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## Jewish American Students: Looking Back to Move Forward

Barbara Perlman

*As Jewish students enter college campuses in large numbers, it is crucial that student affairs educators understand their history as a means of best serving this population and combating anti-Semitism. In realizing the dualistic nature of Judaism as a religion and ethnicity, this paper examines the history of anti-Semitism experienced by Jewish American both abroad and nationally, particularly in institutions of higher learning. Additionally, anti-Semitism and Jewish life on campuses today is discussed as a means of assessing institutional support.*

Widely recognized for their love of higher learning, Jewish students have been present on college campuses since their immigration to the United States. Over 85% of traditional college-aged Jews are attending institutions of higher education today, which amounts to approximately 400,000 students (Hillel: The Foundation for Jewish Campus Life, 2012). Understanding, supporting, and considering Jewish American students is imperative in maintaining and enacting a mission of diversity, inclusion, and justice. While the Jewish population has long been applauded as a beacon of minority success in the United States, the discrimination and anti-Semitism that it has faced both abroad and nationally is sobering.

While many may see such issues of anti-Semitism as antiquated history, the discrimination and hate that many Jewish people still experience today is both legitimate and pervasive. As a result, it is crucial that student affairs educators know how to best serve both the Jewish community and general student population in order to best protect, educate, and serve these students. The Jewish community is complex with religion, ethnicity, and culture all seamlessly and intrinsically intertwined. Greatly impacted by their past, Jewish students today are raised in a unique setting guided by both history and modernity. By examining their long history of persecution, genocide, and exclusion, one will be better versed in how to best serve current Jewish students.

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## Coming to the United States, the 20th Century Russian and European Jew

In an ever-evolving world where each passing year looks vastly different from the last, it is crucial to look to the past as a means of understanding how to move forward. Retrospection is crucial in appreciating the behaviors of any group of people and in learning how to best serve, support, and work within a given population. Consequently, no current view of today's Jewish American is complete without delving into the past century of the rich, yet tragic, history of the Jewish people. The journeys of the grandparents and great-grandparents of the modern American Jew are pivotal in understanding collective psyche and behavior. Indeed, the past century of Jewish history, from Eastern Europe to the Middle East to Ellis Island has been marked by perseverance, irreconcilable hatred, and *chutzpah*, or audacious nerve and strength.

Beginning as early as 1654, "Jewish migration [to the United States] has been continual, ebbing and rising in response to economic factors and the persecution of Jews in various parts of the world" (Vander Zanden, 1983, p. 267). The origins of American Jews directly correlate with hatred abroad as early groups of Jewish settlers originated from Spain and Portugal, while the 1800s ushered in "a great migration of Jews from Eastern Europe [and] Russia" (Vander Zanden, 1983, p. 267). While anti-Semitism, has long followed the Jewish people and incited mass immigration to United States, this section will focus on the Jews of Russia and Europe before and during their entry to the United States as they are the ancestors of the majority of Jewish Americans today.

### *Pogroms, Concentration Camps, and the Mass European Exodus*

Tales of scapegoating, mass murder, and alienation comprised much of the Jewish experience in both Russia and Europe. In Russia, Jews were targeted as a means of protecting the political regime. Takaki (2008) recounts the observation of an immigrant during the 1880s, Abraham Cahan: "by making the Jews the scapegoats, it had confused the common people so that in the end the peasants were certain that the Jews and not the Czar were the cause of their troubles," (p. 262). Government officials frequently enacted acts of violence against Jews, known as *pogroms* (Takaki, 2008). These Russian Jews were herded together in Jewish villages called *shtetls* in what was known as the Pale of Settlement, separated from the rest of society by special borders.

Anti-Semitic violence was also commonplace. One Russian Jew recalled, "I feel that every cobblestone in Russia is filled with Jewish blood" (Takaki, 2008, p. 263). Another Russian immigrant described how "absolutely every year, there was a pogrom before *Pesach* [Passover]. In big cities during the pogroms, they used any reason to get rid of you. As many Jews as they could kill, they did"

(Takaki, 2008, p. 263). Jewish families feared the destruction of their homes, businesses, synagogues, and families at the hands of such massacres every day. As Europe provided little sanctuary from the pervasive anti-Semitic sentiment, many Russian Jews saw the United States as a land of promise and freedom from violence.

European Jews had many similar experiences of anti-Semitic persecution, particularly during World War II at the hands of Hitler's "final solution" – the "ultimate pogrom" (Takaki, 2008, p. 375). Starting in Germany and spreading throughout Europe, Jews were forced to mark their businesses and clothing with a yellow Star of David emblazoned with the word "*Jude*" (Jew). Literally branded as "the other" in Europe, Jews were identified as responsible for many of the failings of a post-World War I Europe. Hitler's Europe had its own version of Jewish settlements and shtetles in their ghettos and concentration camps. Conceived as a streamlined, systematic method of executing vast amounts of Jews, the camps were sites of unfathomable torture. The Nazi "extermination effort – the methodical and complex apparatus of trains, barracks, factories, gas chambers, and crematoria" are forever etched in the collective memories of the Jews throughout the world (Takaki, 2008, p. 375).

At the peak of Hitler's regime, the gas chambers at Auschwitz were murdering approximately 12,000 people each day. In the end, at least six million Jews had been murdered, "killed [only] because they were Jews" (Takaki, 2008, p. 378). Nonetheless, despite abundant proof of genocide, the United States government was reluctant to aid those suffering abroad. Popular opinion suggested that the American public did not want to admit Jewish refugees into the United States, so boats teeming with European Jews were sent back, to a grim end. This deafening silence was a tragic outcome, as the United States, the land of the free, turned its collective back on a people being slaughtered out of hatred.

While this Russian and European history is not necessarily indicative of the American Jewish experience, the memory of such blinding anti-Semitism, the fear of being a Jew, and the incessant desire to remain in highly concentrated Jewish regions are very much present in the Jewish American community. The history of the Jewish immigrant, combined with the experiences of the Jew on the shores of the United States, comprises a very distinct picture. Indeed, Jewish Americans today are the very products of their tragic history marked by perseverance.

#### Anti-Semitism in United States and Its Impact on Higher Education

Shrewd, mercenary, intelligent, ambitious, aggressive, sly, intruder – all are adjectives ascribed to Jewish people (Vander Zanden, 1983). Since the first known

Jewish immigrants arrived in New Amsterdam, anti-Semitism has been prevalent. Deep-rooted stereotypes seen frequently in the media were commonplace. The addition of print media in the late 19th century increased the spread of anti-Semitism as “popular literature, dime novels, the graphic weeklies, and drama exploited this theme” (Dobkowski, 1977, p. 171). Images of Jewish people in American society:

lent credence to the view that Jews participate whenever they can in antisocial activities, that they are predisposed to find ways of making money even illegally, that they undermine the American work ethic, that they do not engage in the legitimate pursuit of wealth but are involved instead...in clandestine endeavors masked by the mysterious subterranean society of Baxter Street and Broadway [in New York]. (Dobkowski, 1977, p. 171)

Intense hatred of Jewish Americans has remained pervasive throughout history. Even the most highly regarded and educated leaders throughout the country participated in Jewish stereotyping. By the 1920s, testimony given to the House Immigration Committee by State Department officials claimed that “America was threatened by an inundation of ‘abnormally twisted’ and ‘unassimilable’ Jews – ‘filthy, un-American, and often dangerous in their habits’” (Karabel, 2005, p. 85). Many asserted that Jews are of a distinct racial group. With descriptors of the Jewish “race” as “short to medium stature; black hair; a long, hooked nose; greasy skin; a dark complexion; and a tendency for the women to be somewhat hefty,” the portrait of the American Jew was painted as both undesirable and inferior (Vander Zanden, 1983, p. 41).

Seen as undesirable and unequal, American Jews were frequently denied access to jobs, housing, and education. By the 1950s, clear barriers in employment access were created – out of 40,000 jobs identified through Chicago employment agencies, 22% restricted Jewish applicants. Similarly, of 5,500 firms assessed, over 27% restricted Jews, and advertised “we’re desperate, but not desperate enough to hire Jews” (Vander Zanden, 1983, p. 268). Similarly, it was common practice in real estate for brokers to warn “when anyone telephones us in answer to an ad in any newspaper and their name is, or appears to be, Jewish, do not meet them anywhere” (Vander Zanden, 1983, p. 269). While distaste and disdain towards Jewish Americans was truly widespread, perhaps the clearest examples of anti-Semitism in the country were found in the epicenters of original thought and education – the nation’s colleges and universities.

### *The Jewish Question*

Common belief holds that Jewish people as a whole place a great emphasis on

education, and that “Jews have made a remarkable success of themselves in the United States, rising from rags to riches” because of this passion (Gorelick, 1981, p. 3). While there is certainly truth to this, most Jews did not simply leap from poverty to the comforts of the middle class by going to college. Instead, work in skilled professions and unions precipitated this rise in Jewish higher education once families had the means to support their children in further education (Takaki, 2008). There certainly was a distinct commitment to education within the Jewish community. One Jewish newspaper editorialized, “the Jew undergoes privation, spills blood, to educate his child. In [this,] is reflected one of the finest qualities of the Jewish people...[and demonstrates] our love for education, for intellectual efforts” (Takaki, 2008, p. 285). Seemingly at once, Jewish students began flooding the halls of the nation’s colleges and universities, many of which were historically White Anglo-Saxon Protestant. By 1916, 44% of enrollment at Hunter College and 73% of enrollment at City College were comprised of Jewish students, and by 1920, 20% of the student population at Harvard University was Jewish (Takaki, 2008).

The addition of a minority outsider to the landscape of higher education, particularly in the most highly regarded institutions, caused major backlash. One Harvard alumnus of the era put the popular sentiment best:

There were Jews to the right of me, Jews to the left of me, in fact they were so obviously everywhere that instead of leaving the Yard with pleasant memories of the past I left with a feeling of utter disgust of the present and grave doubts about the future of my Alma Mater...Are the Overseers so lacking in genius that they can’t devise a way to bring Harvard back to the position it always held as a ‘white man’s’ college? (Karavel, 2005, p. 105)

Disdain of Jewish students was common in the student population on campus as well. In 1917 at Rutgers University, a student mob attacked Jewish students, accusing them of dominating the scholarships and highest honors, and declaring “we don’t want you Jews here” (Greenberg & Zenchelsky, 1993, p. 301). While there were Jewish supporters at many institutions, such perspectives comprised the widespread majority, and caused many to seriously consider how to solve this “Jewish question” and reclaim the university for the “preferred” student.

In reference to the “Jewish problem,” the leadership at many Ivy League institutions saw the ideal student, the “White Anglo-Saxon Protestant elite,” abandoning any given college as a result of the influx of Jewish students (Karavel, 2005, p. 86). As a result, many Ivy League institutions set out to amend their admissions policies to solve the Jewish question by instating quotas on Jewish students to curtail their enrollment. To support their anti-Semitic bias, the leaders of

these institutions pointed to skewed data to further prove the inadequacy of Jewish students and the need to limit their numbers. President Lowell of Harvard University cited statistics on offenses perpetrated by students, finding that Jewish students were more likely to be found guilty of “offenses invoking dishonesty” (Karabel, 2005, p. 97). Lowell also spoke of the fact that Jewish students participated in athletics and extra-curricular activities at a much lower rate (Karabel, 2005). However, much of this imbalance was due to Jewish students being actively excluded, as well as being a largely commuter population, not because of complacency (Karabel, 2005).

Due to its location in New York City and its consequent proximity to large pockets of Jewish immigrants, Columbia University was the first of the most elite institutions to feel pressure to shrink the number of Jewish students (Karabel, 2005). To lessen the “number of ill-prepared and uncultured Jews who were trying to gain admission,” Columbia created the very first Office of Admissions in “direct response to the ‘Jewish problem’” (Karabel, 2005, p. 129). This new office focused on much more subjective criteria like character and leadership, and strategically admitted and rejected students based on factors other than academic merit. Thus, Columbia became the first institution to establish major changes in how universities admit students: “The establishment of an office of admissions, the use of nonacademic criteria..., the imposition on a limitation of numbers, and finally the employment of an outright quota” (Karabel, 2005, p. 130).

At Harvard, in order to differentiate a Jewish applicant from a non-Jewish one, President Lowell implemented a series of identifying application questions (Karabel, 2005). Beginning in 1922, applicants were required to answer such questions as “race and color, religious preference, maiden name of mother, birthplace of father, and what change, if any has been made since birth in your own name or that of your father?” (Karabel, 2005, p. 94). Additionally, to prevent any Jewish students from passing through undetected, the principal or headmaster of the students’ high school was required to fill out a short informational recommendation form. As a result, the holistic application process utilized today throughout the United States was established.

Princeton University took this a step further, by advancing admissions practice towards what it is today. As a means of admitting “men of broader qualifications,” Princeton created the position of a full-time director of admissions to allow for greater flexibility in admitting students of both high scholarship and character (Karabel, 2005, p. 122). While student sentiment – via the exclusion of Jewish students from all social honors – certainly kept the “Jewish problem” at bay, the admissions committee’s “rigid selection based upon a closer inspection of all questionable candidates” eradicated much of this issue. Princeton relied heavily on this personal interview, which proved to be the ideal method in as-

sessing unquantifiable traits such as appearance, decorum, and ethnic, racial, and religious background (Karabel, 2005). Additionally, the Director of Admissions made personal visits to the most prestigious boarding schools to recruit more ideal candidates for admission (Karabel, 2005).

With the onset of World War II, many of these institutions quietly dropped their blatant discrimination against Jews and instead raised academic standards and increased scholarship-aid programs (Synnott, 1982). With these changes, Jewish students entered colleges and universities in even greater numbers. The blatant anti-Semitism and discrimination towards Jewish Americans also lessened with changing times. Nonetheless, there is still much that needs to be both continued and done to support the often sizable Jewish communities on many campuses throughout the country.

#### Today's Jewish American College Student

The United States higher education system has come a long way from the religious, anti-Semitic quotas that prevailed until World War II. James O. Freedman, President Emeritus of Dartmouth College, the first Jewish president of the Ivy League institution, confirmed this, saying, "Jews have long since succeeded in making their mark on American life, primarily by means of education" (2000, p. B7). Freedman (2000) went on to cite that in 1995, while Jewish American comprised less than three percent of the total population, they made up 50% of the top 200 intellectuals, 40% of Science and Economics Nobel Prize winners, and 20% of faculty at the nation's leading colleges and institutions. Additionally, Jewish students now attend Ivy League institutions at an impressive 12 times the rate of their presence in the general American population – a far cry from the days of Jewish quotas (Freedman, 2000).

Despite such improvements, there is still much work to be done as statistics remain sobering. In 1993, 114 anti-Semitic incidents were reported at 60 campuses across the country. Similarly in 2002, 106 acts of anti-Semitism were reported at the Audit of Anti-Semitic Incidents (Hoover, 2003). These acts included name-calling, the drawing of swastikas, vandalism, and anti-Semitic Jewish themed parties (Hoover, 2003). Indeed, the student-run *Stanford Review* newspaper ran an article in 2011 stating, "anti-Semitism has become a fixture of today's college campuses" (Katz, 2011). Between the years 2008 and 2010, the Anti-Defamation League reported a minimum of 260 anti-Semitic incidents on campuses across the country.

With an increase in anti-Israeli sentiment becoming popular amongst faculty and students, many have now laid claim that campuses are becoming more hostile towards Jewish students. Lawrence Summers, the first Jewish president of

Harvard University, noted, “serious and thoughtful people are advocating and taking actions that are anti-Semitic in their effect if not their intent” (Rooney, 2002, p. n.p.). Similarly, in 2005 representatives of Jewish groups appeared at the U.S. Commission on Civil Rights asserting that anti-Semitism and anti-Israelism is rampant on campuses nation-wide and that such beliefs have become “systemic ideologies in higher education” (Jacobson, 2005, p. A21).

While such reports are disheartening, there have certainly been great strides in acceptance and inclusion of Jewish American students. In 2002, over 300 college presidents signed a statement published in *The New York Times* condemning anti-Semitism, further demonstrating the commitment to supporting Jewish students across the country (Bartlett, 2002). Likewise, the increase in Jewish-identifying campus leadership, the great surge of active Hillel organizations on campuses, the strength of Holocaust and Jewish studies programs, and the dedication of countless state of the art Jewish centers across the country demonstrate how far this nation has come.

#### *What Now?*

Despite the large number of Jewish students studying on campuses throughout the country, higher education, and indeed the country in general, remains a place of Christian privilege. As institutions stereotypically shy away from conversations of religion, this privilege is discussed infrequently. As a result, Judaism and anti-Semitism are commonly absent in classroom discussions of multiculturalism and cultural pluralism (Evans, Forney, Guido, Patton, & Renn, 2010). Despite antiquated notions of a Jewish “race” and “appearance,” students’ Jewish identities can remain invisible throughout their time on campus and beyond. Evans et al. (2010) affirmed that Jewish students are “likely to project different public and private identities and fear being publicly identified as Jewish” (p. 244).

In a Christian-dominated nation, with images of blinding hatred burned into collective memory, it is easy to understand why Jewish students would be compelled to hide their ethno-religious identity. Campuses with small Jewish student populations in locations with little to no Jewish community may feel unwelcome or unsafe to Jewish students. As many of these students are raised in densely populated areas with tight-knit Jewish communities, Jewish students transitioning from their familiar, insular surroundings to the unfamiliar college campus may experience extreme discomfort, isolation, and/or culture shock. Consequently, it is imperative that colleges and universities understand this population’s specific needs, and recognize the dualistic nature of Judaism as both a religious faith and ethnic identity. As a result, the support network that Jewish students may need would be both religiously and culturally affirming. Additionally, it is crucial to recognize the tragic history of the Jewish people throughout the world, and for

universities to be transparent about their own anti-Semitism as a means of initiating active dialogue and keeping communication open.

### Conclusion

Nearly a century after instating Jewish quotas, and generations after eradicating the practice, it would appear as if the Jewish community is flourishing on the American college campus. Nonetheless, some “Jewish questions” remain unanswered. As a historically persecuted minority group, it is imperative that colleges and universities not only recognize and discuss the horrifying history of the Jewish people, but also do everything possible to stop the anti-Semitism still rampant on campuses today. By supporting Jewish students in both their religious and ethnic identities, the institution better demonstrates its commitment to diversity and multiculturalism. As colleges continue to extend resources and support to culturally diverse groups, all students will benefit as the campus becomes a safer, more culturally competent place.

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