

When antisemitism gets personal

The antisemitic incidents of my youth were not hatred hiding behind geopolitical rationalizations or academic pretensions.

by Matthew Hausman



It was on a sunny Shabbat afternoon recently that my son and I were walking home from synagogue. The walk is a few miles long and takes a good fifty minutes, but it always provides the opportunity for reflection and conversation. As we took our normal shortcut through a park where my brothers and I used to play as children, we were verbally accosted by a convertible full of local college kids shouting antisemitic taunts as they drove by with the top down. When we emerged on the other side of the park, the same car happened to be driving down the street and greeted us with another torrent of epithets. And after they drove past and we turned the corner, we were again accosted, this time by a couple in a pickup truck who slowed down to hurl a few more insults our way.

Three such incidents in one walk made for a dubious trifecta

indeed.

This wasn't the first time in my life I'd been on the receiving end of such vitriol. It happened frequently when my brothers and I were growing up and got us into quite a few scuffles.

But when we were kids being goaded into fights, our reactions were about defending ourselves and our honor. Our childhood aggressors may have been antisemitic, but they were not hiding their hatred behind geopolitical rationalizations or academic pretensions. Nor were their actions excused by politicians or minimized by progressives seeking to insulate political bedfellows from claims of prejudice by laying blame exclusively on right-wing bigots. I neither knew nor cared about the partisan beliefs of the antisemitic bullies I encountered as a kid and there was nothing political about their hatred.

Moreover, when my grandmother would put everything in perspective by telling me stories about surviving the pogroms in the Ukraine or about relatives I never knew being killed during the Holocaust, I figured there were worse things in life than getting or giving an occasional black eye.

Our experience that Shabbat, however, was different from the events of my childhood; and our antagonists that day were neither neo-Nazis nor white supremacists. They were college students in one vehicle and identity group members in the other – demographics that liberals are reluctant to accuse of bigotry. They were not spouting reactionary propaganda, but they targeted us simply because we looked like a couple of Jews walking home from shul.

Though similar incidents are occurring with increasing frequency in cities and towns across the US (