening and figuring out how to respond.

Joe's letters express a similar need for both understanding and an "action plan," though from a non-Jewish perspective.

Antisemitism Here and Now is organized into seven sections, each of which examines a different facet of antisemitism, from how to define it — not as simple a task as one might think — to how not to fall into despair and/or a perpetual sense of victimhood given that antisemitism is, internationally, on the rise. Each of these sections is further divided into chapters that parse those facets even further. Section Two, for example, contains five chapters devoted to elucidating a taxonomy of antisemites, while Section Six, in six chapters ranging from "Toxifying Israel" to "Myopia: Seeing Antisemitism Only on the Other Side," takes on the role antisemitism has played in shaping the current intellectual and political climate, both on and off college campuses.

Lipstadt's uncompromising insistence on calling out antisemitism wherever she sees it will, I am sure, raise some hackles. Some people, I imagine, will argue that her treatment of antisemitism and racism lacks nuance, particularly in how she writes about the controversy that erupted last year around the Women's March leaders and their refusal to disavow Louis Farrakhan. Others will no doubt suggest that her discussion of antisemitism and Zionism irresponsibly glosses over Israel's oppression of the Palestinians. These critiques have some merit, but that's why it's important to recognize not just what this book is, but also what it is not; and it is decidedly *not* an attempt to come to terms with the very real complexities of the Jews'

ANTISEMITISM

HERE AND NOW

DEBORAH E. LIPSTADT



relationship to other oppressed peoples and/or our relationship to the ways in which Israel, while calling itself our state, our nation, behaves as an oppressor on our behalf.

Indeed, as any reasonable Jewish person might ask, what is the point of acknowledging complexity and nuance unless we first confront antisemitism for what it is, the hatred of Jews, regardless of where that hatred is found or how it is expressed. This, in fact, is one of Lipstadt's main points: you can find antisemitism almost anywhere, and unless you address it everywhere you find it, you're not really addressing it. Unlike racism, though, which is similarly ubiquitous, antisemitism is a conspiracy theory, the idea that Jews are evil schemers determined to take over the world. "It is this that makes antisemitism different from other prejudices," Lipstadt writes. "Antisemitism is not simply the hatred of something 'foreign,' but the hatred of a perpetual evil" that, as the Nazis argued in taking this idea to its logical conclusion, the world would be better off without. I doubt very much that my brother-in-law's wife knew how the joke she told connected to this idea; nor, I am sure, did my sister-in-law understand how using Israel as a stand-in for the entire Jewish people made that same connection; and I know for a fact that both of them would be horrified to think that what they said around that dinner table had any connection to Nazism or the hateful ideas that motivated the April 2019 Poway synagogue shooting, in the aftermath of which I am writing. In *Antisemitism Here and Now*, Deborah E. Lipstadt has made those connections in a clear, concise, and non-threatening way. We should all be glad this book is in the world.

Richard Jeffrey Newman is the author, most recently, of Words for What Those Men Have Done (2017), a collection of poems, and The Teller of Tales: Stories from Ferdowsi's Shahnameh (2011), translations of selections from the classical Persian epic. He is professor of English and Creative Writing at Nassau Community College in Garden City, NY. His website is www.richardjnewman.com.

