

# Understanding Jewish Self-Hatred

Kenneth Levin's timely new book probes an age-old phenomenon

By Bruce Bawer

Some representative news stories from the past few years:

- Within hours after Hamas's barbaric invasion of Israel, people across the Western world take to the streets by the thousand – not to declare their support for Israel, but to wave the flag of Hamas. Many of them are Jews.
- The executive director of the Anti-Defamation League defends Black Lives Matter, a virulently antisemitic organization, by maintaining that not *everybody* in BLM hates Jews and by pointing to the historic alliance between American Jews and blacks.
- The Jewish Council for Public Affairs supports BLM, too, explaining that this position is entirely in line with its dedication to “social justice.”
- After President Trump announces his intention to move the U.S. embassy in Israel to Jerusalem, the Union for Reform Jews joins the Muslim world in condemning the decision.
- When Speaker of the House Kevin McCarthy seeks to remove the bitterly antisemitic Ilhan Omar from the Foreign Affairs Committee, several American Jewish groups rush quickly to her defense.

All of these stories are about the same phenomenon. Some observers refer to it as “Jewish self-hatred.” It became more visible in the wake of October 7, but it's far from new. *Jewish Self-Hatred* was the title of a 1930 book by

Theodor Lessing, a German philosopher; fifty-six years later it was the title of a book by Sander Gilman, an American historian. Now a psychiatrist named Kenneth Levin has written a book about the phenomenon, [\*The Canary on the Couch: The Psychology of Jewish Self-Delusions in the Face of Rising Anti-Semitism\*](#) (from which I took the above examples). Unlike Lessing and Gilman, however, Levin considers the term “Jewish self-hatred” too narrow, given that irrational Jewish responses to antisemitism take a wide variety of forms.



You may have seen some of these responses in your own life. I certainly have seen them in mine. A random case: when students at one of America’s fanciest colleges responded to the Gaza War with a days-long protest at which they savaged Jews and celebrated Hamas, a Jewish friend of mine who’s an alumna of that college insisted that the kids weren’t antisemitic – they were just virtuous young people acting on their consciences.

What makes people like my friend tick? Why do so many Jews – and Jewish organizations – excuse Jew-hatred, turn a blind eye to it, or even endorse it, when members of other minority groups and leaders of their organizations never would respond

in such a way to bigotry directed against them? Think about it: although Americans elected a black president twice, black activists constantly claim that it's the most profoundly racist country in history; although Americans bend over backwards to say nice things about Islam, Muslim leaders rail about the ubiquity of Islamophobia. Yet a remarkable number of Jewish leaders are capable of staring straight into the heart of antisemitism and insisting that there's nothing there.

Why? Why do so many Jews seem desperately eager to forgive or ignore or even accept Jew-hatred? Why do they insist on pretending, in the face of all evidence to the contrary, that their enemies aren't really their enemies at all?

These are the questions that Levin, a longtime professor at Harvard Medical School, probes here. One striking observation that he makes is that many Jewish apologists for, or appeasers of, Jew-hatred strive to distance themselves from their fellow Jews. This, too, has a long history. A few case studies:

- Karl Marx, son of a convert to Christianity, “was clearly interested in distancing himself from ‘the Jews’” – for example, by parroting the familiar argument that “Jews’ involvement in trade is evidence of their degeneracy.”
- The writer Karl Kraus (1874-1936), a Viennese Jewish convert to Catholicism, spent his career accusing other Jews of corrupting Austria – even as gentiles condemned *him* for “using an alien and corrupt Jewish literary language and stylistic mode to disseminate equally alien and corrupt Jewish ideas.”
- The philosopher Otto Weininger (1880-1903), another Viennese Jew who became a Christian, maintained that Jews are incapable of deep thinking or aesthetic feeling.
- The Jewish-American political columnist Walter Lippmann

(1889-1974) championed other minority groups but “repeatedly echoed popular anti-Jewish indictments in his writing and blamed Jews for the hatred directed against them.”

- The historian Tony Judt (1948-2010), an English Jew who taught at NYU, contended that Israel, as a religion-defined state, was an anachronism in an era of “open frontiers” and “international law” – but he had nothing critical to say about the dozens of countries that identify as Islamic, many of them sharia states.

Why did these people make such a point of distancing themselves from other Jews – or from Israel? Levin’s answer: believing that their co-religionists are “tarr[ing] their standing in the world,” they wish to be viewed by gentiles as exceptions to the rule, and thus be accepted.

Some Jews, to be sure, don’t distance themselves from *all* other Jews; instead, they single out a subset of Jews and blame them – and not the Jew-haters themselves – for Jew-hatred. In the nineteenth century, for example, when gentiles in the German-speaking part of Europe rejected Jewish equality because they regarded Yiddish as crude, many German-speaking Jews agreed, with the philosopher Moses Mendelssohn (b. 1729) calling it “a language of stammerers, corrupt and deformed, repulsive to those who are able to speak in a correct and orderly manner.”

(To be sure, when Yiddish-speaking Jews learned German in an effort to assimilate, that didn’t work either, with many gentiles arguing – and some Jews, again, readily agreeing – that in doing so, they were introducing ugly alien elements into Germany’s noble culture.)

What’s the psychology here? Frequently, notes Levin, Jews who parrot Jew-haters tell themselves that they’re serving some higher moral purpose. “For example,” he writes, “those who

criticized Jewish involvement in commerce typically argued that there was indeed something intrinsically reprehensible in commercial endeavors." Others tell themselves that castigating other Jews is *good* for the Jews, because it disproves the widespread gentile view of Jews as hopelessly clannish.

Levin brings up one aspect of Jewish-American behavior that doesn't immediately seem relevant to his topic: the strong Jewish loyalty to the Democratic Party, which goes back to the days of FDR. For Levin, what's worth noting about this loyalty is that during the last fifteen years or so it's survived a good many Democratic moves that have been seriously problematic for Jews – from President Obama's promotion of the Muslim Brotherhood in Egypt, his courting of Iran, and his snubbing of Israel to the party's acceptance of Critical Race Theory, which defines Jews as white oppressors.

Through all of these developments, Jews stayed firmly in the Democratic camp. Then came October 7, after which many leading Democrats chose to stand with Hamas. Even then, most Jewish voters and Jewish organizations remained solidly Democratic – some of them because they chose to close their eyes to Democratic antisemitism, others because their loyalty to the left outweighed their attachment to Israel.

Most recently, the Democrats ran a candidate for mayor of New York who is a devout Muslim and who has spoken warmly about a terrorist-supporting imam. Even *he* got Jewish votes – no, not a majority, but about one-third. That's how strong the Jewish attachment to the Democratic Party is: it can run a candidate whose Jew-hatred seems undeniable, and yet a third of Jews will still somehow persuade themselves that he's their man.

What explains this powerful party loyalty? In the 1930s the Democratic Party was FDR, whom most Jews viewed as a hero of oppressed minorities, themselves included. For them, being a Democrat meant being aligned with – and standing up for – all other oppressed minorities. (Hence the stubbornness with which

Jewish leaders today will express support for Jew-hating groups like BLM.)

To be sure, even in FDR's time, Jewish loyalty to the Democrats didn't always make sense. During World War II, FDR chose not to bomb the railroad line to Auschwitz and strictly limited immigration by Jewish refugees. By contrast, the 1944 Republican platform was strongly pro-Zionist and took FDR to task for not pressuring the UK to let European Jews enter the Holy Land, then under British control. And where did America's Jewish establishment stand? Mostly with Rabbi Stephen Wise, head of the American Jewish Committee, who was adamantly pro-FDR and called the GOP's criticism of FDR "utterly unjust."

And why weren't Wise and other American Jewish leaders more concerned about Jewish refugees? Simple: they worried that making too much noise about the subject would spark antisemitism. Yes, there were American Jews who labored tirelessly during the war to rescue Jewish refugees – but few of them were members of the Jewish establishment, whose resources and connections would have aided their work immeasurably.

And then there's the ultimate contemporary example – and a profoundly tragic one it is – of what you might call the chronic inability of many Jews to believe that their enemies are, in reality, their enemies. I'm referring to some of the Jews who were killed in kibbutzim on October 7. After that day, news reports emphasized that many of them had chosen to live close to Gaza because they believed in bridge-building between Jews and Muslims. They loved peace and brotherhood, and saw Gazans as friends. Many employed Gazans in their homes; some even hired Gazans to care for their children – children who ended up being butchered.

Levin's name for the mindset that can lead to such hideous results is "[d]elusional categorial thinking." It's a kind of thinking that enables people to believe that they can form

real “political alliances” with people who hate them – and that such “alliances,” far from exposing you to danger, will contribute to your welfare and security.

In Levin’s view, then, there are many reasons why a Jew might respond irrationally to antisemitism. Starry-eyed idealism (which Gad Saad would call “suicidal empathy”). Naked, *kapo*-like self-interest. The belief that tolerating antisemitism is somehow virtuous – or that it will make one appear virtuous. A devotion to leftist ideology (which, these days, preaches that Jews are always oppressors, never oppressed) that dwarfs one’s sense of Jewish identity or friendliness toward Israel. An inclination to embrace a fantasy of control in a situation over which one has, in reality, little or no control. A belief that other minorities, especially those that are purportedly oppressed, are by definition allies of the Jews, and that standing by them, even if they shout their antisemitism from the rooftops, is the best way of protecting Jews from oppression. Or – and this is me, not Levin, throwing this one out – an understandable inability to reconcile one’s wealth, privilege, and lifelong sense of security in America, a historically Jew-friendly society, with the notion of oneself as a vulnerable object of murderous hate, just like any poor soul in the Warsaw ghetto.

You might think that such a familiar and distinctive phenomenon would have one cause, not many. I don’t know what Levin would say about the following, but I wonder whether there is, in fact, in the psyche of many Jews, an ancient, deep-seated impulse toward self-delusion about antisemitism – one that, in expressing itself outwardly, can fasten onto some existing prejudice, proclivity, or predisposition that may then come to look like an underlying motive. Just a thought.

But whatever the cause of Jewish self-delusions about antisemitism, one thing’s for sure: the ultimate result is never, ever good. Kenneth Levin’s timely, incisive, and thought-provoking study of this profoundly perilous

psychological phenomenon should be read by every Jew in America. Alas, it won't be.

*First published in [Front Page Magazine](#)*

**Order Kenneth Levin's new book, '*The Canary on the Couch: The Psychology of Jewish Self-Delusions in the Face of Rising Anti-Semitism*': [HERE](#).**