

# THE NEGATIVE SPACE IN COMBATING ANTI-SEMITISM

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**IF** we imagine a four-dimensional space that tracked Jews for thousands of years, we would see individuals and communities pushing and being pushed. And we would observe patterns, some of which would make us quite uncomfortable.

We were loved by one Pharaoh, despised by another; we had a once and future king who slew a giant, one who later seduced a wife and sent her husband to die in battle; we were conquered and we were conquerors; we were Hellenized and rebelled against Hellenism; we built temples and our temples were destroyed; we were sent into exile; we had states, then we were vassal communities and now a state again; and we were subjected to pogroms and a Holocaust; we became overrepresented in some fields and then replaced to make room to accommodate a new social justice order, (including right, left and cultural ideologies).

We are not monolithic, nor a stereotype — although some would picture us in this way, whether they are Jews or non-Jews, with positive and negative themes. Against this panorama, we might ask whether there are useful generalizations across this discontinuous and non-uniform distribution of attitudes, values, actions, and events.

One generalization would be the persistence of a multifaceted, Jewish culture; another generalization would be about a persisting relationship between gentile and Jew, sometimes one of mutual convenience, sometimes admiration, and sometimes one of resentment and hatred. Post 1880s, it was called anti-Semitism. There was also Judaeophobia, Jew hatred, and Jewish stench (foeter judaicus).

We know the many shapes of anti-Semitism. We have gotten better at counting incidents. Laws in many countries prohibit anti-Semitism. We're ready to fight back. Or are we? Perhaps we need more or different methods to combat anti-Semitism. Maybe we can use art to combat anti-Semitism — whether as fine art or simply as propaganda, whether as a play or a partisan poster. But to be successful, we need to be comprehensive; we cannot fall short and say, a little bit of this or that

kind of anti-Semitism is tolerable. Can we do that? I argue that we suffer a mindset that has us stumbling over a robust and complete response to anti-Semitism.

Why the Jews? Why us?

Two thoughtful articles ponder this question with different solutions.

David Nirenberg considers the history of anti-Semitism and a possible antidote: education.

Historians hope that prejudices will become less compelling if people understand how well-worn they are, how many times they have failed to bring about the better future their adherents promised. That hope has often been disappointed. History is not a magic amulet that we can rub to protect us from danger as we make our way through a changing world. But it is a powerful reminder of how previous generations struggled with problems similar to our own . . .

Jason Zinoman reviews contemporary Jewish performers and writers struggling with anti-Semitism, ending with a “but only if . . . “ scenario that resonates with Nirenberg’s historical lesson plan.

Part of the resilience of anti-Semitism is its resistance to critique. Jewish artists are obviously not going to end the lie that they control show business by making more movies, plays, TV shows or sketches about it. But they can illuminate its impact and capture the complex damage it does to the psyche. That matters. For a certain kind of Jew, art can be its own religion. And one lesson we keep learning and forgetting is that the greatest art is much better at portraying conflicted minds than changing them.

Education and dramatic representation can illuminate the practice and consequences of anti-Semitism; both essayists argue for continued efforts to combat it; however, each approach to opposing anti-Semitism ends on a disappointing note.

### **Know thy anti-Semites**

The effort advanced here, however minimal, pursues a clear statement of who the antisemites are – without which that effort would be proportionally ineffective. This is not about enemies since the antisemitism may well stem from ignorance. Moreover, they may be possible future allies or so we might hope. For those reasons, we are reluctant to name these Others as *enemy*. With that caveat, let us proceed with naming the antisemites. But how do we do that in some organized way? The

ADL's Center on Extremism has a useful, but imperfect, glossary that can serve as a starting point. As might be expected, entries for *white supremacists* leads all entries.

White supremacists	519
Hate ideology/groups	361
Holocaust	30
Black Hebrew Israelites	15
BDS (Boycott Divestment Sanction)	0

Figure 1. ADL Center on Extremism Glossary for selected items

Inserting other terms results in some interesting tweaks. For example, by doing an internet search for “BDS extremism,” one encounters an ADL article and glossary term for “The Boycott, Divestment and Sanctions Campaign (BDS).” There are no variants for BDS – the result is a blind spot in this data base with its search tool. Compare the variants for “Imperial Klans of America.” Here we also find “Imperial Klans” and “Imperial America.” Surprisingly, if one searches for the Southern Poverty Law Center, we find an entry, but this is one that links them to a lawsuit against the Imperial Klans of America.

Here is another peculiarity, perhaps another blind spot. If we search the glossary for John T. Earnest, we find two entries for the person who killed Lori Gilbert Kaye at the Chabad in Poway, California, in April 2019. He is listed as a “white supremacist.”

The screenshot shows the ADL Center on Extremism website. At the top, the ADL logo is on the left, and navigation links for 'About', 'Research Centers', 'What We Do', 'Resources', and 'Take Action' are on the right. Below the navigation bar, the page title 'Glossary of Extremism Home' is on the left, and a search bar contains the text 'John T. Earnest'. A search button with a magnifying glass icon is on the right of the search bar. Below the search bar, there are two filter buttons: 'Relevance' (selected) and '2 Results'. On the left side, there is a 'Filters' section with a heading and a sub-heading: 'Check one or more of the filter options below to auto-update the search results based on the selected search criteria.' Below this, there is a 'CATEGORIES' section with a list of checkboxes and labels: 'Conspiracy Theories', 'Groups / Movements', 'Incidents / Events', 'Key Concepts / Definitions', 'Numbers / Symbols', 'People', 'Platforms / Sites', 'Publications', 'Slogans / Code words', and 'Tactics'. On the right side, there are two search results. The first result is titled 'John Earnest' and includes a brief description: 'John Earnest is a white supremacist who killed one person and injured three others after shooting inside a Chabad in Poway, California in 2019. Prior to the attack he posted an online manifesto in which he repeated...' followed by a 'Read more' link and the category 'PEOPLE, WHITE SUPREMACIST'. The second result is titled 'Chabad of Poway Shoo...' and includes a brief description: 'On April 27, 2019, the Chabad of Poway, California was the site of a white supremacist shooting. White supremacist John T. Earnest, armed with a semiautomatic rifle and a handgun, opened fire on worshippers during the final...' followed by a 'Read more' link and the category 'INCIDENTS / EVENTS, WHITE SUPREMACIST'.

Figure 2. ADL Center on Extremism Glossary Search for John T. Earnest

However, if we search for Darrell Brooks, we find zero entries. Brooks ran his vehicle into a Christmas parade in Waukesha, Wisconsin, in November 2021, killing six and wounding many others. Should this have been an entry into the ADL Center on Extremism glossary?

Morton A. Klein and Elizabeth Berney suggest that the ADL simply doesn't count anti-Semitic behavior and thus leaves the impression that the focus should be primarily on white supremacists.

White supremacists are bigoted and dangerous. But anyone serious about protecting Jewish and American lives must also pay attention to and not ignore or downplay equally or more severe threats from other quarters. We were recently reminded of this when an Islamist took hostages at the Colleyville synagogue and a

Black Lives Matter (BLM) activist attempted to assassinate a Jewish mayoral candidate.

Yet, the Anti-Defamation League's (ADL) recent report on Murder and Extremism in the United States in 2021 ignores or downplays deadly extremism from non-white extremists, and then touts misleading conclusions that "white supremacists killed more people in 2021 than any other type of extremist," and that "most of the murders (26 of 29) were committed by right-wing extremists."

This is an important question about how we count anti-Semites and anti-Semitic behaviors as well as part of a broader rubric for extremism. Klein and Berney, President and Director of Special Projects, respectively, of the Zionist Organization of America, further their critique of this ADL metric into counting anti-Semites.

Egregiously, the ADL's report never mentioned the worst extremist mass murder in 2021, perpetrated by Black Nationalist, BLM-sympathizing, anti-Semite Darrell Brooks. Brooks drove an SUV into a Christmas parade in Waukesha, Wisconsin, zig-zagging to hit as many people as possible, killing six innocent victims (all white, including an eight-year-old child) and wounding another 62 innocent people.

Brooks' social media posts (documented by the *New York Post* and LawOfficer.com) called for violence against whites ("knokkin white people TF [the f\*\*\*] out") and knocking out "old white ppl," and retweeted that people will "learn Hitler was right," that Hitler "did the world a favor by killing" Jews, that the Jews are America's "slave masters." Brooks also retweeted that "white Jews know that Negroes are the real children of Israel" – parroting the anti-white ideology of the Black Hebrew Israelites.

We can acknowledge that Darrell Brooks' anti-Semitic rhetoric pulls in one direction (anti-Semitism) while his killing of individuals at a Christmas parade pulls in another (extremism). Should this incident be logged under anti-Semitism or extremism? Should that matter for the ADL glossary on extremism? This is a common problem of lumping and parsing identities in order to discern motivation and cataloging bad acts and bad actors; here, we are especially interested in anti-Semitism. In a similar context it is worth recalling the two Jewish Stanford counseling staffers who encountered this lumping of white and Jewish identities. The diversity and equity staff stated the Jewish counselors should be in the white affinity group, accusing one of them "of trying to derail the agenda's focus on anti-Black racism . . . [and] unlike other minority groups, Jews can hide behind their white identity."

Such content analyses of data entries can easily lead to a misunderstanding of what the information coding means. This is not the rabbit hole we should enter. Instead,

as a raw measure of incidents shown in Figure 1, we can still see which groups are more involved in anti-Semitism and which less involved: White supremacists (the most), Black Hebrew Israelites (much less), and Boycott, Divest and Sanction, or BDS (not at all). Clearly, that result for BDS is wrong. Is that a blind spot that Klein and Berney worry about? Maybe the ADL missed articles on BDS; maybe its emphasis is placed on Palestinian anti-Zionism (10 results), which may or may not spill over into anti-Semitism; or maybe there is a reluctance to name BDS as part of a Glossary on Extremism. That would be an under-sampling of incidents that are ordinarily included within discussions of anti-Semitism. There is also the problem of oversampling, which can lead databases on extremism astray, guided by partisan views of what values are politically correct.

FBI hate crime statistics as an overall category are useful in tracking the number of incidents, victims, and offenders. This data set relies on the National Incident-Based Reporting System (NIBRS). We can compare victim and offender status for violent crime. There is also offender data by race, sex, age, relationship to the victim; for hate crimes, we can parse the data only for race and ethnicity; and for religious hate crimes, there is no published offender data available.

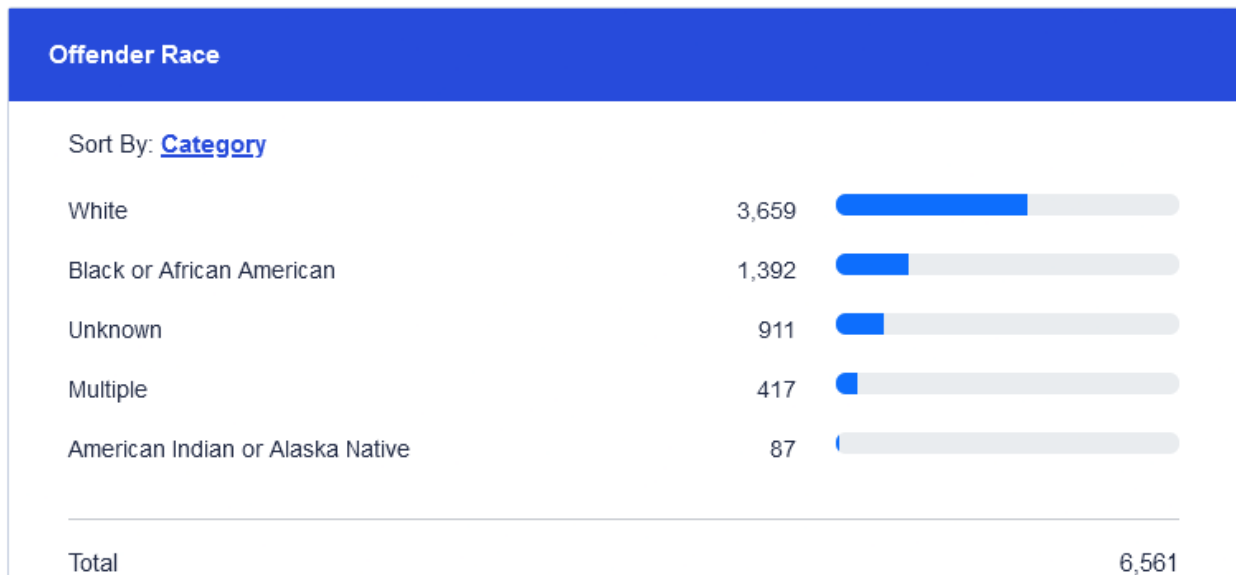


Figure 3. FBI Hate Crime in the United States Incident Analysis / Offender Status / Race

Thus, we are unable to precisely quantify who the anti-Semites are. We are left to toggle back and forth between incomplete metrics (such as the ADL Center on Extremism, FBI Hate Crime Data), and other insightful data sets, such as historical resources, survey data, and algorithms to search hate language on the internet.

Obviously, anti-Semitism exists. The standouts from this inexact, but palpable data is that anti-Semitic offenders have been largely white supremacists, but also

include Palestinian Islamists and BDS, and blacks who incorporate anti-Semitic tropes and memes. Anti-Semitism has been less problematic among Asians (see [Anti-Semitism in China](#) for example); measurable in [Latin America](#) and also occurring in the [United States](#), but far less than is found in the Middle East. The problem continues to be one of assigning the relative importance of who and where it is coming from despite the metrics lacking empirical precision.

### **Direct approaches to combating anti-Semitism**

Our focus is on a comprehensive approach to antisemitism where the “offending” individual or group is known. For our purposes, indirect approaches can be crafted where the offender is not known or has become a generic trope; these can be educational or part of legal mechanisms against discriminatory behavior. Direct approaches, by contrast, augment educational and legal approaches with tailored messaging along known cultural, social, psychological, and political.

The [Combat Antisemitism Movement](#) features art against anti-Semitism. It was started by Lisa Link in 2019. The art displays a range of themes from the experience of a pogrom, the Holocaust, second-generation assimilation and a reaction to the anti-Semitism at an art exhibit in Germany, [Documenta 15](#). The website invites artists to add their imagery and reflections.

Three images that cover a broad range of art against antisemitism are [Grandpa’s Journey](#), [Art Storm](#) and [Two Nations, One God](#).

Ellen November’s *Grandpa’s Journey* captures the experience of community-wide oppression whether here, as in a pogrom, or in other examples, the [Holocaust](#). The villainy of the oppressors is well-known and fading into memory. This art is an important reminder of what was. But anti-Semitism persists. Dorit Jordan Dotan records continued anti-Semitism even, somewhat surprisingly, in a major art exhibit in Kassel, Germany. [Documenta 15](#) was curated by an Indonesian art collective [ruangrupa](#). [Dotan](#) visited the exhibit and found herself conflicted by competing self-interests — as an “artist, Jew, an Israeli peace activist, social justice activist, and 2<sup>nd</sup> generation of a refugee family.” Her personal dilemma turned on the conflict of creative and free expression and propaganda. Her image tracked the stylized imagery found in Documenta 15. The [Documenta Committee](#) found that the exhibition was an “echo chamber for anti-Israel sentiment.”

These two images represent the existential reflection of the Jewish experience. We know well the moment of oppression (pogrom, Holocaust); we also know the continuing tropes that mischaracterize the Jewish place on the world stage (delegitimizing Israel with exaggerated roles in world events).



Figure 4. Grandpa's Journey, Ellen November





Figure 5. Art Storm, Dorit Jordan Dotan

*S Ilan Block* contributed a later addition to the Art Against Antisemitism images with *Two Nations, One God*. His image represents a Jewish and a Muslim woman engaged in side-by-side prayer at Ben Gurion Airport. Instead of pushing back against negative space in which Jews have found themselves, Block imagines a world that might be.

[My image was not made to] COMBAT anything. . . [It was] made to express the beauty of peace and unity. I find it more valuable to focus on the positive than the negative. It's very simple, peace feels good, division does not. When someone is so caught up in fighting it takes on a life of its own. Mediation, not retaliation. You can think about the Hatfield-McCoy feud which just led to a generational feud and nobody wins.



Figure 6. Two Nations, One God Silan Block

## **A tragic reluctance to act**

Stepping back from this and similar exhibitions, we might ask whether those combating anti-Semitism are aware of the wider scope of the sources of anti-Semitism? Perhaps they are aware, but they are unwilling to engage with the comprehensive nature of the problem.

Thane Rosenbaum zeroes in on this problem in his essay [Where are Today's Maccabees?](#)

Jews simply won't make much noise as Jews. The grogger that is so grating on Purim is reserved, one night, for Haman, but never for Hamas. . . . Indeed, the fight instinct within American Jewry has been perpetually repressed. So, too, in Europe. Conflict is usually resolved with conciliatory gestures if not outright capitulation. . . . American Jewish leaders . . . often extend greater efforts crusading on behalf of other communities rather than their own.

Do we blunt the combating of anti-Semitism by a longing to belong? Does the seeking of peace with Palestinians hold us back from using the grogger? Does the Israeli effort to reach a peace agreement with Palestinians (coerced or embraced) — always jilted in the end and a continuing suffering of intifadas — soften the pushing back against anti-Semitism in art?

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Consider an exhibit at the Haifa Museum of Art (2018), [1948](#). One side of the museum presented the Palestinian view — the Nakba; the other side presented the Israeli view — Independence. Dror Lax, the museum director, co-curated the exhibit with Dr. Majd Hamra. Here we see the very act of a collaborative art exhibit between Israeli and Palestinian founded on the inability to comprehend the Other. Dror Lax reflected on this divide:

I didn't sleep nights. It was clear both to me and to the other curator, Majed Khamra, that we were dancing a very intricate dance and that each of us had to respect the other's side. You're constantly afraid that people aren't going to understand this. The situation today in the country is difficult, and people are very sensitive. We aren't in peace talks and we are angry at the Arabs and they are angry at us. I felt it was like a hot potato, and wondered how I was going to even touch it. There are works in the exhibition that I have a hard time with, that I don't like, yet nevertheless we have chosen to show them.

The wall dividing Palestinian and Israeli is well understood. But should that limit reactions to real world events that slide from a national antagonism into historical anti-Semitic tropes?



*Figure 7. Anti-Israel Protest in Times Square, New York*

What looked like a protest (2017) against Israel along the lines of antagonism displayed at the Haifa 1948 exhibition became anti-Semitic:

At a rally on December 8 in Times Square in New York City, chants of “Khaybar, Khaybar, oh Jews, the Army of Muhammad will return.” The story of “Khaybar,” according to most Islamic sources, ends with the execution of thousands of Jews, including women and children. Protesters at anti-Israel rallies around the world, including the U.S., often evoke this battle in their chants to galvanize supporters. . .

One speaker from Al-Awda said at the New York protest: “They (Jews) don’t even bother hiding who they are anymore. They don’t even claim to be the righteous victim anymore. They’ve shown us who they are, they’ve bore their fangs...They are the heart of darkness. They are the heart of oppression. They are the torch bearers of white and Zionist supremacy....”

As a personal experiment, I considered what would be a Maccabee push back against the messages at this event, particularly the photo of young children being incorporated into the protest. One approach would be to paint over the symbols and thereby transform them. I found myself resisting targeting the children, after all the ethical philosophy of the IDF is to recognize the dignity of those whom it is combating; however, these individuals often hide behind women and children as human shields. Should I, as an artist, engage in push back that seeks a response in the same way? Perhaps, I could simply impose a different message.



Figure 8. Re-Imagining A Message, Joe Nalven

My own reluctance to do more than impose a different messaging may reflect a wider disposition among Jewish artists to refuse to use Maccabean tactics. This same reluctance parallels a rejection of the political jihad philosophy in which no one is innocent, including women, children, and non-involved bystanders.

The Jewish and black communities had, at times, worked collaboratively but also have had significant differences. Writers in both communities have articulated this troubled relationship, including James Baldwin and Norman Podhoretz. This year, Ye (Kanye West) tossed antisemitic media bombs onto the world stage, including the infamous tweet: “I’m a bit sleepy tonight but when I wake up I’m going death con 3 On JEWISH PEOPLE. The funny thing is I actually can’t be Anti Semitic because black people are actually Jew also . . . .” There was widespread condemnation of Ye; he lost business relationships.

The question here is whether there is an artistic voice, one that displays a Maccabean spirit, against Ye and against the mindset of black anti-Semitism. One artist did speak out against Ye, offering a Kanye West rap diss against the anti-Semitic tweet.

Kosha Dillz, a Jewish rapper known for his appearances on MTV’s Wild ‘n Out, released a diss track last month in response to Ye’s comments called “Death Con 3.”

“It was a big bummer,” Dillz told ABC News about the remarks. “Cause– I play Kanye. You know?” And now, he said, “he’s gone.”



Is that lone voice sufficient in combating anti-Semitism through art? Perhaps as an adjunct to the widespread rebuke of Ye. But there is a deeper problem with black anti-Semitism that lacks a Maccabean artistic response. Commentators, such as Tema Smith, are aware of black antisemitism, but look for workarounds of its cause rather than respond in kind:

Ultimately, the conversation about Black anti-Semitism is not actually about Blacks and Jews – a binary that not only serves to divide our communities further but also erases the growing number of people who inhabit both. The conversation is a microcosm of the larger issues facing American society today – and the Black and Jewish communities’ roles in it. *And the solution? Working to address the well-documented social challenges faced disproportionately by Black Americans.* (Emphasis added.)

Smith quotes Al Vorspan writing fifty years ago in his role as Director of the Commission on Social Action of Reform Judaism:

Even if we beat every black anti-Semite into the ground with a two-by-four marked ‘Remember the six million,’ will we eliminate anti-Semitism? What we must do about it is not exhaust ourselves with symptoms but deal with the root problems which spawn hatred and violence and frustration. Until we deal with the misery of the slums, until we eliminate unemployment and underemployment, until we deal with the terrible plight of powerlessness, until we humanize our monstrous welfare system, until we deal with the social problems of the American city, there will be anti-Semitism and there will be every other kind of prejudice and every other kind of antisocial fury.

Here, arguably, is the self-imposed restraint of pursuing a comprehensive approach to combating anti-Semitism – likely more so in the artistic community, given its predilection for self-reflection and concern for the Other. This is not a blind spot; this is the hesitation of a tragic mindset.

But wait a minute, you should ask, “Aren’t there Jewish artists who command a Maccabean spirit?” And yes, I did find an example, but quite ironic. Eli Valley may well be the angriest Jewish cartoonist. His vitriol, ironically, is often aimed at other Jews (including Mort Klein, see above) as if Valley was a reborn Hellenist Jew attacking the spirit of the ancient Maccabees: A bizarre twist in combating antisemitism through art.

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predilection for self-reflection and concern for the Other. This is not a blind spot; this is the hesitation of a tragic mindset.

It is not just Eli Valley who may upset the straight-line scenario to combating anti-Semitism, but ourselves.

Gallup polls are another metric, especially in relation to support for Israel versus support for the Palestinian. We are finding our partisan divide in that arena – where versions of the social justice and the progressive mindset may be overtaking versions of the justice and conservative mindset – recasting virtue signaling of Israel and Zionism into virtue signaling of the Palestinian as part of the contest of who rightfully owns the land. Anti-Zionism and anti-Semitism are inextricably linked. In this vision of moral rectitude, antisemitism may become the virtue it once was. Therein lies the risk of public sentiment; therein lies our problem of combating anti-Semitism through whatever path, including art. Therein lies our reluctance to pursue a comprehensive approach to fighting anti-Semitism.