

Antisemitism in the “Golden Land”?

LILA CORWIN BERMAN

Lila Corwin Berman is the Paul & Sylvia Steinberg Professor of American Jewish History and the director of the Goldstein-Goren Center for American Jewish History at New York University

For a very long time, historians of American Jews and many American Jews insisted that the only kind of antisemitism that existed in the United States was private and social in nature: a snub from an elite private school; the exclusion from a country club; a quiet comment or nasty look. Indeed, the history of antisemitism in America conformed to the overarching plot of a Golden Land story for Jews, where even the bad could not obscure the sparkling good of American progress and the perfectibility of the Jewish experience within it.



Photo by Freepik/EyeEm

The Golden Land story has relied on three ideological preconceptions as filters through which to view history. First, it insisted that antisemitism in the United States was mild or inconsequential when compared to the real antisemitism in Europe. Second, it characterized antisemitism as wholly distinct and sometimes, as one historian has written, “crowded out,” by the predominant

hatred of anti-Black racism in the United States.^[1] And, third, it pronounced antisemitism as marginal from the real story of America.

On their face, these claims may seem defensible. Antisemitism in the United States has not culminated in genocide as it did in midcentury Europe. Anti-Black racism, anchored in the forcible transfer and enslavement of Africans, is indisputably the center of the history of American oppression. And, finally, for many Jews, the United States has offered remarkable opportunities for advancement and success.

Yet faith in the Golden Land story has also blinded American Jews and their historians to a deeper, more entangled, and more accurate story of antisemitism in the United States.

Yet faith in the Golden Land story has also blinded American Jews and their historians to a deeper, more entangled, and more accurate story of antisemitism in the United States. Only by setting aside the Golden Land story can we more clearly see antisemitism as implicated within the very political, legal, and civic structure of the United States. One should not mistake this as an oppositional or starkly revisionist call, to replace a Golden Land story with a Dark Ages one. Instead, when we release ourselves from the presumptions of the Golden Land story, we can appreciate the porousness between Old and New World histories, the connections among different forms of group hatred, and the backsliding paths of American and human progress.

Far from a mere intellectual exercise, a responsible history of antisemitism in the United States is necessary in our present moment. Over the last decade, community leaders and pundits have proclaimed a crisis in antisemitism. While one cannot—and should not—dispute the increased incidents of violence directed against Jews, only a benighted historical imagination supports apocalyptic-like claims made by journalists and others that “The Golden Age of American Jews Is Ending.”^[2] In fact, careful examination of the past reveals that antisemitism, like other ideologies of exclusion, illiberalism, and inequality, is stitched into American life. Even more significantly, an unblinkered historical assessment proves that the fight against antisemitism is never just that, but rather requires confronting systems of oppression that thrive in anti-democratic, nativist, xenophobic, and white supremacist visions of the United States.

FOUNDATIONAL STORIES

The typical points of origin for the Golden Land story are the arrival of Jews in New Amsterdam in 1654 and the correspondence between President George Washington and early republic Jews in 1790. Each, ironically, exposes the shortcomings of the story itself.

Let’s start in 1654, when a band of Jews, expelled from Spanish-controlled Brazil, arrived in the colony of New Holland (later New York) seeking the right to settle. Peter Stuyvesant, the

governor of the Dutch colony, expressed fury at “such hateful enemies and blasphemers of the name of Christ” and wished to banish them. But these Jews successfully petitioned the officers of the Dutch West India Company, the colony’s holding company, to gain entrance. In correspondence with Stuyvesant, the company leaders carefully noted that the Jewish entrants had connections to Jewish shareholders who controlled a “large amount of capital” invested in the colonial venture, and, thus, the cost of expelling them was simply too steep. Still, with a nod to Stuyvesant’s indignation and fiscal concerns, the Dutch West India Company stipulated that Jews should expect no support or welfare from the colonial power.^[3]

How did such an episode — of anti-Jewish vitriol, of Jewish finance as the collateral for begrudging acceptance, and of Jewish segregation from social institutions — wind its way into a Golden Land story? The year 1654 came to serve as evidence of the longevity of Jewish life in the country, never mind the fleeting nature of the New Amsterdam Jewish settlement and the contested terms of Jews’ inclusion in it. In 1954, American Jewish leaders orchestrated a grand and public celebration of the tercentennial of Jewish life on American soil. That year, the famed Harvard immigration historian Oscar Handlin, a Jewish man whose parents had immigrated from the Russian empire, wrote one of the first truly synthetic histories of American Jews. Called *Adventures in Freedom*, the book explained that from the roots of the late-seventeenth century, “sprang the Jewish community that would, three centuries later, be the largest and most influential in the world.” One-by-one, his book hit the core themes of the Golden Land narrative: that the true America was one of opportunity and progress, that Jews entered it as just one “among the varieties of strangers,” and that American institutions were “altogether different from those of Europe.”^[4]

How did such an episode — of anti-Jewish vitriol, of Jewish finance as the collateral for begrudging acceptance, and of Jewish segregation from social institutions — wind its way into a Golden Land story?

Reinterpreting the agreement that restricted Jews from receiving any public assistance as a measure of Jewish pluck and self-reliance, historians and leaders of American Jewish communities often referred to the “Stuyvesant Promise” as a point of pride. Jews merited inclusion because they worked hard and did not drain social resources. But another way to understand the entire episode is that it reinforced exclusionary instruments so fundamental to European imperial expansion: Jews were only given entrance because they were useful to the financial backing of these endeavors — had they not been, they surely would have been expelled. On top of this, they had to pledge not to sap any resources from the primary goal of transforming the land into Dutch colonial property.

A second episode that would become iconic in the Golden Land story evinces similar strain upon examination. In 1790, the newly elected Washington set out on a victory tour, visiting civic and religious institutions across the country. Over the course of his travels, he stopped in Newport,

Rhode Island, a thriving port city and home to an affluent Jewish community and the Touro Synagogue. “For happily the Government of the United States, which gives to bigotry no sanction, to persecution no assistance requires only that they who live under its protection should demean themselves as good citizens, in giving it on all occasions their effectual support,” he wrote to the congregation after his visit.^[5]

The words — or more specifically their attribution to Washington — tell only a slice of a messy story. When Washington visited the city, he was handed a letter of congratulations written by the synagogue warden, a man named Moses Seixas. It was Seixas, not Washington, who penned the phrase, “to bigotry no sanction, to persecution no assistance.” Indeed, when read in their original context the words serve as a petition, an anxious plea, from Jews to the leader of the new country for tolerance and rights.

A few months before Washington’s tour, the young US Congress had passed the 1790 Naturalization Act granting citizenship to all “free white person[s].” Jews’ inclusion within these categories of legal personhood was hardly self-evident. In the first place, roughly half of all Jews, the women among them, did not pass the threshold. Just as critically, the federal edict had little bearing on states and localities that primarily controlled the practices of citizenship. Christian oaths for political service, laws limiting Jews’ economic rights, established churches, and more, all compromised Jews’ political rights well into the nineteenth century in many states. The designs of American citizenship—predicated on fundamental exclusions, marked by a patchwork of practices that privileged Christians, and susceptible to legal reinterpretations — proved that Jews could not take for granted the “invaluable rights of free Citizens.”^[6]

Only a decontextualized view of 1654 or 1790 could possibly arrive at these moments as origins for a Golden Land story. While that perspective may have had some use — for example, helping late-nineteenth or mid-twentieth-century American Jews show their patriotism and legitimate their belonging — it also eclipsed the entanglement of Jews’ status with that of other American colonial subjects, excluded persons, and uncertain citizens. The Golden Land story sacrificed complexity in the name of certainty, all the while betraying an undercurrent of Jewish anxiety about the terms of their belonging.

FROM PUBLIC DISCRIMINATION TO PRIVATE PREJUDICE

By describing antisemitism as removed from the structures of American politics and law — for example, by insisting that political leaders or citizenship laws simply did not see Jews, despite examples to the contrary — the Golden Land story did not deny antisemitism, but instead converted it from a public matter to a private one. Britt Tevis’s groundbreaking research on this transformation exposes an intentional project to privatize antisemitism that began in the late nineteenth century and flourished in mid-twentieth century Golden Land tellings of American Jewish history. As she explains, the effort to strip antisemitism of its legal and political meaning in the United States minimized its significance, while also cleaving it from other discriminatory practices and ideologies.^[7]

A case from 1877 involving the Bavarian-born banker Joseph Seligman illustrates how the Golden Land story converted antisemitism from a matter of public law to a private force. That year, Seligman and his family were refused accommodation at the Grand Union Hotel in Saratoga Springs, New York, where they had often vacationed. When pushed for an explanation, the manager told him that the hotel no longer welcomed Jewish guests. As the press reported, the hotel had likely violated New York state law and the federal Civil Rights Act of 1875. According to both jurisprudences, places of public accommodation, including hotels, were barred from excluding people based on race, color, or previous servitude.

With civil rights law on their side, Seligman's attorneys prepared a lawsuit, and the hotel mustered a defense. Unable to dispute that the hotel was a place of public accommodation, the defendant followed a Reconstruction-era playbook of disputing intent to discriminate. The argument would go that Seligman had been refused service because he was "undesirable" and not because of his membership in a protected category. The language of undesirability, familiar from segregationists' efforts to resist civil rights law, transformed an act of illegal discrimination into a permissible private preference.

As it happens, Seligman backed away from the lawsuit, worried, it seems, that the defense would be difficult to overcome and that a legal action would draw more attention to an unfortunate episode than simply swallowing it. Had the case proceeded, it might have offered some clarity about whether Congress—and judicial interpreters of the day—believed Jews fit within the parameters of the protected classes of "race or color." It also would have undercut the eventual historical packaging of Seligman's story, especially in the hands of the mid-twentieth century historian John Higham, as a consummate case of private or social antisemitism, removed from American law.^[8]

By recovering experiences like Seligman's as part of public contests about individual rights and group protections, we see once again the shortcomings of the Golden Land story that isolated antisemitism from its broader context. Already, the Saratoga hotel's Jim-Crow era legal defense of its exclusion of Jews reveals the connections between anti-Black discrimination and antisemitism. Less on the surface, but surely just as significant, Seligman's treatment also reflected the rising fever of American isolationism, budding eugenicist thought and scientific racism, and policies ideas that crisscrossed the Atlantic about how to root out so-called undesirables.^[9]

RUPTURE & REPAIR OF THE GOLDEN LAND STORY

In the 1930s and 1940s, as fascism rose in the United States and beyond, there appeared to be a moment of reflection, when some Jewish leaders and organizations seemed ready to question the Golden Land narrative. Open to solidarity with communist-aligned groups, including Jewish and Black ones, a materialist critique of American liberalism emerged that castigated its over-reliance on individual property rights at the expense of true equality. Without true economic reform, these voices urged, liberal democracy could never defeat fascism. A 1945

publication issued from the American Jewish Congress's recently formed Commission on Law and Social Action, averred "Racial and religious discrimination are only two fibers of the complex fabric of human injustice...and these fibers themselves are sometimes intimately interwoven with discrimination based on wealth or with resentment due to poverty."^[10]

By the 1950s, however, these voices fell out of step with the vital center of American and American-Jewish institutional life and with intensifying anti-communism that irreparably tarred organizations and individuals for advancing radicalism in the United States. Disciplined and bullied by anticommunism, Jewish organizations helped solidify the Golden Land story by maintaining that prejudice was an individual problem, a private matter, that could be cured through education, so that America could live up to its promise. Midcentury historians from Oscar Handlin to John Higham amplified this narrative, and for many Jews who experienced the psychological comfort and material rewards of American life, the Golden Land idea simply felt true.^[11]

Rising claims about the unimpeachable whiteness of Jews further recommended the Golden Land story. Despite evidence to the contrary, many Jewish groups such as the Anti-Defamation League (ADL) pushed the circular idea that because whiteness kept American Jews safe, antisemitism in the United States must come from the nonwhite world. In the guise of the "new antisemitism," a term that came into use in the 1960s, Jewish communal organizations, such as the ADL, and some historians simultaneously viewed antisemitism as emanating from outside of American power structures and yet as necessary to defeat in order to protect Jews and maintain social and national stability.

In an essay from 1967, the Black intellectual and novelist James Baldwin seemed to echo exactly what many Jewish leaders believed at the time: "Negroes are Anti-Semitic Because They're Anti-White." Yet unlike the Jewish representatives, Baldwin explained that the inverse of Jews' whiteness was not Black antisemitism. Rather, Jews' whiteness, like Black people's antisemitism, was symptomatic of white America's twinned racism and antisemitism. As a price for tolerance, he explained, Jews had converted to whiteness, almost as a quasi-religious act. To Baldwin, this represented the rule of "the old, rugged Roman cross" in the United States. Jews could not be accepted on their own terms, but rather were only acceptable insofar as they upheld the primacy of white Christendom.^[12]

Baldwin's message had no place in the Golden Land story, which continued to insist on the marginality of American antisemitism, not only because it did not occupy the space of power but also because it quite literally came from the most marginal places. In 1982, feminist Letty Cottin Pogrebin published what was hailed as a brave article in *Ms* magazine titled, "Anti-Semitism in the Women's Movement." She catalogued the discrimination she faced on two counts: her whiteness and her Zionism. She wrote, "I began to wonder why the Movement's healing embrace can encompass the black woman, the Chicana, the white ethnic woman, the disabled woman, and every other female whose struggle is complicated by an extra element of 'outness,' but the Jewish woman is not honored in her specificity?"^[13] Setting aside the fact that all of those groups (and also lesbian women, who did not make her list) would have told a different story, her point was that Jews had been so thoroughly engulfed as white that antisemitic

statements – which she catalogued as both attacking Jews for being white (like Baldwin) and attacking Jews for being Zionists – now served as acceptable criticism of hegemonic power.

One reason the “new antisemitism” narrative stuck was because it was hardly so new. Rather, it was an extension of the Golden Land narrative. It continued to hammer the specialness of America in its acceptance of Jews. It continued to sharply divide between anti-Black racism and antisemitism. And it continued to depict antisemitism as exogenous to American power, especially in its focus on anti-Zionism.

A NEW STORY?

If the end of the Golden Land story is upon us – as the journalist Franklin Foer and many others are wont to say – then this is an opportunity to reflect on what can be learned by escaping its grasp.

Only by removing the shackles of the Golden Land story can we understand the tangled plotlines of an American story of antisemitism and its warning of the vulnerability of the American experiment. Anti-democratic forces are inherent in American history and have long tied together the fates of many different Americans. Yet movements of hatred, exclusion, and discrimination thrive on undermining solidarity, making groups believe that they are alone in their struggles and their victories. Even as many Jews subscribed to the Golden Land story as an affirmation of their belonging to America, they also experienced it as a source of division from countless other Americans who have experienced the country’s deep imperfections.

Antisemitism is part of the story of American Jews and part of the story of the United States.

The Golden Land story made it possible to neglect these facts. It encouraged American Jews to approach antisemitism superficially, as the hackneyed exception that proved the rule of American goodness. Putting to rest the Golden Land story does not require embracing moral panics or scare tactics, which use an inverse yet similar logic to separate Jews from the fights for American justice and equality for all. For too long, the glittering glare of the Golden Land blinded Jews from seeing that only through connection and shared struggle can we live together in this tarnished world.

[1] Jonathan Sarna, “The Future of the Pittsburgh Synagogue Massacre,” *Tablet*, Nov 5, 2018, <https://www.tabletmag.com/jewish-news-and-politics/274291/future-pittsburgh-synagogue-massacre>.

[2] See Franklin Foer, “The Golden Age of American Jews Is Ending,” *The Atlantic*, April 2024, <https://www.theatlantic.com/magazine/archive/2024/04/us-anti-semitism-jewish-american-safety/677469/>. Predictions of the demise of Jewish life in the US are nothing new. For an insightful discussion on American-Jewish end-of-times prognosticating, see Naomi Seidman, “The End of the Story: And Other Adventures in American Jewish Apocalypse,” *Reshit: The Academic Journal of the Shalom Hartman Institute*, March 15, 2022, <https://www.hartman.org.il/the-end-of-the-story/>.

[3] Paul Mendes-Flohr and Jehuda Reinharz, *Jews in the Modern World: A Documentary History* (New York: Oxford University Press, 1995), 452-453. For an excellent analysis of this historical episode, see Eli Faber, “America’s Earliest Jewish Settlers, 1654-1820,” in Marc Lee Raphael, ed., *The Columbia History of Jews and Judaism in America* (New York: Columbia University Press, 2008).

[4] Oscar Handlin, *Adventures in Freedom: Three Hundred Years of Jewish Life in America* (New York: McGraw-Hill Book Company, Inc., 1954), 6-8, 11-14, 20-21.

[5] George Washington to the Hebrew Congregation in Newport, Rhode Island, August 18, 1790, National Archives, <https://founders.archives.gov/documents/Washington/05-06-02-0135>.

[6] For an excellent discussion of Washington's letter in the context of American citizenship, see John Dixon "Rethinking American Jewish Emancipation: New Views on George Washington's Newport Letter," *American Jewish History* 107, no. 4 (Oct 2023), 731-756.

[7] Britt Tevis, " 'Jews Not Admitted'": Anti-Semitism, Civil Rights, and Public Accommodation Laws," *Journal of American History* 107, no. 4 (March 2021): 847-870, <https://doi.org/10.1093/jahist/jaaa461>.

[8] John Higham, *Strangers in the Land: Patterns of American Nativism, 1860-1925* (New Brunswick, NJ: Rutgers University, 1955).

[9] James Whitman, *Hitler's American Model: The United States and the Making of Nazi Race Law* (Princeton, NJ: Princeton University Press, 2017).

[10] From Alexander Pekelis, "Full Equality in a Free Society," (1945), reprinted in Pekelis, *Law and Social Action* (Ithaca, NY: Cornell University Press, 1950).

[11] Rachel Gordan, "The Sin of American Jewish Exceptionalism," *AJS Review* 45, no. 2 (Nov 2021): 282-301, <https://doi.org/10.1017/S0364009421000088>.

[12] James Baldwin, "Negroes Are Anti-Semitic Because They're Anti-White," *New York Times*, April 9, 1967, <https://www.nytimes.com/1967/04/09/archives/negroes-are-antisemitic-because-theyre-antiwhite-why-negroes-are.html>.

[13] Letty Cottin Pogrebin, "Anti-Semitism in the Women's Movement," *Ms. Magazine*, June 1982, <https://jwa.org/media/anti-semitism-in-womens-movement-by-letty-cottin-pogrebin>.