CHAPTER 3

The Many Faces of Contemporary Jew-Hatred and the New Antisemitism

Waxing and waning throughout the centuries, but never disappearing completely, in the past, antisemitism assumed religious, cultural, political, racist, and many other forms. This extensive and varied legacy of antisemitism in England and Europe—or even more broadly speaking the “Western tradition,” as David Nirenberg puts it—forms part of the collective cultural consciousness that contemporary attitudes vis-à-vis Jews frequently draw on. However, while often rearticulating familiar tropes, antisemitism also finds novel ways of expressing itself. Today, attitudes towards the state of Israel provide a new nexus that can link old and new forms of anti-Jewish prejudice. This new antisemitism has captured the attention of scholars and observers of various backgrounds. To those who see it as real, it represents a great threat to Jewish life around the world. Others have been more careful in drawing conclusions, well aware that charges of antisemitism must be closely scrutinised. In addition, there are also those who disagree—often profoundly—with the claim of a resurgent antisemitism, and in particular take issue with some of the key arguments put forward by the ‘new antisemitism thesis.’

In other words, the past few decades have seen a discursive struggle over the salience of contemporary antisemitism, its causes, and various other aspects of its problem definition. As the first chapter highlighted, such disagreements are more than just intellectual exercises; they have vast implications for the ways issue are perceived in the public and political arenas. If it is true that the rise in anti-Jewish hatred has been exaggerated by ‘alarmists,’ there is not much cause for concern, and hence no need for governments or civil society to take decisive action. If, however, those drawing attention to its resurgence, and to the reality and dangers of the new antisemitism, are largely accurate in their assessment, it is a social problem that needs to be tackled urgently through appropriate measures.

1 Contemporary Antisemitism: Persistence and Resurgence

A number of governmental institutions, Jewish organisations, and anti-racist bodies across the world monitor antisemitism. While scope and research designs of different studies and research programmes vary, overall, the available data indicates that antisemitism not only persists, but even that it has grown over the past decades.

According to the annual reports on worldwide antisemitism by the Kantor Center for the Study of Contemporary European Jewry at Tel Aviv University, there has been a global increase in antisemitic incidents since the late 1980s. In 1989, when its recording of violent incidents began, the institute counted only 78 major incidents. In the decade from 1994 to 2004, the number was already higher, averaging between 150 and 200 per year. The annual number of cases from 2004 to 2014 was on average 550, with a particularly pronounced figure in the peak year 2009, when the institute recorded 1,118 incidents, and a further spike in 2012, with 686 registered violent anti-Jewish acts worldwide. It is noteworthy that these figures refer to occurrences that involved the use of weapons, firebombing, damage to Jewish properties, or direct threats against Jewish individuals or institutions. They therefore only include some of the most extreme cases, and do not encompass manifestations of antisemitism that take other forms, or attitudes.

The Anti-Defamation League commissioned a large-scale representative survey on opinions toward Jews in over 100 countries, which was carried out between July 2013 and February 2014. During this time, over 50,000 interviews were conducted. Interviewees were presented with eleven negative stereotypes about Jews. Respondents who affirmed six or more of these as “probably true” were considered as harbouring antisemitic prejudice. The results show that many people, also Europeans, agree to statements that reflect classic anti-Jewish themes, such as dual loyalty, Jewish control of the world of business and finance, and others. According to this measure, globally, 26% of the general population in the countries surveyed hold antisemitic attitudes. In the Middle East and North Africa, this figure is 74%, in Western Europe 24%. In addition to the fact that 35% of all interviewed had never heard of the Holocaust, another key finding is that of those who had, 32% thought it was a myth or exaggerated. In Western Europe, 45% think that Jews are more loyal to Israel than to their