



# PERSPECTIVES

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## Universalism, Particularism, and Anti-Semitism

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**EXECUTIVE SUMMARY:** For the world to emancipate itself from anti-Semitism, religions and political movements will have to accept individual freedom of conscience and cultural pluralism, which are essential if universalism and particularism are to coexist. That universalism and particularism can, in fact, coexist and thrive together is demonstrated by 3,000 years of Jewish history. When the world finally understands the merits of embracing universal values without shedding ethnic identity, Jews and Judaism will be genuinely understood and accepted.

Anti-Semitism is the world's oldest hatred. This hatred has been justified on religious, economic, political and social grounds. A cogent philosophical theory of anti-Semitism is nevertheless overdue. This theory should explain the persistence and ubiquity of anti-Semitism throughout the ages.

Why have doctrines and religions as diverse as Hellenism, Christianity, Islam, Nationalism, Communism, and Intersectionality attacked Jews? *A prima facie* explanation is that Judaism, as a distinct ideology, invites hostility from alternative worldviews. This thesis does not explain why Judaism, which shies away from expansionism and does not seek proselytes, is viewed as a threatening doctrine. The thesis also does not account for the scarcity of anti-Semitism in belief systems as diverse as Hinduism, the Druze religion, Zoroastrianism, contemporary Conservatism, and Liberal Democracy.

In order to philosophically understand hostility towards Judaism, it is helpful to place ideologies in a spectrum ranging from absolutely universalistic to entirely particularistic. Universalistic ideologies such as Hellenism, Christianity, Islam, and Communism have historically attacked Jews and Judaism. The survival of a particularistic Jewish identity makes a mockery of their claims to ideological superiority and universal truth. On the other end of

the spectrum, nationalism and nativism are particularistic ideologies that resent the cosmopolitanism that Jews embody.

Intersectionality illustrates how conventional labels like left-wing and right-wing obfuscate the ideological nature of anti-Semitism. In theory, intersectionality advocates universalistic values dear to Jews, such as social justice and equality. In practice, its exclusive focus on the interests of “oppressed minorities” makes it a particularistic movement. Advocates of intersectionality view Jewish socioeconomic achievements and Zionism as hostile to the particularistic interests they claim to represent, though Jews have invariably been an oppressed minority throughout most of their history.

On the other hand, Liberal Democracy, contemporary Conservatism, Hinduism, Zoroastrianism, and the Druze religion are doctrines that accommodate Judaism. Liberal Democracy, like Judaism, blends elements of particularism and universalism: It integrates particularistic interests into a pluralistic political system that serves universal values. Contemporary Conservatism is also philo-Semitic because it balances universalism and particularism. Conservatives treasure the industriousness of Jewish communities and respect Jewish religious distinctiveness. Hinduism, Zoroastrianism, and the Druze religion accept Judaism because they are themselves particularistic faiths.

It is important to note that particularistic faiths such as Hinduism, Zoroastrianism, and the Druze religion are amicable towards Judaism while particularistic political doctrines are not. Particularistic faiths are not bothered by different religious beliefs as they do not seek proselytes. Particularistic political doctrines, on other hand, demand collective submission to their norms and values. Because Jews subscribe to separate religious laws and beliefs, they have been viewed as a threat to social harmony since the time of the Pharaohs.

One national movement did not embrace anti-Semitism, even over many decades. The 19<sup>th</sup> century Italian unification movement, or *Risorgimento*, was friendly towards Jews and Judaism. This was in part because Italian Jews were only a small minority, and in part because Italian patriots considered Jews natural allies against a Catholic Church hostile to Italian unification. Yet even Italian nationalists eventually turned against their fellow Italians. In 1938, Mussolini’s fascist regime introduced anti-Semitic legislation that culminated in the deportation of thousands of Italian Jews to Auschwitz.

These events illustrate why both political and religious universalism and political particularism threaten Jews and Judaism. Jewish communities should avoid supporting political and religious movements that espouse universalistic goals while advocating particularistic political doctrines.

Difficult choices must sometimes be made. Should Jewish communities support progressive politicians who strengthen anti-Jewish ideologies in the name of religious tolerance and diversity, or should they applaud nationalists who criticize multiculturalism and cultural relativism?

The best course of action is never clear. In these cases, Jewish communities would be well advised to endorse diversity premised on common values. Multiculturalism within the framework of a covenant that commits all communities to common principles is intelligent. This strategy has been recommended by Rabbi Lord Jonathan Sacks, the former Chief Rabbi of the United Kingdom.

It is not by chance that anti-Semitism is the world's oldest and most resilient hatred. Without intending to, Jews and Judaism challenge powerful doctrines. Because political doctrines rarely balance universalism and particularism and because the world's leading religions are universalistic, Jews have endured hatred over the course of millennia.

The 20<sup>th</sup> century witnessed the defeat of virulently particularistic and universalistic doctrines like Nazism and Communism. Since the 1960s, Catholicism and mainstream Protestantism have radically toned down their universalistic ambitions. These developments have contributed to a significant diminution of anti-Semitism around the world and augur well for the future.

In the 21<sup>st</sup> century, the chief threats to Jews and Judaism originate from Islamism – an aggressively universalistic doctrine – and from aggressive nationalist movements. Leftist politicians embracing intersectionality also pose a threat. However, their inability to solve real-world problems will probably make these ideologies lose steam in coming decades.

For the world to emancipate itself from anti-Semitism, religions and political movements will have to accept individual freedom of conscience and cultural pluralism, which are essential if universalism and particularism are to coexist. That universalism and particularism can, in fact, coexist and thrive together is demonstrated by 3,000 years of Jewish history. When the world finally understands the merits of embracing universal values without shedding ethnic identity, Jews and Judaism will be genuinely understood and universally accepted.

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