

THE FALSE COMFORT OF TRUMP'S CONDEMNATION OF ANTI-SEMITISM

By Jill Jacobs*
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President Trump's condemnation of anti-Semitism and nod to the Holocaust in Tuesday night's State of the Union address drew rapid praise from some corners of the Jewish community. The American Jewish Committee tweeted, "Thank you @POTUS for your strong condemnation of anti-Semitism and commitment to protecting the Jewish people and the State of Israel." David Suissa, editor of the Los Angeles Jewish Journal, complained about a Jewish group not offering "one word of recognition about the president's passionate mention of Jewish suffering and the need to fight the disease of Jew hatred."

But Jewish history offers a cautionary tale to those who take Trump's rhetoric at face value. His approach to the problem reflected the same blinders that have marred his administration's response to anti-Semitism all along. And the likely effect of his speech will simply be to drive a wedge between American Jews and other communities — not to silence the white supremacists whom we know have already been emboldened by his time in office.

Throughout history, Jews have constantly had to navigate between those in power and those in economic straits. We were often forced into this position, denied full citizenship and confined to certain professions — like moneylending, tax collection and liquor sales. From Pharaoh sending Joseph to negotiate with the Egyptian masses during a seven-year famine to 17th-century Polish landlords employing Jews as their agents, rulers everywhere have been more than happy to use Jews as shields and scapegoats. Jews, for our part, have often responded to our precarious position by creating what historian Yosef Yerushalmi dubbed "royal alliances," the belief — even in the face of evidence to the contrary — that those in power will protect us against the whims of the masses.

Like too many political leaders throughout history, Trump has been all too willing to take advantage of this dynamic. He gratifies evangelical Christians and their apocalyptic vision by moving the U.S. Embassy in Israel to Jerusalem, even though this symbolic gesture is opposed by the majority of American Jews and does nothing to advance a peace agreement between Israelis and Palestinians. He congratulates himself for keeping Israel safe by canceling the Iran nuclear deal, even though most of the Israeli security establishment, as well as most American Jews, believed that this agreement was the best way to keep Iran from carrying out its leaders' destructive fantasies against Israel.

At the same time as Trump boasts of his support for Israel and the Jewish community, he dog-whistles to anti-Semitic white nationalists, for example with his final 2016 campaign commercial identifying three wealthy Jews (George Soros, Janet L. Yellen and Lloyd Blankfein) as responsible for the decline of the American working class. It's no coincidence that a recent Anti-Defamation League report ties all instances of extremist murders last year — including, of course, the terrorist attack that left 11 Jews dead in a synagogue — to right-wing extremists. Like kings and czars before him, Trump pretends to protect the Jewish community and deflects blame for any anti-Semitic attacks onto the masses. (As he did after Pittsburgh, when he tweeted that there was "great anger in our Country caused in part by inaccurate, and even fraudulent, reporting of the news.")

Trump is hardly the only member of his party to force Jews into the classic middleman role. This week, Sen. Marco Rubio (R-Fla.) pushed the Senate to pass a bill that includes a provision aimed at indemnifying states that pass laws prohibiting hiring contractors — even individuals — who participate in boycotts of Israel or of the occupied territories. This bill, which threatens a basic First Amendment right, will have no positive economic impact on Israel and serves only to turn the Jewish state into a wedge issue. The apparent goal was to force Democrats either to vote against a bill that Republicans characterized as “pro-Israel,” or sacrifice the right to free speech critical to American democracy. (Rubio claimed he was trying to fight “discrimination” against Israel.) Supporting this bill would also demand that Democrats abandon decades of U.S. policy that favors a two-state solution, and therefore distinguishes between the internationally recognized borders of Israel and the occupied territories. The losers? The Jewish community, who will surely be perceived as the drivers of the legislation, even though most of us support the long-term existence of the State of Israel side by side with a Palestinian State, oppose the occupation and believe strongly in First Amendment rights — even if we don’t personally boycott Israel.

In a 1968 essay (which later became a book), Rabbi Robert Marx described Jews as “interstitial” — a people caught between the power structures and the masses. He wrote: “What is significant here is how often the Jewish community responded to the forces that were structuring it in a negatively interstitial role, not by fighting those forces, but by cooperating with them ... All too often, Jews allowed their spokesman to be those who would be most tractable and responsive to the interests of the non-Jewish power structure.” Those who celebrate Trump and Rubio’s symbolic nods to the Jewish community, while ignoring economic and social policies that will harm Americans overall, fall squarely into this trap.

The irony of Trump’s cynical nod to anti-Semitism and the Holocaust is that the community targeted by the Pittsburgh terrorist rejected his xenophobic policies, which mirror the discourse that closed America’s doors to Jewish refugees before and during the Holocaust. Like most Jews in the United States, the members of the Tree of Life synagogue recognized that the white nationalist ideology now stirring up fear about an influx of Latin American immigrants is the same one that prompted an anti-immigrant spokeswoman in the 1940s to warn of “200,000 Communist Jews at the Mexican border waiting to get into this country. If they are admitted, they will rape every woman and child that is left unprotected.”

The terrorist who carried out the Pittsburgh attacks chose a synagogue that was celebrating “Refugee Shabbat,” in partnership with HIAS, a Jewish agency which has been resettling Jewish and non-Jewish refugees here for more than 100 years. His ideology reflects the core anti-Semitic theory that holds that Jews have secretly pulled the strings of every revolutionary movement through history — from the Bolshevik Revolution to civil rights Movement to today’s support for immigrants and refugees. At the same time, his complaint that Trump is surrounded by Jews (though he used a derogatory term) echoed a different anti-Semitic trope that identifies Jews with dominant power structures.

These are indeed dangerous times for Jews, who have always been most vulnerable during moments of economic and social instability. But our protection won’t come through royal alliances, which have been proven time and time again to be insufficient. Only working with other communities to ensure the safety of all people can protect us. Throughout history, Jews have always found the most safety under governments that protect individual liberties, in societies organized around civic, not racial or ethnic, national identities. While nineteenth-century political liberalism led to the emancipation of Jews across Western and Central Europe, 20th-century autocracy culminated in genocide.

Jews, like all communities, certainly have the right to advocate for our own needs. But we should be suspicious when those in power make a show of elevating these priorities — or supposed priorities — above those of other communities. When Trump condemns anti-Semitism in a speech dripping with xenophobia, that signals a separation between Jews and other minority communities. This hinders our common long-term interest in combating white nationalism and building a society committed to the human rights of all people. As April Rosenblum argued in an influential zine on anti-Semitism and the left, “we are continuously made vulnerable to violence and used as the ‘pressure valve’ whenever oppression grows worse for other groups. We can’t escape the cycle of our oppression as long as systems of inequality run the world.”

Trump and his allies are only too happy to force American Jews back into the historic interstitial role, in which we accommodate ourselves to those in power in the hopes of gaining temporary protection. We must not confuse these maneuverings with actual concern for the Jewish people, which would require undoing the white nationalist ideologies that allow anti-Semitism — and xenophobia and racism — to flourish.

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