

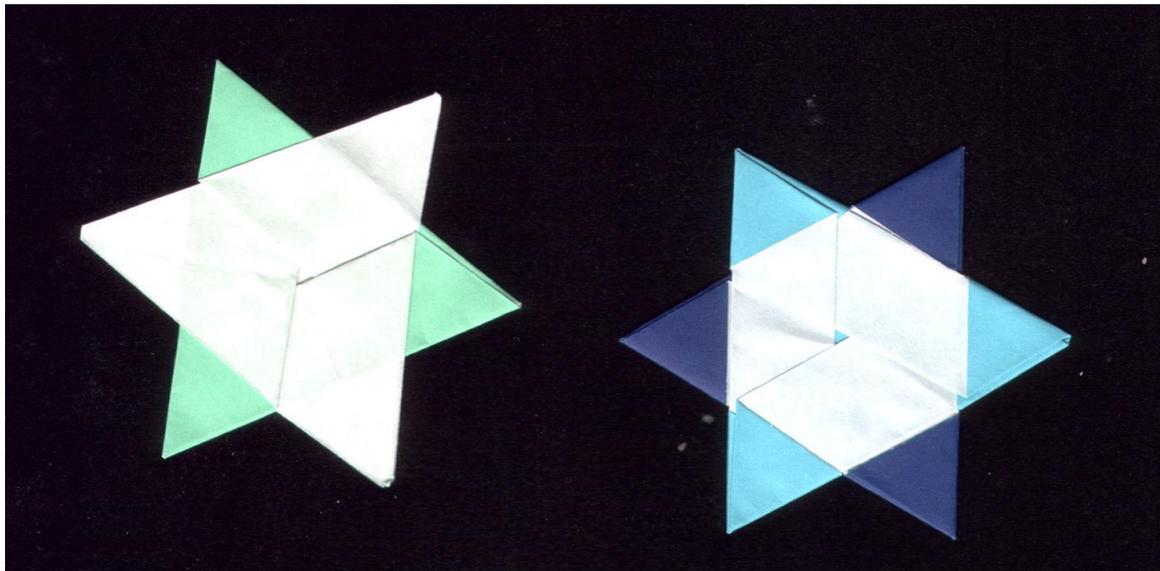
# Why Philo-Semitism is Better Than Anti-Semitism

Why people who like Jews, even for the wrong reasons, are usually better than those who don't



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Some time back, I wrote an op-ed for the *Washington Post* explaining my unified theory of Donald Trump's relationship to the Jews. The purpose was to answer a simple yet confusing question: How can a man who has Jewish family, friends, and business associates, and who proudly proclaims his support for Israel, nonetheless regularly say anti-Semitic things?

In short, my explanation was that Trump accepts anti-Semitic stereotypes about Jews (they're greedy, good with money, control lots of stuff, only look out for their own, etc.), but that he views these things as positive. "He is the human embodiment," I wrote, "of the Onion article 'Affable anti-Semite Thinks The

Jews Are Doing Super Job With The Media.” I situated this thinking in a broader context of historical “philo-Semitism”—people who believe traditionally anti-Semitic stereotypes about Jews, but take them as compliments and seek to befriend or emulate Jews as a result. In my piece, I explained how this sort of outlook can unfortunately be easily manipulated and used to turn people against Jews, and offered the example of South Korea, where philo-Semitic assumptions about Jews were used to galvanize the public against a Jewish businessman.

What I did not suggest in the article, however, is that philo-Semitism is the same thing as anti-Semitism. In fact, I was careful to say that it was better than the alternative. But nonetheless, thanks to the success and spread of the op-ed, I have seen commentators on both the right and left mistakenly suggest that its upshot is that philo-Semitism is simply another form of anti-Semitism, and that adherents of both should therefore be treated the same way. This is not what I believe and would actually be quite harmful in practice. I want to explain why.

1) It is a simplification to suggest that “philo-Semitism = anti-Semitism.” There are actually different types of philo-Semitism. There’s bad philo-Semitism that’s based on ignorance which typically regurgitates anti-Semitic stereotypes in a positive way, and then there’s good philo-Semitism based on actual knowledge of Jewish people and Judaism and the affinity that comes from that familiarity. Knowledge-based philo-Semitism is a wonderful thing and has produced true friends of the Jewish people! We should be striving to turn the former *into* the latter, whenever possible. (It is not always possible, as with ineducable individuals like the current president.)

2) Precisely because such conversion and growth is possible, even ignorance-rooted philo-Semitism is better than the negative alternative of anti-Semitism, as I noted in my piece. Not only are these philo-Semites not actively assailing Jews like negative anti-Semites, but their affinity for Jews—however shallow—provides an opening for dialogue that can enable them to listen to Jews and build new, stronger relationships based on knowledge. Traditional anti-Semites, by contrast, are closed to such appeals. When it comes to philo-Semitism,

recognizing who you are dealing with is essential to knowing how you should react.

I felt all these points were implicit in the original piece (and if you read it carefully, I think you can see me gesturing to them), but I've seen some readers take my argument to more simplistic conclusions that I did not intend, and then cast all philo-Semites as bad people, which I consider to be both inaccurate and counterproductive to the cause. In my public talks and personal conversations about this issue, I've been quite explicit about these distinctions and why they matter, and I figured it would be valuable to put them out there on the internet for others to reference.

*Post-script:* If you're interested in the sort of relationships people can build to overcome racial and religious prejudice, you might enjoy my interview and profile of Pittsburgh Steeler Zach Banner, who has spent the last months standing up against both.

*(Image via Flickr/Orit Yahel)*

*Source:* <https://yair.substack.com/p/why-philo-semitism-is-better-than>