

# Judeopessimism: Antisemitism, History, and Critical Race Theory\*

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## ■ Abstract

This essay coins a term “Judeopessimism,” engaging questions of some of the contemporary writing on antisemitism and its claim to be historical in nature through the lens of critical race theory, specifically Afropessimism and its offshoots, which make claims of anti-Blackness as political ontology. Is some of this writing on antisemitism really making theological or political ontological claims of “eternal antisemitism” refracted in a less volatile historical narrative? How can critical race theory and its understanding of anti-Blackness help refine, clarify, and push the discussion on antisemitism to be more forthright about its underlying claims? I explore some examples of ontological antisemitism in the writings of Meir Kahane and Naftali Zvi Berlin who each in different ways offer ahistorical and even ontological views on antisemitism that are mostly shunned by contemporary writing on the subject and suggest that Afropessimism offers a helpful way to see beyond the historical veil of how antisemitism is understood today.

## ■ Keywords

Afropessimism, antisemitism, Jews, political ontology, critical race theory, Semite, history

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We must tell the truth 'till we can no longer bear it.  
 –James Baldwin<sup>1</sup>

## ■ Introduction

When did Jews begin to think of antisemitism as a problem? While that may seem like an intentionally provocative question, I ask it in all seriousness. The term “antisemitism” was coined in the mid-nineteenth century by Moritz Steinschneider and popularized soon after by Wilhelm Marr in 1881.<sup>2</sup> Since then, however, Jewish discussions of antisemitism tend to presume it extends back to the more distant past—whether as Jew-hatred or anti-Judaism or already antisemitism—and that in some sense it was already a problem before the nineteenth century, and perhaps even as long as there have been Jews.<sup>3</sup>

If we define “antisemitism” as the hatred of the Jew qua Jew, ancient antecedents may not quite fit. By the time we get to the Middle Ages, certainly in Christendom, Jews are certainly hated distinctly *as* Jews and perhaps the term *Judenhass* is most apt. But it is not clear that Jews saw that as a *problem* that could be solved by either social or even political means. Most seem to have viewed that hatred either as part of the exilic punishment or as an eternal truth about non-Jews, as suggested by the rabbinic dictum rendering of “Esau hates Jacob,” which I will discuss below. In the fantastical “three oaths” pericope in Talmud Sanhedrin 111a, God says to Israel “I promise not to enable the nations to persecute you *too much* (*yoter m'dai*).” Persecution seems to be taken here as a covenantal inevitability, maybe even necessity, to purify the collective Jewish soul in preparation for the final redemption.<sup>4</sup> By this logic, non-Jewish hatred is simply an inevitable part of Jewish history, what celebrated Jewish historian Salo Baron called its lachrymosity.<sup>5</sup>

<sup>1</sup> 1963 Symposium at Howard University

<sup>2</sup> For one example of many, see Wolfgang Benz, “The Construction of Modern Antisemitism: From Race Ideology to Genocide,” in *Racism, Slavery, and Literature* (ed. Wolfgang Zach and Ulrich Pallua; Frankfurt am Main: Lang, 2010) 13–23.

<sup>3</sup> There is, of course, a voluminous bibliography on these questions. For a recent assessment that engages some of the questions with fresh insight, see *Key Concepts in the Study of Antisemitism* (ed. Sol Goldberg, Scott Ury, and Kalman Weiser; Palgrave Critical Studies of Antisemitism and Racism; London: Palgrave MacMillan, 2021). On anti-Judaism more generally, see David Nirenberg, *Anti-Judaism: The Western Tradition* (New York: Norton, 2014). One of the more well-known exemplars of the continuity between premodern anti-Judaism and antisemitism is Jacob Katz, *From Prejudice to Destruction: Antisemitism 1700–1933* (Cambridge: Harvard University Press, 1980), although Katz’s case is made with historical rigor and not predicated on inevitability as much as some more recent studies.

<sup>4</sup> The notion of suffering and the exilic covenant is developed by Yoel Teitelbaum in his “Essay on the Three Oaths,” in *Vayoel Moshe* (Brooklyn, 1960). See in Shaul Magid, “Zionism as Anti-Messianism: The Political Theology of Rabbi Yoel Teitelbaum of Satmar” (forthcoming).

<sup>5</sup> On Salo Baron and the lachrymose view of Jewish history, recently, see Robert Chazan, “A New Vision of Jewish History: The Early Historical Writings of Salo Baron,” *AJSR* 39 (2015) 27–47; and David Engel, “Crisis and Lachrymosity: On Salo Baron, Neobaronianism, and the Study of Modern European Jewish History,” in *Jewish History* 20 (2006) 243–64. See also Ismar Schorsch, “The

A different approach emerges among Jews during the modern era after emancipation, as many Jews now wanted to be a part of European societies in which they lived.<sup>6</sup> In fact, as scholars such as Hannah Arendt and David Engel have argued from different perspectives, antisemitism as we know it today likely emerged as a byproduct of emancipation. Wilhem Marr (1819–1904) popularly coined the term “antisemitism” in his 1862 essay “The Way to Victory of Germanism over Judaism.”<sup>7</sup> In some way, antisemitism emerges as a concept precisely when Jews begin to see the hatred of the Jew qua Jew as a problem that needed to be solved, and could be solved—that is, something that requires social and political intervention in order for emancipation to be successful. And yet, the older theological approach of suffering as a constitutive part of exile remained, largely within traditional Jewish circles. But not only. My suggestion here, in fact, is that the rabbinic idea that hatred of the Jew defines the non-Jew, always and everywhere, still informs much of the Jewish discussion of antisemitism to this day,<sup>8</sup> even in discussions that seem to be historical or focused on how best to resolve or eradicate it. Hannah Arendt notes in her unfinished essay from the 1930s, “Antisemitism”:

There have been numerous attempts to blur the fundamental difference and downplay the historical dissimilarities between the full scope of the medieval hatred of the Jews on the one hand . . . and the scope of modern antisemitism on the other. . . . What is thereby achieved is nothing less than to abstract the

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Lachrymose Conception of Jewish History,” in idem, *From Text to Context: The Turn to History in Modern Judaism* (Hanover, NH: Brandeis University Press, 1994) 376–88.

<sup>6</sup> See Jacob Katz, *Out of the Ghetto: The Social Background of Jewish Emancipation, 1770–1870* (Cambridge: Harvard University Press, 1973; repr., Syracuse: Syracuse University Press, 1998); and idem, *Jewish Emancipation and Self-Emancipation* (Omaha: University of Nebraska Press, 1986).

<sup>7</sup> An English translation by Gerhard Rohringer was published in 2009 as “The Victory of Judaism over Germanism: Viewed from a Nonreligious Point of View.” In the United States, in 1877, an incident where Joseph Seligman, a German-Jewish banker, was denied accommodations at a Christian-owned hotel in upstate New York is often viewed as a marker of antisemitism on American shores. Of course, this was overshadowed by the lynching of Leo Frank in Georgia in 1915.

<sup>8</sup> See Robert S. Wistrich, *A Lethal Obsession: Anti-Semitism from Antiquity to the Global Jihad* (New York: Random House, 2010); idem, *Antisemitism: The Longest Hatred* (New York: Schocken Books, 1994); idem, *From Ambivalence to Betrayal: The Left, the Jews, and Israel* (Lincoln: University of Nebraska Press, for the Vidal Sassoon International Center for the Study of Antisemitism, 2012); and Steven T. Katz, *The Holocaust in Historical Context*, vol. 1, *The Holocaust and Mass Death before the Modern Age* (New York: Oxford University Press, 1994). This notion, which Hannah Arendt critically called “eternal antisemitism,” is quite pervasive in contemporary literature on antisemitism. Nirenberg’s *Anti-Judaism* is a bit more complex, as he states in his introduction that his subject is not antisemitism but anti-Judaism. For a distinctive Israeli perspective, see Jacob Katz, *From Prejudice to Destruction: Antisemitism, 1700–1933* (Cambridge: Harvard University Press, 1980); and Shmuel Ettinger, “Jew Hatred in Historical Perspective,” in *Sinat Yisrael le dor-oteha* (ed. S. Almog; Jerusalem: Meretz Shazar, 1980) [in Hebrew]. There are, of course, much earlier works, such as Maurice Samuel’s *The Great Hatred* (New York: Knopf, 1940). Almost all of these studies, in one way or another, are works under the “eternal antisemitism” moniker suggested critically by Arendt. On the problems of Ettinger’s work, see Scott Ury and Guy Miron, “Antisemitism: On the Meanings and Uses of a Contested Term,” in *Antisemitism and the Politics of History* (ed. Scott Ury and Guy Miron; Waltham, MA: Brandeis University Press, 2023) 10–15.

Jewish question out of the historical process. . . . Both “medieval barbarism” and “everlasting antisemitism” leave Jews without any hope. . . . And talk about “everlasting antisemitism” simply goes one step further and casts us out of human history entirely.<sup>9</sup>

Martin Bergman, son of Israeli philosopher Shmuel Hugo Bergman, concurs in an essay from 1939: “Similarly, the ‘historical’ approach does not meet the problem, because all it does is to establish a chronology of occurrences; there is no warrant for the assumption that the earliest occurrence of anti-Jewish hostility is necessarily the *fons et origo* of a single and consistent tendency manifesting itself in all subsequent occurrences.”<sup>10</sup> Bergman’s essay is not widely known. Yet this often-reflexive phenomenon continues to this day.

My question here is not about the origins of antisemitism, nor how to solve it. Rather, I am interested in how Jews, especially today, write *about* antisemitism—its place in the Jewish popular imagination and its uses by Jews in our contemporary world. Part of what I want to investigate is the tension in how antisemitism is simultaneously viewed as a historical phenomenon, best understood contextually (as all historical phenomena are), and as an ahistorical if not ontological principle, which is even, on some theological readings (as we will see), not only inevitable but necessary.

I begin this inquiry in an unlikely place, in the early writings of militant American rabbi Meir Kahane. Kahane was the founder, in 1968, of the Jewish Defense League and founder of the Israeli political party KACH in 1971. He was eventually elected to the Israeli Parliament in 1984 and removed in 1986 by a “racism law” legislated just for him. The reason I begin here is that antisemitism really occupies the center of Kahane’s political agenda and religious ideology, and his views are regrettably still very much operative even as his tactics have been shunned.<sup>11</sup> In his 1971 breakout book *Never Again!* that sold over 100,000 copies the first year of its publication, Kahane stresses that the most startling thing about the Holocaust was that Jews were surprised by it. For him, the Holocaust was distinctive only in its expanse,

<sup>9</sup> Hannah Arendt, “Antisemitism,” in *Arendt: The Jewish Writings* (ed. Jerome Kohn and Ron H. Feldman; New York: Schocken, 2007) 66–67. Others expressed similar views earlier. For example, see Erich Kahler, “Forms and Features of Anti-Semitism,” in *Social Research* 6 (1939) 455–88.

<sup>10</sup> Shlomo [Martin] Bergman, “Some Methodological Errors in the Study of Antisemitism,” *Jewish Social Studies* 5.1 (1943) 43–60, at 56. Bergman (who changed his name from Shlomo to his middle name, Martin) moved from Mandate Palestine to the United States and became involved in psychoanalytic practice and analysis. An article that deals with Bergman’s essay is Judah Bernstein, “Martin Bergman’s Personae: Or How an Erudite Article on Antisemitism Came to Be Written and Forgotten” (unpublished essay). I want to thank Bernstein for providing me with a copy of his essay. We can see a similar ambivalence about the ubiquity of the term in Holocaust historian Yehuda Bauer’s “Problems of Contemporary Antisemitism,” in *Varieties of Antisemitism: History, Ideology, Discourse* (ed. Murray Baumgarten, Peter Kenez, and Bruce Thompson; Newark: University of Delaware Press, 2009) 315–27.

<sup>11</sup> See Shaul Magid, *Meir Kahane: The Public Life and Political Thought of an American Jewish Radical* (Princeton: Princeton University Press, 2021).

not in its program and not in its goal. Antisemitism, as he sees it, is simply a part of the DNA of the non-Jews; their hatred of the Jews needs no explanation and can find no solution—it is more like a “natural law.” He writes:

I only know that those who say it [the Holocaust] cannot happen again are fools or blind or both. I only know that the Haters look upon the Jew as the enemy. I only know that the Jew is first to go in any holocaust and that the economic envy and religious hatred and irrationality of Jew-baiting are here. . . . And above all, let us understand that people, in the best of times, do not like Jews, and that people in America today, do not like Jews. . . . It is not a thing that is logical and one who can[not] understand it had better search his own psychological condition. For ages we have sought to diagnose the condition in the hope of finding a cure and we have failed. In the end, we are left with the resigned word of Rabbi Shimon Bar Yohai: “It is *natural law* that Esau hates Jacob.”<sup>12</sup>

By his logic, the historians who attempt to understand the Holocaust “have failed,” because antisemitism for Kahane is not historical or structural; it is woven into the very fabric of human civilization. It is constitutive of the non-Jew and, thus, will always be part of any non-Jewish world in which Jews choose to live. For Kahane, antisemitism can never be eradicated, only managed, and thus he offers a way to counter its violence through the deterrent of Jewish militancy. What Arendt called “eternal antisemitism” is for Kahane, and, I would add, for many who would never side with Kahane’s solution, woven into God’s covenant with Israel, as we will see below under the midrashic adage “Esau hates Jacob.”

It was when trying to understand Kahane’s view of antisemitism that I first coined the term “Judeopessimism,” an analogy to the position of “Afropessimism” current in Black studies and critical race theory.<sup>13</sup> Here, I would like to develop this further, suggesting that the conversation with Black studies can offer a productive way toward more critical approaches to antisemitism and the Jewish discourse around it today.

Why Black studies, or, as some prefer, Black study?<sup>14</sup> My aim here is not to juxtapose two constructs of navigating difference simply because it hasn’t been done, or to suggest that all forms of hatred are the same. Rather, I have found in Black studies some of the most sophisticated theoretical thinking about difference and marginality, history and ontology, inclusion and exclusion, servitude and freedom present in today’s academy. Alternatively, with some notable exceptions, even the most celebrated treatments of antisemitism have tended to be sorely undertheorized among scholars of Jewish studies.<sup>15</sup> By contrast, recent work in

<sup>12</sup> Meir Kahane, *Never Again!* (New York: Pyramid Books, 1972) 101.

<sup>13</sup> See, for example, Shaul Magid, “Judeopessimism: On Antisemitism and Afropessimism,” in *Ayin Journal* (2001), <https://ayinpress.org/on-antisemitism-and-anti-blackness>.

<sup>14</sup> On Black studies and Black study, see Joshua Myers, *Of Black Study* (Las Vegas, NV: Pluto Press, 2023) 1–13.

<sup>15</sup> There are some important exceptions, such as Gavin Langmuir, *Toward a Definition of*

Black studies has been marked by serious considerations of the consequences of the failure to theorize anti-Blackness, and thus to misunderstand the nature of whiteness that is committed to keeping Blacks on the margins of society, as “otherly” human, or not human at all, not because of racism in the sense we conventionally understand it, as bias or prejudice, but because anti-Blackness in particular is constitutive of human civilization as such.<sup>16</sup> Showing the failure of liberal ideas of tolerance and representation to defuse anti-Blackness, such thinking thus moves beyond the conventional solutions found in civil rights or Black nationalism. Decoupling theory from the search for solutions, some scholars in Black studies and critical race theory more generally have embarked on a theoretical project of discovering anti-Blackness as a key to understanding difference as categorical, in some cases even ontological, rather than simply historical or circumstantial. And perhaps most importantly, they have done so in ways that resist the hegemonic white gaze.

At first sight, Jewish reflection on antisemitism might seem quite different. Both scholarly and popular works on the topic, for instance, tend to be framed as historical surveys oriented toward present-day solutions, or at least the possibility of such solutions. Part of what I found in Meir Kahane, however, is that his views on antisemitism are more widespread than they might seem.<sup>17</sup> Today, Kahane’s position of militancy is summarily rejected in the polite company of diaspora Jews who live with the post-emancipatory belief that Jews can successfully integrate into the societies in which they live.<sup>18</sup> This arguably serves as the very *raison d’être* of American Jewry. In general, American Jews reject Kahane’s militancy as

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*Antisemitism* (Berkeley: University of California Press, 1996), Gil Anidjar, “When Killers Become Victims: Antisemitism and Its Critics,” in *Cosmopolis* 3 (2007) 1–24, Jonathan Judaken, *Jean-Paul Sartre and the Jewish Question: Anti-Semitism and the Politics of the French Intellectual* (Omaha: University of Nebraska Press, 2007), Amos Funkenstein, *Perception of Jewish History* (Berkeley: University of California Press, 1993); and, on the relationship between antisemitism and anti-Zionism, see Scott Ury, “Strange Bedfellows? Anti-Semitism, Zionism, and the Fate of ‘the Jews,’” *AHR* 123 (2018) 1151–71. There are many other exceptions I could list as well. This begs a deeper exploration if only because in the not so distant past, there were important studies that did engage antisemitism in a more theoretical vein, from Arendt’s *Origins of Totalitarianism* to Adorno and Horkheimer’s *Dialectic of Enlightenment*, Sartre’s *Antisemitism and Jew*, and Giorgio Agamben’s *Remnants of Auschwitz*, just to cite a few examples. See also all the articles in the *American Historical Review Roundtable*, “Re-thinking Anti-Semitism” (ed. Jonathan Judaken), *AHR* 123 (2018). Most recently, see the important volume recently translated from the Hebrew, *Antisemitism and the Politics of History* (ed. Ury and Miron).

<sup>16</sup> On the question of the human, the classic example is Sylvia Wynter, “No Humans Involved: An Open Letter to My Colleagues,” *Forum N.H.I.: Knowledge for the 21st Century* 1.1 (Fall 1994) 1–17. Cf. Myers, *Of Black Study*, 52–99.

<sup>17</sup> See, for example, David Sheen, *Kahanism and American Politics: The Democratic Party’s Decades-Long Courtship of Racist Fanatics* (Institute of Palestine Studies, 2023). I will add that some of the critical reviews on my book on Kahane argued that I overextended my argument about Kahane’s lasting influence. I think the November 2022 Israeli elections and the aftermath of the Hamas massacre on October 7, 2023 put to rest the notion that Kahane is a thing of the past.

<sup>18</sup> It is worth noting that post-October 7, 2023, Kahanism has become more palatable to many Jews, even those who would previously have never identified with his views.

illiberal and immoral. But if antisemitism can only be managed, and never resolved, as Kahane maintained, the project of modernity will ultimately fail the Jews.<sup>19</sup> Kahane said precisely this, but many Jews today in America would not agree. But the current discussion of antisemitism both claims to say this and not to say this. Antisemitism is treated as historical but also implied to be inevitable, or eternal, the term Hannah Arendt evokes and then rejects in her *Origins of Totalitarianism*, all without explaining how both can be true at the same time.<sup>20</sup> And this fissure is most ubiquitous in popular books on the topic written largely by Jews, perhaps for Jews—to cite a few recent examples, Dara Horn’s *People Love Dead Jews: Reports from a Haunted Present*, Deborah E. Lipstadt’s *Antisemitism: Here and Now*, Bari Weiss’s *How to Fight Anti-Semitism*, and David Baddiel’s *Jews Don’t Count*.<sup>21</sup> Each in different ways seems to address historical context while implying, or certainly gesturing toward, the eternalist argument that remains unsaid. This is even more the case with more scholarly works, such as Robert Wistrich’s *A Lethal Obsession: Antisemitism from Antiquity to the Global Jihad*. On the need for an eternalist claim, Arendt opines, quite provocatively, “Jews concerned with the survival of their people would, in a curious desperate misinterpretation, hit on the consoling idea that antisemitism after all, might be an excellent means for keeping the people together, so that the assumption of eternal antisemitism would even imply an eternal guarantee of Jewish existence.”<sup>22</sup> The implication, as I understand Arendt, is that the disappearance of antisemitism would be a threat to Jewish existence.

My claim in this essay is that through the lens of critical race theory more generally and Afropessimism in particular, we can expose and begin to investigate an undertheorized fissure in the contemporary Jewish discussion of antisemitism. My concern is not to understand antisemitism itself but first to understand the

<sup>19</sup> While not explicitly making that case but coming close to it, see Ruth Wisse, *Jews and Power* (2nd ed.; New York: Schocken, 2020). See also Terrence Johnson and Jacques Berlinerblau, “Liberalism and the Tragic Encounter between Blacks and White Jews,” in *Blacks and Jews in America: An Invitation to Dialogue* (Washington, DC: Georgetown University Press, 2022) 56–92.

<sup>20</sup> One other example of a Jewish thinker who deeply studied the antisemitism of his time was Bernard Lazare, who rejected the notion of the inevitability of antisemitism, much in line with Arendt. He is in many ways the hero of Arendt’s celebrated essay, “The Jew as Pariah”; see in Arendt, *The Jewish Writings* (ed. Kohn and Feldman), 329.

<sup>21</sup> Dara Horn, *People Love Dead Jews: Reports from a Haunted Present* (New York: Norton, 2022); Deborah E. Lipstadt, *Antisemitism: Here and Now* (New York: Schocken, 2019); Bari Weiss, *How to Fight Anti-Semitism* (New York: Crown, 2021); David Baddiel, *Jews Don’t Count* (London: TLS, 2021). For my review of Dara Horn’s *People Love Dead Jews*, see Shaul Magid, “Savoring the Haterade: Why Jews Love Dara Horn’s ‘People Love Dead Jews,’” *Religion Dispatches*, 20 October 2021, <https://religiondispatches.org/savoring-the-haterade-why-jews-love-dara-horns-people-love-dead-jews>.

<sup>22</sup> Hannah Arendt, *Origins of Totalitarianism* (New York: Harcourt Brace, Jovanovich, 1973) 70. Theodore Herzl argues for a tempered form of the eternalist argument when he writes: “We naturally move to those places where we are not persecuted, and there our presence produces persecution. This is the case in every country, and will remain so, even in those highly civilized—until the Jewish question finds a solution on a political basis”; Theodore Herzl, *The Jewish State* (New York: Dover Books, 1989) 75.

nature of the Jewish discourse about it and the cultural work that it does for Jews today. My claim is not that antisemitism and anti-Blackness are parallel, nor is it my intention to compare them. Rather, I suggest that the critical study of anti-Blackness enables us to grapple with the unspoken tension in contemporary Jewish discussions of antisemitism that treats it simultaneously as a historically contingent and ahistorically inevitable phenomenon. Or, in other words, what makes some contemporary writing on antisemitism sound more like Kahane than its authors would like to admit.<sup>23</sup>

Reading Kahane as a Jewish theorist of antisemitism—and, I would suggest, a “Judeopessimist” in this sense—we are first taken back to those rabbinic teachings that most shaped the views in the Middle Ages. As I have noted, this Jewish view of the non-Jewish hatred of Jews does not consider it as a problem in search of a this-worldly solution, certainly not the way moderns do, but rather as a matter of covenantal consequences. Of course, rabbinic teaching itself is not univocal on this, or any, matter, but two examples were especially influential.

First is a perennialist understanding of antisemitism as coterminous with divine election. In some rabbinic sources, the fact that the non-Jewish world holds animus toward the Jew is taken as a sign of divine favor, even a condition of divine election. We find this most overtly, and startlingly, in a medieval midrash *Pesikta Zutarta* (*Lekakh Tov*) on Exodus, chapter three, playing on the etymological similitude between three words: *s'neh* (bush, as in “burning bush”), Sinai (Mount Sinai, the place of revelation), and *sina* (the Hebrew term for hatred). This midrash comments on God appearing to Moses in the burning bush, or *s'neh*.

Why “in the bush?” Because Israel will be ensnared in the thorns of servitude in the future. Why bush *s'neh*? Because in the future Israel will receive the Torah at Sinai. This is the language of *sina* (hatred), that the hatred of the gentile (the midrash uses the standard form of “idolater”) will descend upon Israel [because of Sinai].

Significantly, Shlomo ben Yitzhak, better known as Rashi (1040–1105), in a gloss on a related passage in Talmud Shabbat 89a suggests that the hatred toward the Jews is the result of the non-Jews not receiving the Torah. That is, it is an exercise in jealousy. Other medieval thinkers suggest that this gestures toward non-Jewish hatred of the Jew as a result of Jews sinning in the future. In any event, the midrash suggests that hatred of the Jews qua Jews—what we now reflexively call antisemitism—emerged with the moment of divine election at Sinai. In fact, by this logic, antisemitism confirms Israel’s election; hatred of the non-elect being the inevitable consequence of election, a point Spinoza made in a slightly different,

<sup>23</sup> The strong antipathy of comparing antisemitism to any other forms of hatred was central to the work of Shmuel Ettinger and later Robert Wistrich. Both view antisemitism from a decidedly Israeli perspective and even as their work joins many others, that exclusivist perspective continues to be pervasive in the contemporary study of antisemitism, something thought but often unspoken. For a discussion of this see, Ury and Miron, “Meanings and Uses,” 1–20.



more psychological, register. Spinoza posited that claims of election will naturally evoke enmity.<sup>24</sup> The midrash in *Pesikta Zutarta* offers a more theological rendering, claiming that such enmity is *produced* by the very fact of Sinai.

The second rabbinic example is the maxim “Esau hates Jacob” cited by Kahane—which, I will suggest, is especially important for understanding the covert ontology of antisemitism that survives the advent of modernity.

In traditional Jewish circles, the phrase “Esau hates Jacob” is often deployed as a theological maxim to define antisemitism. The phrase itself is not biblical but comes from an early midrashic text, *Sifrei to the Book of Numbers*. The context is a comment on Gen 33:4:

Esau ran to meet him [Jacob]. He embraced him, falling on his neck, he kissed him; and they wept.” The verse has an unusual series of dots above the word *vayishakayhu* (“and he kissed him”), and this *puncta extraordinaria* prompts questioning of whether Esau’s kiss was sincere. Rabbinic sage Rabbi Shimon bar Yohai is credited with the response that “It is a well-known halakha (*halakha he b’yaduah*) that Esau hates Jacob. Nevertheless, at that instance Esau became merciful and kissed him sincerely.”<sup>25</sup>

In subsequent Jewish thinking, “Esau hates Jacob” was treated as a theological maxim—including into modernity. For example, one of the leading halakic authorities in the second half of the twentieth century, R. Moshe Feinstein (1895–1986), notes in a responsum: “Why is the word *halakha* relevant here (in this midrash)? It is because just as *halakha* never changes, so also Esau’s hatred of Jacob never changes.”<sup>26</sup> More recently, a contemporary Orthodox rabbi, Emanuel Feldman, pushes the point even further: “It is a *universal law*: Esau hates Jacob. This is one halachah that Esau maintains religiously.”<sup>27</sup>

Especially in Feldman’s interpretation of halakah as “universal law,” this dictum comes close to an ontological claim about antisemitism as constituent of the non-Jew. But was this always the case? In a 1967 essay, “Esau as Symbol in Early Medieval Thought,” Gerson Cohen shows how Esau/Edom, while it may have simply meant Rome in the rabbinic iteration, eventually comes to represent medieval Christendom, which is still an imperial rather than theological claim, but one now tied to Christianity as Israel’s main adversary.<sup>28</sup> But when did Esau become

<sup>24</sup> See Spinoza, *Theological-Political Treatise* (ed. Jonathan Israel; Cambridge Texts in the History of Philosophy; Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 2007) 43–56. Cf. Yitzhak Melamed, “Spinoza and the Election of the Hebrews,” in *Spinoza and Modern Jewish Philosophy* (ed. Michael A. Rosenthal; London: Palgrave, forthcoming).

<sup>25</sup> *Sifrei Bamidbar*, “*B’ha’alokha*,” Piska 11.

<sup>26</sup> Moshe Feinstein, *Igrot Moshe*, cited in Marty Lockshin, “‘Esau Hates Jacob’ – But Is Antisemitism a Halakha?” in TheTorah.com, <https://www.thetorah.com/article/esau-hates-jacob-but-is-antisemitism-a-halakha>.

<sup>27</sup> See Emanuel Feldman, “The Halachah that Esav Observes,” *Mishpacha: Jewish Family Weekly*, cited in Lockshin, “‘Esau Hates Jacob.’”

<sup>28</sup> Gerson Cohen, “Esau as a Symbol in Early Medieval Thought,” in *Jewish Medieval and Renaissance Studies* (ed. Alexander Altmann; Cambridge: Harvard University Press, 1967) 19–48.

a symbol for *all* non-Jews, such that the claim of hatred could be taken beyond any specific religious, historical, political, or territorial context as a “universal law” about the non-Jew? In his sweeping 2019 study, *Jacob and Esau: Jewish European History between Nation and Empire*, Malachi Hacohen argues that it is in the late nineteenth century in Yiddish and nationalist Jewish literature when Esau solidifies as the “Goy”—that is, the undifferentiated non-Jew:

Esau returned as a major literary *topos* in Jewish national literature. He cast divergent figures. In their Yiddish works, Russian and Polish acculturated Jewish writers . . . adopted popular conceptions of Esau from the rabbinic idiom and turned them into ethnic ones. Esau emerged as the *Goy*, the non-Jew, the quintessential Other. Zionist writer Hayim Nahman Bialik provided the equivalent in Hebrew, as did other authors.<sup>29</sup>

At first sight, the modern Jewish discussion of antisemitism might seem to mark a departure from these views. It tends, for instance, to discuss its history and contexts rather than outlining ahistorical or theological truths. To focus on history is to assume that non-Jews are different from one another and mostly tolerant in modern liberal societies such that any sort of bias and hatred is an aberration or exception in need of explanation and contextualization. But I suggest that we find these same ahistorical ideas underlying much contemporary Jewish writing about antisemitism. Such an admission is rarely voiced, as it does not adhere to modern sensibilities of Jewish identity and difference. Yet much of the medieval view still remains surreptitiously operative even as modern Jews began to articulate antisemitism as a problem to be solved.

## ■ Antisemitism

Jews today are mostly confused about antisemitism. In fact, it is arguably this confusion that generates endless writing about it. As I see it, the confusion is founded on the following assumption: historically, antisemitism seems to be everywhere and always, in places where Jews reside and in places where they do not, in places where they are excluded from society and in places where they are integrated into society. Many Jewish thinkers explore in painful detail the instances, trends, and disastrous impact of antisemitism throughout history. But the problem of the transhistorical (“everywhere and always”) veiled in the historical is rarely analyzed or theorized. This arguably serves as the impetus for David Nirenberg’s study *Anti-Judaism: The Western Tradition*.

On the one hand, this is understandable. Such claims do not cohere with the modern Jewish goals of integration and normalization. And historians in general are mostly uncomfortable with transhistorical decontextualized claims. On the other

<sup>29</sup> Malachi Haim Hacohen, *Jacob and Esau: Jewish European History between Nation and Empire* (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 2019) 423. See also Adi Ofir and Ishay Rosen-Zvi, *Goy: Israel’s Multiple Others and the Birth of the Gentile* (Oxford Studies in the Abrahamic Religions; Oxford: Oxford University Press, 2018).

hand, what many of these studies show is that antisemitism seems to resist any single explanation. Historians have shown how Jews exercising difference sometimes produces antisemitism. But so do Jews in assimilation. Jews being nationalists and Jews being universalists, capitalists, and communists—all of these seem to have sparked antisemitism. Are these all the same and, if so, from a historical perspective, what does that mean for determining the “why” of antisemitism?<sup>30</sup>

I reconsider the historical study of antisemitism in conversation with transhistorical understandings of anti-Blackness in critical race theory, looking to Afropessimist theorists who see whiteness and Blackness in political-ontological terms. On this, Jared Sexton notes that Afropessimism, “moves from the empirical to the structural, or more precisely, from the experiential to the political ontological, especially insofar as the question of differential racialization—or complexity of racial hierarchy—makes recourse to a comparative history and social science.”<sup>31</sup> I am neither advocating nor rejecting these claims with respect to race. What I am suggesting is that these theories offer a useful point of conversation, a potentially productive juxtaposition, with Jewish approaches to antisemitism. Afropessimism, in particular, takes the problem of the transhistorical nature of anti-Blackness head on, offering one model for how to theorize outside of history and theology about hatreds that transcend specific times and places, and that can even structure entire identities and cultures.

As I stated at the outset, my concern here is not with *what* antisemitism is, but rather *how* it is perceived and presented by Jews today. (And part of my suggestion is that the discussion both by Jews and within Jewish studies is distinct, for instance, from the parallel Christian discussion, which is guided by other concerns.) For the Jewish discussion, I suggest that one can distinguish three approaches: the first historical, the second structural, and the third ontological. And, I would add, as Scott Ury suggests, one cannot overestimate the extent to which Zionism, often unmentioned, drives much of the current writing on antisemitism.<sup>32</sup>

The first understands instances of antisemitism as products of historical circumstances that produce attitudes of animus or hatred toward Jews or cultivate notions of Jewish “otherness.” The second claims that these antagonisms run deeper than historical circumstances and are embedded in the very structure of how a society is constructed, thus accounting for their recurrent character; historical instantiations thus reflect a structural flaw in a society, sometimes driven by religion,

<sup>30</sup> This question was addressed decades earlier by Bergman in his “Methodological Errors,” 49, responding to the essay “Antisemitism” in the *Universal Jewish Encyclopedia* (1939). Bergman wrote: “What this amounts to is a list of anti-Jewish attitudes and charges; it is certainly no explanation of why they exist.” And yet throughout the second half of the 20th cent., much writing about antisemitism continues this problematic approach.

<sup>31</sup> Jared Sexton, “Afro-Pessimism: The Unclear Word,” *Rhizomes: Cultural Studies in Emerging Knowledge* 29 (2016), <http://www.rhizomes.net/issue29/sexton.html>.

<sup>32</sup> Scott Ury, “Zionism,” in *Key Concepts in the Study of Antisemitism* (ed. Sol Goldberg, Scott Ury, and Kalman Weiser; London: Palgrave, 2021) 288–92.

sometimes by culture, sometimes by racialization. The third, the ontological, is the most ambiguous but also the most devastating. It suggests there is something in the very *nature* of social reality that produces such hatred. This can sometimes be explained metaphysically (as we find in premodernity) but more often, regarding antisemitism, it is viewed theologically. In addition, one physical, even medical, example can be found in the writings of Leo Pinsker (1821–1891). In his widely read essay “Auto-Emancipation,” he writes that Judeophobia (antisemitism was not yet a widely used term) is not only a “psychic aberration” but an “incurable hereditary social disease.” What is striking, in my view, is the degree to which the ontological and even psychic/physical explanation often lurks beneath the first two.<sup>33</sup>

One important recent exception is the Jewish historian David Engel, who suggested in his essay “Away from a Definition of Antisemitism” that the study of antisemitism as a historical phenomenon must remain delimited to its terminological genesis in nineteenth-century Germany in response to the resistance some German intellectuals had to Jewish emancipation. Hannah Arendt makes a similar argument in her essay “Antisemitism” cited above. Notwithstanding these interventions, however, it remains common to conflate them all into a singular “antisemitism,” erasing these distinctions that would make examples each contingent on specific circumstances or cultural contexts.

Engel posits the problem as a lack of historical rigor. My question is: What if the ahistorical erasure of such distinctions is not haphazard but rather intentional and calculated?<sup>34</sup> Before a deeper analysis of this problem, I offer a brief introduction to Afropessimism in this context.

## ■ Afropessimism

In trying to explore this question, I found it useful to look at Afropessimist theorists like Frank Wilderson III, Jarod Sexton, Saidiya Hartman, and others who are quite explicit in embracing claims about ahistorical patterns, or what George Weddington calls “political ontology.” Wilderson, for instance, in part reading cultural theorist Sylvia Wynter, posits the civilizational position of anti-Blackness or “anti-Black solidarity” that permeates the construction of whiteness as a purportedly neutral state of being human. His claim is on the level of “political ontology,” in this sense since, as Weddington puts it, Afropessimism “describes blackness not as solely a question of difference, *but of a political positionality that exists outside of, but is also essential to, the construction of humanity.*”<sup>35</sup> And this comes close

<sup>33</sup> See Leo Pinsker, “Auto-Emancipation: An Appeal to His People by a Russian Jew (1882),” in *Road to Freedom: Writings and Addresses* (ed. B. A. Netanyahu; Westport, CT, 1975) 78.

<sup>34</sup> David Engel, “Away from a Definition of Antisemitism: An Essay in the Semantics of Historical Description,” in *Rethinking European Jewish History* (ed. Jeremy Cohen and Moshe Rosman; Littman Library of Jewish Civilization; Oxford: Oxford University Press, 2009) 30–53.

<sup>35</sup> George Weddington, “Political Ontology and Race Research: A Response to ‘Critical Race Theory, Afro-pessimism, and Racial Progress Narratives,’” *Sociology of Race and Ethnicity* 5 (2019) 278–88, at 282 (italics in original).

to Derrick Bell's notion of "racial realism" from a legal perspective—that racism is a permanent structural feature in United States law.<sup>36</sup> This is not to say that whites are, by definition, anti-Black; it is rather to claim that whiteness is at least in part *produced* by anti-Blackness, and this structural antagonism is constitutive of civilization, at least in its modern Western expressions and especially in the United States.<sup>37</sup> I will argue below that much of the Jewish discussion of antisemitism is marked by parallel assumptions that are pervasive but remain largely unspoken.

The dominant public discourse about anti-Blackness in the United States was long dominated by white liberal models of approaching all forms of minority inequity as easily surmountable barriers to inevitable progress, thus focusing on solutions through rights, access, and representation. But more than half a century after the civil rights movement, the focus on white tolerance and Black representation has not solved inequity.<sup>38</sup> Afropessimists are among the most prominent thinkers to focus instead on Black theorizing of Blackness and anti-Blackness. As Jared Sexton stresses, Afropessimism is thus a claim but also a positionality—that is, it is more about seeing the world from a position that does not assume that whiteness speaks neutrally or universally to what is human.

But asserting white supremacy doesn't quite get to the claim of Afropessimists like Wilderson who go beyond historical discussions about slavery as well as structural claims about economics and incarceration laws in American society. For them, the focus is anti-Blackness rather than white supremacy. The former is constitutive of the latter. By this measure, anti-Blackness is viewed as categorically distinct from other forms of racism and bias, certainly in America, but also uniquely constitutive. This is not a distinguishing factor between Afropessimism and other forms of critical race theory.<sup>39</sup> Sexton, reading DuBois, writes: "The color line, as it were, operates here as the division of the world into regions of blackness and non-blackness, or slavery contrasted to forms of freedom including the possessive investment in whiteness, rather than whiteness and non-whiteness."<sup>40</sup> Wilderson echoes this sentiment when he says that the structure of the world's semantic field is "sutured by anti-Black solidarity."<sup>41</sup> And it is in this sense that their claims become

<sup>36</sup> Derrick Bell, "Racial Realism," *Connecticut Law Review* 24.2 (1991) 363–80.

<sup>37</sup> The construction of whiteness is itself a matter of scholarly debate. See, for example, a thorough historical analysis in Theodore Allen, *The Invention of the White Race* (2 vols.; New York: Verso, 2012).

<sup>38</sup> On this, see Cheryl I. Harris, "Whiteness as Property," in *Critical Race Theory and Legal Discourse* (ed. Richard Delgado and Jean Stefancic; New York: NYU Press, 2017) 276–91. Harris focuses on the legal ramifications of defining whiteness as legal privilege that sustains racism in the legal system. For example, she writes, "When the law recognizes, either implicitly or explicitly, the settled expectations of whites built on privileges and benefits produced by white supremacy, it acknowledges and reinforces a property interest in whiteness that reproduces black subordination" (281).

<sup>39</sup> Here, see Victor Erik Ray et al., "Critical Race Theory, Afro-Pessimism, and Racial Progress Narratives," *Sociology of Race and Ethnicity* 3 (2017) 147–58.

<sup>40</sup> Sexton, "Afro-Pessimism."

<sup>41</sup> Frank B. Wilderson III, *Red, White, and Black: Cinema and the Structure of U.S. Antagonisms*

explicitly ontological; as Huey Copland recently put it: “Afro-pessimism at once reveals and reckons with the modern world’s fundamentally anti-Black antagonism, which, in political-ontological terms, structurally positions the Black as the slave, the void, the site of noncapacity that makes possible whiteness, relationality, in a word, ‘the world’ itself.”<sup>42</sup>

The claim is minimally a structural one about the anti-Blackness of America that cannot be remedied through legislation. But maximally, it moves to the realm of the ahistorical. Wilderson offers a particularly stark, even dark, articulation of Afropessimism, as founded on “a comprehensive and iconoclastic claim: that Blackness is coterminous with Slaveness: Blackness *is* social death, which is to say there never was a prior meta moment of plenitude, never equilibrium: never a moment of social life.”<sup>43</sup> On his reading, “Blackness and Slaveness are inextricably bound in such a way that whereas Slaveness can be separated from Blackness, Blackness cannot exist other than Slaveness.”<sup>44</sup> His point is that Afropessimism is founded on a (political) ontological claim of anti-Blackness (which he distinguishes from racism more broadly) upon which human civilization, and not just America, is founded. There are Humans, and there are Blacks, Wilderson writes. “Blacks are not Human subjects, but are instead structurally inert props, implements for the execution of White and non-Black fantasies and sadomasochistic pleasures.”<sup>45</sup>

For Wilderson, anti-Blackness is not a social dynamic but a requisite component of social life. And slavery is not exclusively a historical phenomenon but a “relational dynamic”; it defines Blackness. On this reading, it is not that Blacks *were* slaves. It is that they will always *be* slaves, because that is their civilizational role; they were created, as it were, in the West’s imagination, as property. This is not the consequence of slavery but the condition of slavery. They are thus the negative opposite of the Human without which the Human could not exist as it does. Blackness is the dehumanized Human which gives the Human its positive status. Sylvia Wynter puts it this way: “While the black man must experience himself as the *defect* of the white man—as must the black woman vis a vis the white woman—neither the white man or woman can experience himself/herself *in relation to* the

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(Durham, NC: Duke University Press, 2010) 58.

<sup>42</sup> Huey Copland, “Afro-Pessimist Aesthetics: An Open Question” *ASAP/Journal* 5 (2020) 241.

<sup>43</sup> Wilderson, *Afropessimism*, 102. Wilderson take the term “social death” from Orlando Patterson; see Patterson, *Slavery and Social Death* (Cambridge: Harvard University Press, 2018) 35–76. See also Jarod Sexton, “The Social Life of Social Death: On Afro-pessimism and Black Optimism,” in *Time, Temporality and Violence in International Relations: (De)fatalizing the Present, Forging Radical Alternatives* (ed. Anna M. Agathangelou and Kyle D. Killian; New York: Routledge, 2016) 61–75. There is considerable debate about the way Wilderson uses “social death” and the way Patterson meant it in his book.

<sup>44</sup> Wilderson, *Afropessimism*, 42. See also the distinction between “slaveness” and “savagery” that defines the Native American in Wilderson, *Red, White, and Black*, 45–53.

<sup>45</sup> Wilderson, *Afropessimism*, 15. Sylvia Wynter notes the acronym N.H.I. (No Humans Involved) used in the 1990s by the Los Angeles judicial system regarding jobless black males who belong to the inner-city ghettos; Wynter, “No Humans Involved.”

black man/black woman, in any way but as that fullness and genericity of being human, yet a genericity that must be verified by the clear evidence of the latter's *lack* of fullness, of this genericity."<sup>46</sup> Blackness as defect, or deficiency, enables white men to exist in the fullness of themselves. There is thus a price to pay for the white man if the Black man becomes Human. As Kimberlé Crenshaw writes, whites actually have a stake in racism.<sup>47</sup>

Much of this political ontology is born from a specific reading of the postcolonial theorist Frantz Fanon. While Afropessimism generally does not compare anti-Blackness to antisemitism, Fanon often uses antisemitism in a comparative frame. Comparing Auschwitz to the Middle Passage, Wilderson, commenting on Fanon's reading of the Holocaust, writes:

Jews went into Auschwitz and came out as Jews. Africans went into the ships [i.e., the slave ships from Africa to America] and came out as Blacks. The former is a Human holocaust; the latter is a Human *and* a metaphysical holocaust. This is why it makes little sense to attempt analogy: the Jews have the Dead (the *Muselmann*) among them; the Dead have the Blacks among them.<sup>48</sup>

The "metaphysical" nature of the fate of the many varieties of Africans as Wilderson sees it, is that those who entered the Middle Passage all came out as Black, becoming Negroes with the name the slaver gave them suggests a new kind of being, a new creation. Frantz Fanon puts it differently: the Black man was the creation of the white man. This is viewed by Fanon, as Wilderson reads him, as categorically different even than the genocide of the Jews in Nazi Germany. Whatever one makes of this claim—and the Holocaust and the Middle Passage have been talked about elsewhere in comparative genocide studies, and it is certainly the case that the Jew who emerges from Auschwitz is not at all the same Jew who entered its gates—for Fanon it is arguably the "metaphysical" component, perhaps transformation of his point, that inspires the shift from historical and structural claims about slavery to the ontological claims of Afropessimism. There was a Jew before the Holocaust. There was no Negro (*negre*) before slavery. On this reading, the Negro may have had a past, but they have no heritage. For Fanon, Blacks were victims not only of physical violence but of metaphysical violence as well. With this brief introduction, I will now move back to the question of antisemitism.

<sup>46</sup> Sylvia Wynter, "Toward the Sociogenic Principle: Fanon, Identity, the Puzzle of Conscious Experience, and What It Is Like to Be 'Black,'" in *National Identities and Sociopolitical Changes in Latin America* (ed. Mercedes F. Durán-Cogan and Antonio Gómez-Moriana; Hispanic Issues 23; London: Routledge, 2001) 40 (italics in original).

<sup>47</sup> Kimberlé Williams Crenshaw, "Race, Reform and Retrenchment: Transformation and Legitimation in Antidiscrimination Law," *Harvard Law Review* 101.7 (1988) 1331–81.

<sup>48</sup> Wilderson, *Red, White and Black*, 38, in discussion of Frantz Fanon, *The Wretched of the Earth* (1963; trans. Richard Philcox; New York: Grove Press, 2004).

## ■ Antisemitism as a Divine Corrective: Naftali Zvi Berlin of Volozhin

What does any of this have to do with antisemitism? In short, everything. The questions Wilderson, Sexton, Hartman, Fred Moten and Wynter, among many others, wrestle with about anti-Blackness are really not much different than the questions Jews wrestle with regarding antisemitism. What is different is that these theorists have been much more willing to think outside of, or even against, the historicity of specific examples of racism to understand the persistence and power of the phenomenon, without simply claiming it is “always and everywhere.” Where does it come from? When and where does it exist? What, if anything, can be done about it? To my mind, scholarship on antisemitism might also have something to learn from scholarship on anti-Blackness, not in focusing on “origins” and solutions, but how such phenomena function on social or even civilizational levels.<sup>49</sup> Part of what is powerful about Wilderson’s intervention, given all the caveats, is that he proposes a thought experiment that is not solutions-based or otherwise framed in terms of a white gaze that sees racism as anomalous. His ideas have sparked much debate and disagreement, of course, and they should continue to do so.<sup>50</sup> But that is precisely what has been valuable about them. What is pervasive but typically left unspoken in much Jewish discussion of antisemitism might be sharpened if the terms of the debate were made more explicit as an analytical exercise and not a proof or weapon.

Many scholars who work on antisemitism seem locked in a dilemma regarding its genealogy, thinking that tracking antisemitic incidents over millennia, in different contexts and for a variety of reasons, will reveal its source and potential resolution, or lack thereof. On the one hand, many Jews seem bound to view it, or present it, historically or circumstantially, with understandable resistance to any assertions that sound ahistorical, theological, or even ontological. On the other hand, some habitually describe examples of hatred and hostility toward Jews, large or small, as instantiations of an antisemitism that everyone “knows” is “everywhere and always.”<sup>51</sup> This seeming incongruity can even be seen in historical studies: many present the phenomenon of antisemitism in different contexts *as if* different sorts of examples are all the same phenomena. Scholars such as Amos Goldberg and Scott Ury have openly challenged the coherence of using antisemitism as an umbrella

<sup>49</sup> The ways in which studies of anti-Blackness can help better understand antisemitism is taken up in a different register by Susannah Heschel in “Erotohistoriography: Sensory and Emotional Dimensions of Antisemitism,” in *Antisemitism and the Politics of History* (ed. Ury and Miron), 65–86.

<sup>50</sup> There are many responses to the Afro-pessimist claims. See, for example, the notion of Black optimism by Fred Moten and others. See Fred Moten, “Black Optimism/Black Operation,” *Double Operative: Language Making*, 19 October 2007 at Microsoft Word - moten-black-optimism.doc (wordpress.com). See also Victor Anderson, *Beyond Ontological Blackness* (New York: Bloomsbury, 2016).

<sup>51</sup> Perhaps the most popular example is Bari Weiss, *How to Fight Anti-Semitism* (New York: Crown, 2021).



term to include all kinds of animus toward Jews.<sup>52</sup> This sentiment was expressed much earlier, and more stridently, in Bergman's 1943 essay "Some Methodological Errors in the Study of Antisemitism": "Our point then [is] that antisemitism may be no more than a mere term of convenience, designed to correlate for our own purposes phenomena which are actually disparate and unconnected."<sup>53</sup> Since this remains largely unstated in so much scholarship on antisemitism, what goes unsaid are the ontological assumptions within much of the historical research on antisemitism which in large part neglects to engage the political-ontological theorizing outside of historical research. Beyond the scope of this analysis, to invoke Arendt again, what do Jews get from talking about antisemitism, what pleasure or comfort is taken in the lachrymose depiction of their history? And are these studies in some way feeding some sense of authentic Jewishness as linked to victimization, a sense that is hard to abandon, even in the contemporary contexts where Jewishness is no less linked to political sovereignty (as in Israel) or to successful integration into non-Jewish cultures (as in America)?<sup>54</sup>

One example of what a more explicit discussion might look like is Kahane's reflexive comment that I cited at the outset. I want to present one more modern example of openly framing antisemitism ahistorically, or transhistorically, as something that comes close to the ontological but even more strikingly, inevitable, or even necessary. This example pushes us even more toward the accounting of a theorizing paradigm that may be productive, even if we reject its premise.

This example can be found in a short treatise by R. Naftali Zvi Berlin of Volozhin (1816–1893) titled *She'ar Yisrael (The Remnant of Israel)*. Berlin was a leading rabbinic figure in late nineteenth-century Eastern Europe (Lithuania) who remains revered in many traditional circles today. His essay was originally published in 1894 in a second edition of his work *Rinna shel Torah*. It was likely written sometime in the 1860s. It is an uncommon essay from the wellsprings of traditional Eastern European Jewry in that it is dedicated to the topic of explaining antisemitism. In fact, it may be the first Hebrew work to use the term "antisemitism" explicitly. While it was surely written before the pogroms in the 1880s, rising animosity toward Jews in Eastern Europe even in the middle of the nineteenth century, coupled with widespread Jewish rejection of the tradition, could have inspired Berlin's interest. While Berlin remains wedded to the exegetical-theological frame common in his world, I suggest *She'ar Yisrael*, published in English as *The Remnant of Israel* is a rare example of moving to the realm of the ontological as a way to frame antisemitism.<sup>55</sup>

<sup>52</sup> See, for example, Ury, "Strange Bedfellows."

<sup>53</sup> Bergman, "Some Methodological Errors," 47.

<sup>54</sup> See, for example, Shaul Magid, "Are Jews an Oppressed People Today?" in idem, *The Necessity of Exile: Essays from a Distance* (New York: Ayin Press, 2023) 155–200.

<sup>55</sup> I used the edition published in the back of Berlin's commentary to Song of Songs, *Shir Ha-Shirim 'im Perush Ha-Naziv* (Jerusalem, 1976). An English edition appears as *Why Antisemitism? A Translation of "The Remnant of Israel"* (trans. Howard Joseph; New Jersey: Jason Aronson, 1996).

The historian Arthur Hertzberg once allegedly said, “The only thing more dangerous to Jews than antisemitism, is no antisemitism.”<sup>56</sup> Hertzberg meant, I assume, that the absence of antisemitism opened the door to mass assimilation that he believed was always the occupational hazard of Jews in modernity. Writing in the nineteenth century, Naftali Zvi Berlin of Volozhin seems to have a different take on that same idea—not that antisemitism prevents assimilation, but that it is a corrective to it.

Berlin’s essay *She’ar Yisrael* is based on a much earlier principle stated by Saadia Gaon (882–942), namely, that the Jews only exist for the sake of Torah; in other words, there is nothing unique or special about Jews per se apart from carrying the tradition of divine revelation to the world. The Jews, for Saadia, are vessels for Torah, nothing more. Without stating that precept outright, Berlin uses it to explain the enmity of the non-Jew toward the Jew. He never uses the maxim “Esau hates Jacob” in his essay (although he does cite it elsewhere in his Torah commentary). Rather, he bases his theory on the acrimonious relationship between Jacob and Laban in Genesis but more specifically on a verse from the genealogies in Gen 6:21: “Sons were born to Shem, ancestors of all descendants of Eber and older brother to Japheth.” The Jews are descended from Shem through Eber, hence Shemites, or Semites, a term that Berlin seems to be referring to as it was very much in use in his time, while the Japhetites were the “people of reason,” referring, I surmise, to Europeans. The Shemites (the Jews) are certainly higher than the Japhetites, but only when they carry the inheritance of Eber (through Abraham)—that is, only when they carry the tradition of Torah. When they don’t, they are less than the Japhetites and will understandably be despised by them. The Jews are thus divided into two categories for Berlin: the first are Jews, those who live by the tradition of Torah, and the second are Semites, those who abandon Torah. Thus, Berlin writes: “It is debasing for us to be called Semites for this is to be more lowly than to be identified with Japheth the Great. However, when we are called Israelites or Abrahamites, we are on a higher level than the Japhetites.”<sup>57</sup>

For Berlin, the only way for Jews to keep themselves higher than the Japhetites, and thus protected from their ire, is by separating themselves from them to protect their continued fidelity to Torah. Responding to the massive assimilation of Jews in his time, Berlin suggests that by abandoning Torah, Jews move from being Israelites, or Jews, to being Semites, who are lower than the Japhetites and who will be understandably hated by the descendants of Japheth. He goes even further, by saying that when Jews abandon Torah, they become almost subhuman, describing

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I cite from the translation but alter it from the original when necessary. For another use of Berlin’s *The Remnant of Israel*, see Eliyahu Stern, “Anti-Semitism and Orthodoxy: Race and Religion in ‘The Remnant of Israel,’” *Representations* 155.1 (Summer 2021) 55–81. On the work itself, see Jason Kalman, “The Song of Songs and the Editor of Editors: On the Implications of the Netziv’s *Rinah shel Torah*,” *Journal for Semitics* 23 (2014) 722.

<sup>56</sup> This is a comment by Hertzberg said orally. I have not found a written source for this.

<sup>57</sup> Berlin, *The Remnant of Israel*, 30.

them as similar to “monkeys.” They lose their “Israelite form” and *become among the nations like an unwanted vessel* (Hos 8:8):

The nature of this matter further indicates that when Israel violates its unique form—that is, its Judaism—it becomes lowly and despised in the eyes of the world. This is a general principle in nature; that every higher form that suffers the destruction of that higher form becomes much lower than something that does not originally have that particularly higher form.<sup>58</sup>

For Berlin, this enmity is not simply part of the web of natural law, in the sense of the rabbinic dictum “Esau hates Jacob.” It is antisemitism, and it has a divine teleology all its own. “Antisemitism” is viewed here as a covenantal corrective. Berlin may have been responding to the oddity of the term “antisemitism” as referring to Jew-hatred (*Judenhass*), which had just come into use in the decade he was writing his essay, thus playing on the distinction between “Jew” and “semite.”<sup>59</sup> Berlin writes:

Now it is clear that the unique form of Israel is their being alone and separate from others; it is therefore understood what happens when Israel tries to break out of its aloneness and imitate others, ending in the removal of its religious tradition of Judaism. How does the Holy One return them to their structural purpose? Animosity for Israel is stirred up among the nations; they are pushed away from their lives and dwellings until, inevitably, the uniqueness of Israel is recognized, and the work of God is established forever.<sup>60</sup>

One could say that Berlin’s assessment is empirically false. That is, antisemitism exists against Torah-observant Jews as well as assimilated Jews. He responds to this with an observation about Jacob and Laban. The Passover Haggadah contains one of the most oft-cited cases for the ontology of antisemitism: “Indeed in every generation they rise against us to destroy us. However, the Blessed Holy One saves us from their hands.” Berlin focuses on what follows: “Go and learn what Laban the Aramean attempted to do to our ancestor Jacob.”<sup>61</sup> Berlin notes that while the context is that Laban was suspicious of Jacob, his enmity had two dimensions, the second being hostility toward Jacob’s faith. What prevents Laban (antisemites) from succeeding is divine protection initiated by the Jews’ fidelity to the law. Once that disappears, they become merely Semites, *unwanted vessels*, as the prophet Hosea prophesized, and the Japhetites rightly hate them. Berlin summarizes as follows:

From this we learn that all the nations among whom we live hate the name of Judaism. However, they do not have the opportunity to actualize their enmity

<sup>58</sup> Ibid., 31

<sup>59</sup> See, for example, the discussion in Gil Anidjar, *Semites: Race, Religion, Literature* (Stanford: Stanford University Press, 2007).

<sup>60</sup> Berlin, *The Remnant of Israel*, 28. A similar sentiment can be found in the work of the kabbalist Yehuda Ashlag (1885–1945); see in his work *Sefer Hakdamot le-Hokhmat Ha-Emet* (Jerusalem, 2012) 91; and in Jonathan Garb, *The Chosen Will Become Herds* (New Haven: Yale University Press, 2009) 30.

<sup>61</sup> Berlin, *The Remnant of Israel*, 32.

until the High Providence wishes to punish us, and a pretext is found for an attempt to destroy us completely. The story of Laban and Jacob is a lesson to all Jacob's descendants.<sup>62</sup>

For Berlin, antisemitism thus has two forms. The first is hatred of a lowly people (Semites) who have abandoned Torah and thus relinquished their lofty status as Eberites (i.e., descendants of Shem who carry the tradition of Abraham). This hatred—he claims—is understandable and even justified, since Israel becomes in the words of Hosea *an unwanted vessel*. The second is Laban's desire to uproot the Israelite faith. In the second instance, Israel is protected by God.

Berlin was living when Jews were abandoning Jewish tradition and, at the very same time, antisemitism was on the rise. He was a leader of the Volozhin yeshiva, one of the great Torah institutions in modern history. And yet, around him assimilation was rampant. The fear was that the behavior of the Jewish "Semites" would also impact the lives of the Jewish "Eberites." Thus, he calls his essay "The Remnants of Israel"—a phrase taken from Isa 10:20: "And in that day the remnant of Israel and the escaped from the House of Jacob shall lean no more on him that beats it, but shall lean on the Lord, the Holy one of Israel." For Berlin, antisemitism is simply a part of the fabric of human civilization, which is why, I think, he draws it from the genealogy of the descendants of Eber.

While Berlin does not speak openly here in metaphysical or ontological terms, he certainly viewed antisemitism in dehistoricized, or transhistorical, terms, that is, as not linked to specific historical circumstances or societal structures, but rather functioning as a fundamental—and even necessary—part of human civilization, activated in part by Jews becoming Semites by abandoning Torah. The Jew avoids the brunt of antisemitism by living under the wings of divine protection. But if they step outside, antisemitism will invariably rise to destroy them. "Esau hates Jacob" is not necessary for Berlin because he places antisemitism long before that rabbinic locution. The remnant of Israel may be salvaged, writes Berlin, but the "Semites" in his view will be justifiably erased. In short, antisemitism purges the Semites who have left Torah. Or, alternatively, it wakes them up to return to reside under the wings of divine protection.

### ■ Judeopessimism

This brief analysis of Berlin's *The Remnant of Israel*, confronting the new term "antisemitism" and its meaning, points to some examples of what I am calling Judeopessimism, which makes claims about antisemitism that are akin to the political ontology of anti-Blackness that we find in some Afropessimists. Just as Afropessimists claim that America is a "white supremacist" nation or, as Afropessimists and some critical race theorists would have it, that the world as we know it is founded on anti-Blackness (i.e., there is the Human, and there is

<sup>62</sup> Ibid.

the Black), some Jewish thinkers see the non-Jewish world through the lens of antisemitism; hatred of the Jew is treated as constitutive of the non-Jew. A question that I think is worth asking is the degree to which Judeopessimism also underlies contemporary discussions of antisemitism more broadly. Are Jewish scholars of antisemitism similarly claiming that antipathy to the Jew undergirds much of human civilization? And if so, what exactly would that mean?

There is an understandable discomfort for historians, or modern Jews more generally, to make claims of this sort in explicit terms. Aside from the historian's antipathy toward transhistorical claims, to argue for an ahistorical or transhistorical persistence of antisemitism seems anathema to a people who have invested so much energy normalizing *in* the world, either through successful integration (e.g., Americanism) or through nationalization (e.g., Zionism). The theological analysis of Berlin may seem creative and suggestive but hardly a template for how contemporary Jews now see themselves in the world. And yet this transhistoricity persists. Kahane offers a kind of secularized version of Berlin, simply asserting that the failure of historians to understand the "why" of antisemitism leaves us with Shimon Bar Yohai's "natural law" of Esau's enmity for Jacob. And Bar Yohai's comment, likely initially directed only at Rome (Edom), has become universalized by the expansion of Esau as the *goy* (gentile) in modern Jewish literature, so that Jewish nationalism does not in fact place the Jews as a "nation *among* nations," but rather in the binary model of "Israel *and* the nations."

In practice, many historians of antisemitism tend to describe enmity toward Jews in myriad historical and societal contexts without particularizing those contexts, disabling the proclivity toward transhistorical interpretations. Too often, varied expressions of hostility toward Jews and Judaism—from Christian theological supersessionism to Islamic rebellion against Israel as colonialism, to conspiracy theories about Jewish world domination ("The Protocols of the Elders of Zion"), to anti-Zionism ("Anti-Zionism is antisemitism. Full stop.")<sup>63</sup>—are simply called antisemitism, as if they are all essentially the same thing. In effect, even if not in intent, such scholarship is thus engaging in a *theological* project that is arguably no less ontological in its claims than the theories of anti-Blackness noted above. To imply, even if not stated openly, that antisemitism is "everywhere and always" is not a historical claim; it is a theological or ontological one. Even if we leave the reason to "mystery" and reject Berlin's analysis of antisemitism as the natural consequence of assimilation (producing the "semite"), antisemitism would still not be a historical claim even if one may make that claim using historical methods. This is why Engel's essay "Away from a Definition of Antisemitism" is such a welcome and crucial, albeit underexamined and underappreciated, intervention into the conversation—and, interestingly, why it was so critically received in Israel.<sup>64</sup>

<sup>63</sup> "Remarks by ADL CEO Jonathan Greenblatt to the 2023 ADL National Leadership Summit," 1 May 2023, <https://www.adl.org/resources/news/adl-doing-work>.

<sup>64</sup> See, for example, a recent volume of *Zion*, an Israeli journal, with a Hebrew translation of

It is here that I think Afropessimism can be of use to scholars of antisemitism, precisely because it is willing to make its ahistorical claims explicit and thus to put them up for debate. Many critical race theorists blanch at Wilderson's stark assessment, because it problematizes any solution or makes any solution inadequate. There is no solution to anti-Blackness, or at least no easy solution or no solution that would leave Western civilization intact, since it is constitutive of the construction of the Human, at least in the modern West. Put otherwise, anti-Blackness cannot be undone without also undoing much of what we now consider to be "civilization." This is a strong claim in Black studies, and one that has received much critical attention, but in some way, Berlin's and Kahane's assessments, and the ways that they have shaped the popular Jewish imagination, also reject any solution. Yes, Jews can separate themselves, and even establish their own country (which Berlin tacitly supported), and they can live by the dictates of Torah. But that will not erase antisemitism (as rooted, for Berlin, in Laban's animus toward Jacob), only minimize its potential damage. And one can respond to antisemitic violence through violence, following Kahane, or live under the auspices of divine protection through fidelity to Torah (Berlin), but that too will not erase antisemitism, only manage it or mitigate it. Antisemitism, for them, is intractable. Kahane at least openly acknowledges that; Berlin does so by reframing antisemitism as a predictable, perhaps even necessary, reaction to the severing of Jews from Torah. For Berlin, once the protective layer of Torah is rejected, the Jew becomes Semite and, as Semite, is hated.

While few historians of antisemitism make such dire predictions, the (surreptitious) transhistorical way some present their historical data seems to me to point in that same direction. The unwillingness to pose an answer to the question of the *why* of antisemitism, or the various transhistorical ways that question is answered, is boldly and unapologetically taken up by Berlin and, in doing so, he de-historicizes antisemitism and places it into an ontological, or at least theological, frame. Antisemitism is what happens when Jews become Semites by abandoning Torah. In other words, without Torah the natural animus of Japhetites toward Semites becomes manifest. Historians will certainly resist that explanation, even find it offensive and absurd. But aren't they in some inchoate way contributing to it as well? Put otherwise, are many Jews not living in a reflexive orbit of Judeopessimism without owning its consequences or investigating its contours? What does "antisemitism, everywhere and always" mean in terms of being a Jew in the twenty-first century?

The study of antisemitism, as I argue here, has not yet developed a critical theory of its subject whereby it can be analyzed in the fullness of itself outside its historical instantiations. Black studies scholars argue about the consequences,

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Engel's essay and a series of critical responses to it: "Antisemitism: Historical Concept, Public Discourse," *Zion* 85 (2020) [in Hebrew]. And, more recently, see *Antisemitism and the Politics of History* (ed. Ury and Miron).

or price paid, by envisioning the constitutive nature of anti-Blackness. But these debates are second tier and follow the first-tier layers of the investigation itself.

I am not suggesting historians of antisemitism have not offered theories as to the existence and nature of antisemitism; many surely have. I mean more specifically interrogating anti-Jewishness the way Black studies scholars interrogate anti-Blackness. In short, perhaps we need to initiate a school of critical Jewish theory. Scholars of antisemitism understandably feel uncomfortable with older Jewish theorizing of non-Jewish hatred toward Jews such as we have seen in the theological diagnosis of “Esau hates Jacob” or Naftali Zvi Berlin’s reading of Jewish history through the relationship between Laban and Jacob. Or Kahane’s politicizing antisemitism as a weapon to justify Jewish exceptionalism and violence in a state project that promotes “abnormality” precisely because antisemitism is constitutive of the world’s attitude toward Jews. Such theories may attract popular interest in self-serving ways, not that scholars can, and arguably should, make a different kind of contribution.

In that light, scholars of antisemitism might benefit from a deeper engagement with the arguments undergirding Afropessimists specifically and critical race theorists more generally, who are grappling with anti-Blackness and theorizing its broader implications for human civilization, not as a cause of racism but as a way of understanding why we can’t seem to get beyond it.