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Mutating Virus: Hatred of Jews

By EDWARD ROTHSTEIN

At a conference on anti-Semitism at the Center for Jewish History earlier this week one panelist told a classic Jewish joke:

After a Jewish man is rejected for a job as a radio announcer, the story goes, an acquaintance asks him why he was passed over. "Simple," the man replies with an agonized stutter, "Anti-S-S-S-S-Semitism."

That joke, of course, mocks the very idea of anti-Semitism, just as it mocks excessive Jewish sensitivity toward its slights. But the joke is also a declaration of assimilationist confidence. There are bigger problems than one's identity, and there are plentiful opportunities despite it.

Yet far from mocking the idea of anti-Semitism, the conference, organized by Leon Wieseltier and Martin Peretz of the New Republic and Leon Botstein, the president of Bard College, found the old virus freshly seeping through Western culture, taking new pathways, seeking new hosts and posing new threats.

The four-day conference, which was sponsored by the YIVO Institute for Jewish Research, included an impressive international roster of historians and social scientists, scholars of anti-Semitism, journalists and leaders of Jewish organizations. The theme of resurgent anti-Semitism also inspired another conference this week, in Paris, organized by the Simon Wiesenthal Center and Unesco. And last month a one-day symposium on the same subject was held at the Anne Frank House in Amsterdam. This confluence of rising concerns is also evident in such recent histories as "The Anti-Semitic Moment: A Tour of France in 1898" by Pierre Birnbaum (Hill & Wang) and in the forthcoming "The New Anti-Semitism: The Current Crisis and What We Must Do About It" (Jossey-Bass) by Phyllis Chesler.

The anxieties are not groundless. In France during the last two years, hundreds of anti-Semitic incidents have included synagogue burnings and physical assaults. At the YIVO conference, the Polish writer Konstanty Gebert, who wears a skullcap, said he had just endured more insults during a few months in Paris than he had during years of living in Poland. The historian Simon Schama told of his family's graves being desecrated along with hundreds of others in a Jewish cemetery in England two weeks ago. The most egregious examples still come from the Arab world, where Der Stürmer-style cartoons are commonplace and the medieval blood libel flourishes.

Many of the incidents in Western Europe can be traced to young men in growing Muslim communities who have made targets of Jews. But these attacks and the responses to them

have influenced the broader evolution of anti-Semitism. For some time the French government, at least, resisted treating them as anti-Semitic acts. In some cases they have also been justified or explained as reactions against Ariel Sharon's policies in Israel or President Bush's war on terror. Since such condemnations are also made on the European left, a sympathy developed.

This helped aggravate a form of intellectual anti-Semitism associated with harsh criticism of Israel. Of course, criticism of Israel need not be anti-Semitic, and accusations of anti-Semitism become devalued when they are used to describe all criticisms of Israel. But criticism is anti-Semitic when it demonizes Zionism, equates it with Nazism or justifies organizations like Hamas and Hezbollah that have pledged themselves to the destruction of Israel. And the Nazi analogy is so avidly applied to Israel that it seems to offer a form of relief and absolution to the accuser while condemning the state to the lowest rung of hell. Soon enough, the indictment expands to encompass other Jews.

In this transformation of anti-Semitism old myths and notions of the pariah people often reappear in new guises. Thus the idea that Jews devour the blood of Gentiles for ritual purposes was reincarnated in a political cartoon in *The Independent* of London this January, which spurred a protest from the Israeli government. It showed a Goya-esque ethnic monstrosity of an Ariel Sharon, gobbling the head of a Palestinian child as Israeli helicopters dropped bombs in the background. "What's wrong?" Sharon growls. "You never seen a politician kissing babies before?"

But why have newer forms of intellectual anti-Semitism become so familiar in Europe? Why have they thrived even when traditional anti-Semitism is forthrightly condemned?

At the YIVO conference, Mark Lilla, who teaches European intellectual history at the University of Chicago, argued that in the past outbursts of anti-Semitism had often been associated with political crises: with the conflict between church and state in the Middle Ages, with the Enlightenment in the 18th century, with the rise of totalitarianism in the 20th. Now, he continued, another transformation is taking place. Throughout Europe a rebellion is under way against the very idea of the nation-state and its sovereignty.

In European consciousness the nation-state is associated with the evil forces of nationalism, xenophobia and fascism. After the Second World War, Mr. Lilla argued, Europe was able to avoid thinking about sovereignty altogether; the United States and NATO picked up the burden. As a consequence, Mr. Lilla said, the "idea of Europe" has received an "uncritical embrace," while nongovernmental organizations are regularly appealed to as political ideals. In the midst of this, Israel is an anomaly, a nation-state of recent vintage, insisting on its status, strength and sovereignty, violating the spoken pieties of contemporary international life. This may be one reason that at the United Nations Israel has been treated as a pariah, unable even to serve on the Human Rights Commission (whose chair is Libya) or subject to resolutions that affirm the legitimacy of armed struggle against it.

Mr. Lilla is extending recent arguments made by Robert Kagan about the differences between America and Europe. Indeed, both anti-Americanism and anti-Zionism oppose modern nation-states that insist on older ideas of power. Even when Europe addresses issues of sovereignty — in affirmations of inviolable borders or in arguments for a Palestinian state — they are rarely examined seriously, Mr. Lilla said: "Even sympathy for Palestinians has an oddly apolitical quality in Europe." Proposed solutions are little more sophisticated than imagining, as Mr. Lilla put it, "Hans Blix zipping around Palestine in his little truck."

But this is not just a matter of political ideology. Alain Finkielkraut, the French intellectual, suggested that in the wake of the Second World War Europe was haunted by a "never again": "Never again, power politics. Never again, nationalism. Never again, Auschwitz." While America could forthrightly celebrate itself, for Europe remembrance opened "an abyss." So Europe imagined a new world, "a world so humane, so unprejudiced, so open-minded" that the very idea of an enemy is not taken seriously.

But then, in the midst of this idealistic dream, the Jews intrude. Only this time they "are not accused of clinging stubbornly to their Jewishness but of betraying it." Israel's nationalism, its military and its particularism offend Europe's left-wing universalism and anti-globalization sympathies and recall the catastrophic past. Any whiff of right-wing anti-Semitism is still treated as inexcusable. But these new condemnations are considered virtuous, even though, Mr. Finkielkraut speculates, they invoke the oldest traditions of anti-Semitism: "Seeing the Jews as a people so intoxicated with its own chosenness that it refuses the idea of universal humanity." In that refusal the Jew, in this caricature, really is the archetypal racist, the enemy — the Nazi.

While once the Jew was attacked for an association with modernity and internationalism, now the Jew is attacked for a dissent from post-modernity and internationalism. Paradoxically, these attacks overlap the more traditional anti-Semitism of Islamic radicals and Palestinian nationalists who distrust liberal modernity, chanting "Death to the Jews" and spinning out their own imaginings of Nazism.

But despite all this, there are also signs of positive change in the wake of recent events. It was only during the last year, under American pressure for reform, that the concrete characteristics of Palestinian governance were examined more seriously. And last month Yigal Carmon, whose Middle East Media Research Institute has regularly been translating material from the Arab world related to conflicts with the United States and Israel, argued that there were now significant "harbingers of change in the anti-Semitic discourse in the Arab world" (www.memri.org), with increasing dissent from expressions of extreme anti-Semitism.

Someday, perhaps, the old Jewish joke about the stuttering broadcaster might even take on a different form, signaling that anti-Semitism has again become eligible for jest.

