



Little Books of Big Questions  
Chief Rabbi Sir Jonathan Sacks

Rachel was worried about the return of antisemitism and anti-Zionism to campus life: the anti-Israel motions, the calls for an academic boycott, the religious and political radicalism that seemed now, as in the past, to blame Jews or Israel for the troubles of the world. Nothing had really prepared her for this, and she wanted to understand why it was happening.

### **What is antisemitism and why does it keep coming back?**

Antisemitism is the paradigm case of dislike of the unlike. Long ago, when people lived in bands or small city states, they feared the stranger. In fact, in many languages, the word for 'stranger' and 'enemy' are the same. That fear once had survival value. There are many cases in which trusting local populations received European strangers as friends, only to find themselves attacked, robbed and enslaved. It happened to the Incas and Aztecs, for example, at the hands of the Spanish in the early sixteenth century. So people learned to fear the stranger.

Jews were born as a people in the opposite experience. They were feared by the Egyptians, perhaps (so some historians have argued) because Egypt had once been conquered by an earlier group of strangers known as the Hyksos. To neutralise a possible threat, the Egyptians enslaved the Israelites. So the Israelites knew what it was like to be on the receiving end of hatred.

On achieving their freedom, Moses turned this experience around to create one of the greatest of all moral principles: "Do not oppress the stranger because you know what it feels like to be a stranger: you were once strangers in Egypt." (Exodus 23: 9) Thirty-six times in the Torah we are commanded to love the stranger. That is the single most important rule in the entire lexicon of morality.

### **But everyone is a stranger to someone else. Why the Jews?**

Until relatively recently, most societies imposed a single religion, a single culture. Those who did not belong to that religion or culture lacked rights. Most people simply adopted the religion of the majority. Jews – at least, most Jews, most of the time – did not. So they were an anomaly. They were different and stayed different. They believed in the right and duty to be true to your faith even though most people in society don't share it.

That made them exceptionally vulnerable to the dislike of the unlike; fear of, and hostility to, strangers.

In Christian Europe Jews were the archetypal strangers. Their vulnerability was compounded by the fact that they lacked rights. They couldn't vote; they couldn't take part in government; they had no power – and they had no home in the sense defined by the poet Robert Frost as 'the place where, when you have to go there, they have to take you in.' By and large, people only attack those they can attack with impunity. Because Jews lacked the full protection of the law, they could be assaulted, often without fear of reprisal.

### **But that was then. Why now? And why Israel?**

Because Israel in the world today is like the Jew in Europe until the Holocaust: a stranger. It is a very small, very vulnerable country in a part of the world whose culture, religion and political institutions are different.

But that is only part of the answer. Antisemitism, though ancient, was not continuous. It appeared at times of great stress, when societies were going through massive and disorienting change. A good example is the witch-

hunts of the fourteenth to the sixteenth century. Throughout Europe, tens of thousands of women were tried and burned as witches. We have no idea why other than that, first, the Middle Ages were coming to an end, and second, women, usually living alone, were exceptionally vulnerable.

The world today is undergoing some of the most rapid and far-reaching changes in all of history: the complex set of phenomena known as globalisation. Change creates insecurity, which generates fear, which gives rise to hate. Hate will always find as its object something or someone who is different and vulnerable. For every Jew today there are 183 Christians and 100 Muslims. That makes Jews, now as in the past, vulnerable.

### **So what should be our response?**

Our first response should be to heed the famous words of Rabbi Nachman of Bratslav: 'The whole world is a very narrow bridge, and the main thing is never to be afraid.' We must be vigilant. We must fight antisemitism wherever we find it. But we must not be afraid.

Fear is dysfunctional. It paralyses and demoralises. Among the most beautiful lines in the Bible are the opening words of Psalm 27: 'The Lord is my light and my salvation – whom then shall I fear? The Lord is the stronghold of my life – of whom shall I be afraid?' That is part of what faith is: the refusal to give way to fear.

The second response is to fight falsehood with truth, and hate with love. Antisemitism happens to Jews, but it is not who we are. Historically we never defined ourselves as a people hated by gentiles; we saw ourselves as a people loved by God. No people should ever allow itself to be defined by its enemies.

One story has stayed with me ever since I first heard it. It took place in Russia in the early 1990s, following the collapse of communism. For the first time in seventy years, Jews were free openly to live as Jews, but at the same time antisemitic attitudes, long suppressed, also came to the surface.

A British rabbi had gone there to help with the reconstruction of Jewish life. One day he was visited by a young woman in distress. 'All my life,' she said, 'I hid the fact that I was a Jew and no one ever commented on my Jewishness. Now, though, when I walk past, my neighbours mutter *Zhid* [Jew]. What shall I do?'

The rabbi thought for a minute, then replied, 'If you had not told me you were Jewish, I would never have known. But with my hat and beard, no one could miss the fact that I am a Jew. Yet, in all the months I have been here, no one has shouted *Zhid* at me. Why do you think that is?'

The woman was silent and then said, 'Because they know that if they shout *Zhid* at me, I will take it as an insult, but if they shout *Zhid* at you, you will take it as a compliment.' That is a deep insight. Beyond eternal vigilance, the best way for Jews to combat antisemitism is to wear their identity with pride.

### **But how does that help? Being proud to be Jewish won't stop antisemitism.**

We, on our own, cannot cure antisemitism. The victim cannot cure the crime. The hated cannot cure the hate. The cure for antisemitism exists only within the cultures that give rise to it and tolerate it. Fortunately, as the result of a generation of Holocaust education, most people know where antisemitism leads. We need allies; we must actively seek them; we must not be left to fight this battle on our own.

Some years ago, when antisemitic activity on campus was beginning to rise, I called a meeting of Jewish student leaders. I said: the next few months are going to be difficult. You will find yourselves under attack. I promise that you will not be left to fight this battle alone. What I want you to do is the opposite of what people expect. I want you to lead the fight against Islamophobia and all other forms of prejudice. Let us do what Moses told the Israelites to do: turn their experience of being a stranger into loving, not hating, the stranger.

The leader of the Jewish students at that time was a wonderful young man, Alan Senitt, tragically murdered in Washington DC at the age of 27. By then he had become Director of the Coexistence Trust, an organisation dedicated to fighting antisemitism and Islamophobia.

He understood that the way to fight hate is to fight it together with other faiths, other ethnicities, with people of goodwill everywhere. No group should have to fight prejudice alone.

In the end, antisemitism – the hatred of difference – is an assault not on Jews only but on humanity as such. Life is sacred because each person – even genetically identical twins – is different, therefore irreplaceable. Because we are all different, we each have something unique to contribute to humankind.

Cultural diversity is as essential to our social ecology as is biodiversity to our natural ecology. A world without room for Jews, or for the State of Israel, is one that has no room for difference, and a world that lacks space for difference lacks space for humanity itself.

Let the final word go to Judea Pearl, father of the murdered journalist Daniel Pearl. I once asked him why he had chosen to respond to Daniel's murder by reaching out to others the hand of friendship. He replied: 'Hate killed my son. Therefore, for the rest of my life, I will fight hate.' That is the imperative of our time.

#### For further reading:

Among the best surveys of antisemitism are Robert S. Wistrich, **Antisemitism: The Longest Hatred** and Walter Laqueur, **The Changing Face of Anti-Semitism: From Ancient Times to the Present Day**. Also worth reading are Bernard Lewis, **Semites and Anti-Semites**; on Christian antisemitism, Rosemary Radford Ruether, **Faith and Fratricide**; and on the 'Protocols of the Elders of Zion', Norman Cohn, **Warrant for Genocide**.