



Why the Jews?: The Reason for Antisemitism

By Dennis Prager, Joseph Telushkin



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From the bestselling authors of *The Nine Questions People Ask About Judaism*, a compelling discussion of the dangerous rise in antisemitism during the twenty-first century.

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In this seminal study, Dennis Prager and Joseph Telushkin attempt to uncover and understand the roots of antisemitism—from the ancient world to the Holocaust to the current crisis in the Middle East. *Why the Jews?* offers new insights and unparalleled perspectives on some of the most recent, pressing developments in the contemporary world, including:

- The replicating of Nazi antisemitism in the Arab world
- The pervasive anti-Zionism/antisemitism on university campuses
- The rise of antisemitism in Europe
- Why the United States and Israel are linked in the minds of antisemites

Clear, persuasive, and thought-provoking, *Why the Jews?* is must reading for anyone who seeks to understand the unique role of the Jews in human history.

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Review

"The wisest, most original and provocative book on the subject I have ever read." (Harold Kushner)

About the Author

Dennis Prager, one of America's most respected thinkers, is a nationally syndicated radio talk show host and syndicated columnist. He has written four books, including the #1 bestseller *Happiness Is a Serious Problem*. He has lectured on all seven continents and may be contacted through his website, DennisPrager.com.

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Chapter One: Why Jew-Hatred Is Unique

Hatred of the Jew has been humanity's greatest hatred. While hatred of other groups has always existed, no hatred has been as universal, as deep, or as permanent as antisemitism.

The Jews have been objects of hatred in pagan, religious, and secular societies. Fascists have accused them of being Communists, and Communists have branded them capitalists. Jews who live in non-Jewish societies have been accused of having dual loyalties, while Jews who live in the Jewish state have been condemned as "racists." Poor Jews are bullied, and rich Jews are resented. Jews have been branded as both rootless cosmopolitans and ethnic chauvinists. Jews who assimilate have been called a "fifth column," while those who stay together spark hatred for remaining separate. Hundreds of millions of people have believed (and in the Arab world many still do) that Jews drink the blood of non-Jews, that they cause plagues and poison wells, that they secretly plot to conquer the world, and that they murdered God.

The *universality* of antisemitism is attested to by innumerable facts, the most dramatic being that Jews have been expelled from so many of the European and Arab societies in which they have resided. Jews were expelled from England in 1290, France in 1306 and 1394, Hungary between 1349 and 1360, Austria in 1421, numerous localities in Germany between the fourteenth and sixteenth centuries, Lithuania in 1445 and 1495, Spain in 1492, Portugal in 1497, and Bohemia and Moravia in 1744-45. Between the fifteenth century and 1772, Jews were not allowed into Russia; when finally admitted there, they were restricted to one area, the Pale of Settlement. Between 1948 and 1967, nearly all the Jews of Algeria, Egypt, Iraq, Syria, and Yemen fled these countries, fearing for their lives.

The *depth* of antisemitism is evidenced by the frequency with which hostility against Jews has gone far beyond discrimination and erupted into sustained violence. In most societies in which Jews have lived, they have at some time been subjected to beatings, torture, and murder solely because they were Jews. In the Russian Empire during the nineteenth and early twentieth centuries, mass beatings and murders of Jews were so common that a word, *pogrom*, was coined to describe such incidents. And these pogroms were viewed by their antisemitic perpetrators as being of such significance that they were equated with the saving of Russia.

On a number of occasions even beating and murdering Jewish communities was not deemed sufficient. Antisemitic passions have run so deep that only the actual annihilation of the Jewish people could solve what came to be called by antisemites the "Jewish Problem." The basic source of ancient Jewish history, the Bible, depicts two attempts to destroy the Jewish people, that by Pharaoh and the Egyptians (Exodus 1:15-22) and that of Haman and the Persians (book of Esther). While it is true that the historicity of these biblical accounts

has not been proven or disproven by nonbiblical sources, few would dispute the supposition that in ancient times attempts were made to destroy the Jews. Indeed, the first recorded reference to Jews in non-Jewish sources, the Merneptah stele, written by an Egyptian king about 1220 B.C.E., states, "Israel is no more."

Jewish writings from the earliest times until the present are replete with references to attempts by non-Jews to destroy the Jewish people. Psalm 83:5 describes the enemies of the Jews as proponents of genocide: "Come, and let us cut them off from being a nation, that the Name of Israel may no more be remembered." Just how precarious Jews have viewed their survival is reflected in a statement from the ancient, and annually recited, Passover Haggadah; "In every generation they rise against us in order to annihilate us."

On three occasions during the last 350 years, annihilation campaigns have been waged against the Jews: the Chmelnitzky massacres in eastern Europe in 1648-49, the Nazi German destruction of Jews throughout Europe between 1939 and 1945, and the attempt to eradicate the Jewish state by its enemies.

For various reasons, the Chmelnitzky massacres are today not well known among Jews and are virtually unknown among non-Jews; perhaps the Holocaust tends to overshadow all previous Jewish suffering. Yet without denying the unique aspects of the Nazi Holocaust, there are a number of significant similarities between it and the Chmelnitzky massacres. In both instances, all Jews, including infants, were targeted for murder; the general populace nearly always joined in the attacks; and the torture and degradation of Jews were an integral part of the murderers' procedures. These characteristics are evidenced by the following contemporaneous description of a typical Chmelnitzky massacre:

Some of [the Jews] had their skins flayed off them and their flesh was flung to the dogs. The hands and feet of others were cut off and they were flung onto the roadway where carts ran over them and they were trodden underfoot by horse....And many were buried alive. Children were slaughtered in their mothers' bosoms and many children were torn apart like fish. They ripped up the bellies of pregnant women, took out the unborn children, and flung them in their faces. They tore open the bellies of some of them and placed a living cat within the belly and left them alive thus, first cutting off their hands so that they should not be able to take the living cat out of the belly...and there was never an unnatural death in the world that they did not inflict upon them.

The *permanence* (as well as depth) of antisemitism is attested to by the obsessive attention given to the "Jewish Problem" by antisemites throughout history. At one time or another nearly every major country that has had a large Jewish population has regarded this group, which never constituted more than a small percentage of its population, as an enemy. To the Roman Empire in the first century, the European Christian world for over fifteen centuries, the Nazi Reich, the Soviet Union, and to the Arabs and much of the Muslim world, the Jews have been or are regarded as an insufferable threat.

Jews have been perceived as so dangerous that even after their expulsion or destruction, hatred and fear of them remain. The depiction of Jews as ritual murderers of young Christian children in Chaucer's "Prioress's Tale" in *The Canterbury Tales* one hundred years after all Jews had been expelled from England attests to the durability of antisemitism. So does the characterization of Jews as usurers who wish to collect their interest in flesh in Shakespeare's *The Merchant of Venice*, three hundred years after the Jews' expulsion. A more recent example was Poland in 1968, when for months the greatest issue for Polish radio, television, and newspapers was the "Unmasking of Zionists in Poland." Of the thirty-three million citizens of Poland in 1968, the Jews numbered about twenty thousand or less than one-fifteenth of 1 percent.

How are the universality, depth, and permanence of antisemitism to be explained? Why such hatred and fear of a people who never constituted more than a small minority among those who most hated and feared them?

Why, nearly always and nearly everywhere, the Jews?

Many answers have been offered by scholars. These include, most commonly, economic factors, the need for scapegoats, ethnic hatred, xenophobia, resentment of Jewish affluence and professional success, and religious bigotry. But ultimately these answers do not explain antisemitism; they only explain what factors have *exacerbated* it and caused it to erupt in a given circumstance. None accounts for the universality, depth, and persistence of antisemitism. In fact, we have encountered virtually no study of this phenomenon that even attempts to offer a universal explanation of Jew-hatred. Nearly every study of antisemitism consists almost solely of historical narrative, thus seeming to indicate that no universal reason for antisemitism exists.

We reject this approach. To ignore or deny that there is an ultimate cause for antisemitism contradicts both common sense and history. Antisemitism has existed too long, and in too many disparate cultures, to ignore the problem of ultimate cause and/or to claim that new or indigenous factors are responsible every time it erupts. Factors specific to a given society help account for the manner or time in which antisemitism erupts. But they do not explain its genesis -- why antisemitism at all? To cite but one example: the depressed economy in Germany in the 1920s and 1930s helps to explain why and when the Nazis came to power, but it does not explain why Nazis hated Jews, let alone why they wanted to murder every Jew. Economic depressions do not explain gas chambers.

The very consistency of the passions Jews have aroused demands a consistent explanation. Ancient Egyptians, Greeks, and Romans, medieval and many modern Christians and Muslims, and Nazis and Communists have perhaps only one thing in common: they have all, at some point, counted the Jews as their enemy, often their greatest enemy. Why?

Among Jews, this question has been posed only in the modern era. Until the modern age, Jews never asked, "Why the Jews?" They knew why. Throughout their history, Jews have regarded Jew-hatred as an inevitable consequence of their Jewishness. Contrary to modern understandings of antisemitism, the age-old Jewish understanding of antisemitism does posit a universal explanation for Jew-hatred: Judaism, meaning the Jews' God, laws, peoplehood, and claim to being chosen. The historical record, as we shall show, confirms the traditional Jewish view that the Jews were hated because of Jewish factors. Modern attempts to de Judaize Jew-hatred, to attribute it to economic, social, and political factors, and universalize it into merely another instance of bigotry, are as opposed to the facts of Jewish history as they are to the historical Jewish understanding of antisemitism.

Antisemites have not hated Jews because Jews are affluent -- poor Jews have always been as hated; or strong -- weak Jews have simply invited antisemitic bullies; or because Jews may have unpleasant personalities -- genocide is not personality-generated; or because ruling classes focus worker discontent onto Jews -- precapitalist and noncapitalist societies such as the former Soviet Union, other Communist states, and various Third World countries, have been considerably more antisemitic than capitalist societies. Antisemites have hated Jews because Jews are Jewish. Christian antisemites ceased hating rich Jews when they became Christians. Muslim antisemites embrace Jews who convert to Islam. The same has held true for virtually all other antisemites except the Nazis, whom we shall discuss later.

What about Judaism has provoked anti-Jewish hostility? There are four answers.

1. For thousands of years Judaism has consisted of four components: God, Torah, Israel, and Chosenness; that is, the God introduced by the Jews, Jewish laws, Jewish peoplehood, and the belief that the Jews are God's chosen people. Jews' allegiance to any of these components has been a major source of antisemitism because it not only rendered the Jew an outsider, but more important, it has often been regarded by non-Jews

as challenging the validity of their god(s), law(s), national allegiance, and/or national worth.

By affirming what they considered to be the one and only God of all humankind, thereby implying illegitimacy to everyone else's gods, the Jews entered history -- and have often been since -- at war with other people's most cherished beliefs. The antisemites also hated the Jews because the Jews lived by their own all-encompassing set of laws. And because the Jews also asserted their own national identity, Jews intensified antisemitic passions among those who viewed this identity as threatening their own nationalism.

2. As if the above were not enough, Judaism has also held from the earliest times that the Jews were chosen by God to achieve this mission of bringing the world to God and His moral law (i.e., ethical monotheism). This doctrine of the Jews' divine election has been a major cause of antisemitism.

3. From its earliest days, the *raison d'être* of Judaism has been to change the world for the better (in the words of an ancient Jewish prayer recited daily, "to repair the world under the rule of God"). This attempt to change the world, to challenge the gods, religious or secular, of the societies around them, and to make moral demands upon others (even when not done expressly in the name of Judaism) has constantly been a source of tension.

4. As a result of the Jews' commitment to Judaism, they have led higher-quality lives than their non-Jewish neighbors in almost every society where they have lived. For example, Jews have nearly always been better educated; Jewish family life has usually been more stable; Jews aided one another more than their non-Jewish neighbors aided each other; and Jewish men have been less likely to become drunk, beat their wives, or abandon their children. As a result of these factors, the quality of life of the average Jew, no matter how poor, was higher than that of a comparable non-Jew in the same society (see Chapter 4).

This higher quality of life among Jews, which, as we shall show, directly results from Judaism, has, as one would expect, provoked profound envy and hostility among many non-Jews.

Since Judaism is the root cause of antisemitism, Jews, *unlike victims of racial or ethnic prejudice*, could in almost every instance of antisemitism, except Nazism, escape persecution. For thousands of years and until today, Jews who abandoned their Jewish identity and assumed the majority's religious and national identity were no longer persecuted.

For these reasons, Jews have always regarded antisemitism as a response, however immoral, to Judaism. Thus, most Jews until the modern era, and most religious Jews to this day, would describe Jews murdered by antisemites not as victims of ethnic prejudice but as having died *al kiddush hashem*, that is, as martyrs sanctifying the name of God before the world.

Once one understands why Judaism has precipitated antisemitism, the unique universality, depth, and permanence of Jew-hatred also become understandable. It takes infinitely more than economic tensions or racial prejudice to create the animosity that often has involved the torturing of children and the murdering of entire communities. Only a people representing a threat to the core values, allegiances, and beliefs of others could arouse such universal, deep, and lasting hatred.

That is why totalitarian regimes, secular and religious, inevitably are antisemitic. Totalitarian regimes by definition aim to control the totality of their citizens' lives and can therefore tolerate no uncontrolled religious or national expressions, both of which are part of Judaism. Once the Jewish roots of antisemitism are recognized, the only solutions to the "Jewish Problem," as far as antisemites are concerned, are obvious. The Jews must either convert, be expelled, or murdered. In the 1880s, the Russian czar's procurator of the

Holy Synod and architect of Russian government policy at the time, Constantine Pobedonostev, is said to have offered precisely this advice: One-third of the Jews living in the Russian Empire should be converted to Christianity, one-third should be expelled, and one-third should be put to death.

In fact, for the last two thousand years, this has repeatedly been the chronological order of antisemitic acts. First, attempts would be made to convert the Jews. When the Jews refused, they were often expelled. And when even expulsion failed to solve the "Jewish Problem," there remained one "Final Solution," which is precisely the name the Nazis gave to their plan to annihilate the Jews.

It is also clear that antisemitism is *not* ethnic or racial prejudice, though it obviously shares certain features with them. Haters of Jews persecuted them for the same reasons Romans persecuted Christians, Nazis tortured members of the Resistance, and Communist regimes imprison dissidents. In each instance, the group is persecuted because its different beliefs represent a threat to the persecuting group. This hatred must be understood as being very different from a racial or ethnic prejudice. Blacks in America, for example, have been discriminated against because of the physical fact of their blackness, not because of specific black ideas or beliefs. Hatred of blacks is racial prejudice. Blacks cannot stop being black. But in dictatorships, dissidents can stop being dissenters, and a Jew has always been able to, and in general still can, stop being a Jew.

Even the major exception to this rule, Nazi antisemitism, confirms the Jewish basis of antisemitism. The Nazis simply maintained that Jews could never really become non-Jews. They believed that no matter how much Jews may consciously attempt to appear and behave like non-Jews, they nevertheless retain the values of Judaism. Nazi anti-Jewish "racism" emanated from a hatred of Judaism and what Jews represent. Nazi racism is *ex post facto*; first came the antisemitism, then came the racist doctrine to explain it.

Antisemitism is, therefore, as Jews have always regarded it: a response to Jews. The charges often made by antisemites -- that Jews poison wells, drink human blood, plot to take over the world's governments, or control world finance -- are hallucinatory. But the roots of antisemitism are not. The real reasons antisemites hate Jews and the accusations they make against them are rarely the same. This is hardly uncommon. When people harbor hatreds, individually or communally, they rarely articulate rationally the reasons for their hatred.

We should not be so naive as to regard all antisemitic accusations as the reasons for the antisemitism. For example, the modern belief that economic factors cause antisemitism, besides confusing exacerbating factors with causes, grants the accusations of antisemites far too much credence. It is analogous to the efforts of some fine historians to determine the historical accuracy of the Christian claim that the Jews killed Jesus, because Christian antisemites called Jews "Christ killers," as if proving one way or another would have ended Christian antisemitism. It is also analogous to the tireless efforts of other fine historians to decipher the exact number and circumstances of Arabs displaced during the founding of Israel, as if those who single out Israel from all other countries to support efforts to destroy it do so because six hundred thousand Arab refugees were created in 1948.

The questions for those wishing to understand the roots of antisemitism are not whether some Jews helped execute a fellow Jew two thousand years ago, or how great a role Jews played in the German economy, or how many Arabs fled Israel in 1948. The questions are why, to begin with, people hate Jews, and then invent reasons to do so.

The answer is Judaism, its distinctiveness and its challenges, and we have offered four reasons why this is so. In the pages that follow, we pursue a more detailed analysis of these reasons.

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