Between Power and Peril: The Fracturing of Antisemitism

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The American Jewish community, long shaped by shared historical trauma and solidarity with Israel, now finds itself splintered — politically, generationally, and morally. Families can't talk across dinner tables. Synagogues and communal agencies are paralyzed by division. Legacy institutions, once obsessed with ensuring the next generation's Jewish identity, now attack young Jews as self-hating. Rabbis and thought leaders remain silent for fear of backlash.

The ongoing war in Gaza has intensified a raw, dangerous fracture: What constitutes antisemitism? Who defines it? And how does it intersect with Jewish power, justice, and identity?

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Beneath debates over terminology and geopolitics is a fraught psychological faultline. How do we reconcile being a historically persecuted people with possessing real political, military, financial, and cultural power? At the heart of this lies what I call **Architectures of Safety**: the generationally distinct psychological frameworks that Jews have developed in response to threat and promise of danger, acceptance, and belonging. These architectures shape how we experience threat, how we define antisemitism, and how we judge one another.

But what one generation feels in its bones, another sees as projection. What one calls loyalty, another sees as complicity. What one calls self-defense, another sees as moral evasion. This divergence underpins much of today's polarization around what so recently united all Jews: the threat of antisemitism.

American Jews today live with unprecedented influence, yet the psychological architecture of Jewish identity still leans heavily on the trauma of the past. The Holocaust looms large; pogroms and expulsion shape our collective memory. This creates a deep-seated ambivalence: to critique Jewish power — especially Israel's power — is felt by many as a betrayal of the memory of Jews murdered and as a dangerous form of antisemitism. It evokes not only fear, but shame.

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Among many Jews over 60, a post-Holocaust framework emerged in which Jewish exceptionalism is rooted not in the wisdom and practice of Torah, but in the moral wound of abandonment and the terror of powerlessness. The founding of Israel was not just political necessity — it was redemptive. "Never again" became more than a slogan; it was a psychic contract. Jewish safety would never depend on the mercy of the world. We internalized the belief that no nation — not even the United States — retains the moral standing to question how Jews defend themselves. Jewish safety, as embodied in the State of Israel, trumps all other rules—be they international law or Jewish ethics — and any criticism of Israel that creates any ambivalence is defined as antisemitism.

My father z"l, the kindest man I ever knew, fled Poland as a nine-year-old boy in 1938 with only his parents and younger brother, never to see his extended family again. Often, in overt and more hidden ways, I could feel his pain. I viscerally understand how this architecture of safety offered coherence and dignity in a post-Holocaust world. But over time, this narrative has metastasized. Jewish suffering has come to confer moral exemption and the term "antisemitism" has been weaponized to shield Israel—and ourselves — from accountability. The architecture is not sheltering or serving us.

Thus, any critique of Israel's conduct, especially in wartime, is often cast as antisemitism — not because it is, but because it ruptures the psychic contract formed after the Holocaust that Jewish safety must remain above scrutiny. Our collective trauma has become a shield against ethical reflection.

THE VICTIM-POWER PARADOX

From a psycho-spiritual perspective, this defense mechanism resembles a dangerous split: We disavow complexity, dividing the Jewish self into good victim and righteous protector. The image of the vulnerable Jew becomes sacrosanct — unavailable for revision — while the reality of Jewish power becomes repressed, denied, or justified without ethical scrutiny. In different ways, for both the left and the right, the parts of our Jewish self that remember helplessness and horror and the parts that now wield power and influence are kept hermetically sealed from each other. To bridge that gap — to say the IDF can protect and slaughter, that the Jewish state can be both safe refuge and oppressive occupier, or that billionaires can be philanthropic and exploitative — is experienced as an intolerable threat to our very identity.

This victim-power paradox becomes tragically recursive. Our historical trauma rightly demands vigilance, but when trauma becomes the primary lens through which power is understood, it disables our moral clarity. It turns critique into heresy and dissent into threat. In this state, as in all forms of splitting, no integration is possible. We become only victims — or only villains. Palestinians become only perpetrators — or only innocents. The world divides us into unconditional supporters or antisemites.

This paradox plays out across generations as trans-generational trauma — the unconscious transmission of unprocessed traumatic experience — has imprinted itself onto the psychic architecture of post-Holocaust Jewish identity. Each generation of Jews has inherited and adapted to trauma differently, constructing divergent architectures of safety for interpreting threat and defining antisemitism.

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For Holocaust survivors and their children, antisemitism is embodied memory. Their nervous systems were shaped by real or inherited terror. Safety is always provisional. Threat can appear at any moment. Vigilance is survival. For this group, Israel's military strength and American Jewish solidarity are not political positions — they are physical, psychological, and spiritual necessities. Criticism of Israel, especially its use of force, reactivates the fear of abandonment and threat of annihilation and therefore is labeled with such ferocity as antisemitism.

My generation, the Baby Boomers, came of age in an era of both civil rights and Jewish upward mobility. Our architecture of safety is structured around achievement, respectability, and the defense of hard-earned legitimacy. We were welcomed into elite institutions but carried inherited anxiety that Jewish success was real but its permanence uncertain. We built Jewish

organizations not only to preserve Jewish identity, but to consolidate power and protection. For us, antisemitism, when we experienced it, was personally and perhaps socially uncomfortable but never an existential threat.

Generation X experienced antisemitism as history more than reality. Their safety architecture reflects basic trust, or the unconscious belief that the world is fundamentally safe. For them, antisemitism is real but manageable — something addressed with education, not alarm.

Younger generations, shaped by digital life and intersectional frameworks, view Jewishness as one identity among many. Fluent in the language of privilege, systems of oppression, and solidarity across difference, they understand antisemitism as a form of bigotry — important but not exceptional. They evaluate Israeli policy using the same standards applied to other democracies and their support for Israel is often conditional, not tribal. For this generation, conflating anti-Zionism or pro-Palestinian protests with antisemitism feels manipulative and politically expedient.

These divergent architectures explain why conversations about antisemitism so often collapse into rage or disbelief. What one generation calls protection, another hears as repression. What one calls loyalty, the other sees as complicity. What one experiences as existential, another views as exaggerated. The very definition of antisemitism becomes a battleground — not because Jews no longer care, but because we no longer share a single psychic grammar for understanding what constitutes threat. Unless we name these frameworks, we will continue to mis-recognize each other and to experience growing rupture — ironically making us all collectively less safe.

THE UNBEARABLE TENSION

Not surprisingly, the war in Gaza has become the site of collision for our different architectures of safety. It shattered the fragile consensus that held American Jewry together post-1967 — a consensus that allowed Jews to wield power while maintaining a self-image of vulnerability.

The paradox — of institutional strength paired with psychic fragility — was always precarious. But Gaza exposed its limits. When Jewish donors threaten universities, dox students, or demand Congressional hearings on antisemitism, it becomes impossible to deny the extent of Jewish influence. When tens of thousands of innocent women and children are killed by the Israeli army, when making Gaza unlivable and imposing hunger is a strategic policy, calling Jewish victimhood is unsustainable. At the same time, the horrifying images from October 7th and the angry protests on college campuses and the streets of major cities against Israel activated trauma in older Jews and produced the familiar fusion of helplessness and hyper-defensiveness.

This duality — of immense power and deep vulnerability — creates emotional whiplash. We feel persecuted and omnipotent at the same time. Gaza made visible what we could no longer compartmentalize: that Jewish safety can no longer be maintained through silence or control.

In this emotionally volatile context, accusations of antisemitism have become strategic tools. The term has been stretched, blurred, and manipulated to deflect criticism and consolidate control. Politicians, advocacy organizations, and media platforms invoke antisemitism selectively — not in response to systemic threats, but to discipline civil society, intimidate activists, and silence critics of Israeli policy. The IHRA definition of antisemitism, wrapped in the language of "safety" and "solidarity," has eroded the very liberal norms it claims to defend: academic freedom, open discourse, and democratic pluralism. The IHRA definition, which has been adopted by many institutions and which Congress itself is still pushed to adopt, has been used not to protect Jews from hate but to silence dissent . Campus events are canceled. Faculty are threatened. Donors withdraw funds. All in the name of Jewish safety — but often at the cost of democratic norms.

This is not to say that there are not elements within the progressive community that if not full fledged antisemites have traded in dangerous antisemitic tropes. And to be clear: antisemitism is rising. Violent attacks, conspiracy theories, and white supremacist rhetoric are real threats. But conflating criticism of Israel with antisemitism dilutes the term and hollows out its moral weight.

Psychologically, this is a form of *projective identification*. The unbearable tension of complicity is split off and projected onto the critic, who is labeled antisemitic. This allows our Jewish self to remain innocent, righteous, and above scrutiny while turning complex, nuanced conversations into loyalty tests and binary struggles of good versus evil. This defense against shame is what psychoanalyst Jessica Benjamin might call the "refusal of mutual recognition" — the inability to acknowledge the other's pain without collapsing one's own moral self-image.

But this defense against shame comes at a price. It erodes trust. It alienates younger Jews. It transforms antisemitism from a shared concern into a partisan weapon. And it betrays the Jewish ethical tradition — a tradition rooted in argument, accountability, and self-examination.

On a deeper level, the invocation of antisemitism to attack liberal institutions also reveals a kind of unconscious identification with authoritarian power. Where once antisemitism was used to exclude Jews from the liberal order, now it is used by some Jews to police that very order — ironically replicating the dynamics of silencing and marginalization that Jewish history so powerfully resists. In this way, the weaponization of antisemitism becomes not only a betrayal of democratic norms but a repetition of trauma, where we, the once-excluded, become the excluding force.

The result is a legitimacy crisis: antisemitism, once a unifying cause, has become a terrain of contestation, where identity, historical trauma, and political ideology collide.

What are we trying to protect ourselves from with this architecture, this understanding, of antisemitism? Genuine hate? Or the discomfort of facing Jewish moral entanglement with the exercise of power, violence, and exclusion?

COLLAPSE OF CONSENSUS

The post-Holocaust consensus — rooted in shared trauma, Zionist pride, and institutional integration — is no longer tenable. This consensus depended on unconscious agreements that Gaza has made impossible to maintain: that Israeli actions are always defensive; that the deaths of thousands of innocent Palestinians is Hamas's fault; that criticism of Israel reflects antisemitic motivation; that Jewish vulnerability trumps Palestinian suffering; and that the community does not need to examine the full extent of Jewish institutional power.

This consensus has collapsed, not because we care less about being Jewish, but because we care in increasingly different ways. A new generation, shaped more by privilege than persecution, by intersectionality more than insularity, is reshaping Jewish identity. And in doing so, they are also redefining antisemitism.

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Older generations often respond to this challenge with psychological defenses: denial of moral injury, doubling down on threat perception, or reframing Palestinian suffering as Hamas manipulation. Critics of Israel are labeled antisemitic not because they hate Jews, but because they disrupt the inherited architecture of Jewish survival.

Many younger Jews, by contrast, rely on reality-testing. They assess Israel by the same standards they apply to other democracies. When those standards are unmet, they experience moral injury — a rupture between Jewish values and Jewish actions. And when their protest is labeled antisemitic, it damages not only trust but Jewish identity itself.

We are not witnessing a semantic or political disagreement but a collapse of a once-dominant architecture of safety. The current crisis around antisemitism is a failure to build a shared psychic shelter — collective spaces where different architectures of safety can coexist, be recognized, and evolve. Without a new architecture of safety — one that honors both trauma and transformation, loyalty and dissent — we risk greater fragmentation and moral confusion. As debates over antisemitism intensify, they expose not just political differences but deep psychological wounds: unintegrated traumas, moral disorientation, the desperate need to belong, nightmares of powerlessness and fantasies of power.

We must recognize that our conflicts are not just ideological — they are about survival strategies. We are not merely arguing about terms. We are speaking from profoundly different architectures of safety.

The task now is not to force consensus — whether around antisemitism or Israel — but to create containment — to hold space for multiple truths. A future-oriented American Jewish politics must be emotionally mature, morally courageous, and psychically flexible. We must cultivate spaces where dissent is not betrayal, trauma is not weaponized, and power is not above moral scrutiny.

Antisemitism cannot be fought effectively if it is distorted for tribal gain or wielded to shut down necessary critique. We need to name antisemitism where it exists, resist it where it threatens, and refuse to let it be used to silence ethical clarity.

The question we now face — the question beneath all others — is this: What kind of people will we be at the nexus of our nightmares of powerlessness and our fantasies of power, of the perils of our recent past and the promise of no longer being only survivors?