



Fact Sheet on the Elements of Anti-Semitic Discourse

Kenneth L. Marcus, President & General Counsel
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Government officials, university administrators and academic faculty often need resources for identifying anti-Semitic discourse that can supplement existing definitions such as the [U.S. Department of State definition](#) and the [International Working Definition](#).

This Fact Sheet meets that need by highlighting some of the most common motifs in anti-Semitic discourse. The following inter-related tropes and memes, intended to be illustrative rather than exhaustive, have long been markers for anti-Semitism:

1. Demonization

Since the Gospel of John, and especially since the fourth century, influential figures in Christian theology have associated Jews with the devil or with demonic elements. During the Middle Ages, Jews were frequently described as children of the devil, often portrayed with horns and bulging eyes, and associated with Satanic attributes, such as arrogance and devious logic. Similar depiction of Jews can be seen in Muslim texts from the twentieth century onward. In the contemporary world, these images are reflected in depictions of Jews, individually or collectively, as bearing cosmically malevolent characteristics. This can be seen in caricatures of Israeli and Jewish public figures depicted as devils or demons.

2. Deicide Myth

From the early years of the Christian church, Jews have been condemned for rejecting the teachings of Jesus despite knowledge of his words and proximity to his presence. Worse, some Christians have condemned Jews for slaying the Christian messiah and have held Jews collectively responsible for this action. This view is associated with related doctrines such as the notion that Jews are sustained in a wretched condition in order to bear witness to the moral superiority of Christianity and to foreshadow the final triumph of Christianity at the end of days. The deicidal myth has reinforced the association of Jews with traits that are imagined to go with the killing of a messiah, e.g., sinister powers, intransigence, and conspiratorial treachery. Although not a deicide myth, some Islamic texts similarly accuse "the Jews" of plotting to poison Mohammed. In modern times, hostility to Jews is often expressed in terms of this supposed malevolence, power and treachery.

3. Ritual Slaughter

Since ancient times, Jews have been falsely accused of killing gentiles for ritual purposes. In Hellenistic Egypt, this was sometimes accompanied by accusations of cannibalism. In Medieval Europe, beginning in the Twelfth Century, it was often accompanied by accusations that Jews used their victim's blood to bake matzah for the Jewish holiday of Passover. Historically, these false allegations have frequently been followed by anti-Jewish riots and mass-murders. Today, echoes of this blood libel can be heard in allegations that Jews, especially in Israel, kill young gentile children for military or political purposes or in service of genocide. In one contemporary variation, Israelis are accused of kidnapping Palestinian children at night, murdering them, and selling their organs for profit. Variations of the child-murder libel remain prevalent in some parts of the world.

4. The Wandering Jew

Beginning with Saint Augustine, Christian theologians viewed Jews as a cursed people doomed to wander in misery until the end of days as testament of their own depravity and Christian superiority. The Wandering Jew later developed as a wretched, lowly figure of Christian folklore, circulating as the well-known European Ahasver legend beginning in the thirteenth century. In the traditional formulation, a Jew who taunted Jesus on the way to his Crucifixion is cursed to roam the earth until the end of days. In some versions, the Jew is cursed not only roam to the earth but also to remain in an evil state as punishment for his persecution of Jesus, his taunting of Jesus on his way to the Crucifixion, his Crucifixion of Jesus, and his rejection of Jesus as the Messiah. Today, this myth echoes in efforts to reinforce the supposedly lowly status of diasporic Jews, for example, in student-led kick-a-Jew or hit-a-Jew events held (despite official disapproval) at some American public schools. Similarly, it can be seen in the notion that the Jews, alone among the peoples of the earth, can never merit statehood. This view is expressed in efforts to delegitimize the State of Israel and is reflected in terms like "the Zionist entity" as a disparaging synonym for the Jewish state.



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5. Carnality

Since at least the fourth century, Christians have associated Jews with carnality, ascribing such traits as lecherosity, greed, stinginess and stunted spirituality. This is reflected in the use of the word “Jew” as a verb denoting sharp business practices. In contemporary times, carnal stereotypes are reflected in actions such as throwing coins at Jewish school children. A version of the carnal perception can be seen in the stereotype of the “Jewish American Princess” (or “JAP”) who is typically perceived as shallow, spoiled, selfish, vapid and materialistic. Reflecting the irrationality of anti-Semitic prejudice, Jewish men, sometimes derogated as “Jew boys,” have been depicted as sexually avaricious and effeminate, while Jewish women have been portrayed as sexually repressive and insatiable.

6. Well-Poisoning and Desecration of the Host

Since the Middle Ages, Jews have been accused of tainting sacred objects or communal property. Beginning in the thirteenth century, Christians falsely charged Jews with reenacting the crucifixion of Jesus by venting their spleen on the host wafer, which was understood to represent the body and blood of Christ. Since that time, Jews have been repeatedly charged with conspiring to desecrate holy sites or objects. Today, these allegations are reflected in accusations that Israelis are conspiring to destroy the Dome of the Rock in Jerusalem or other sacred sites. Similarly, European Christians repeatedly accused Jews of poisoning communal wells during medieval and early modern periods. This was sometimes attributed to Jews’ putatively demonic characteristics and was sometimes said to be aided by the devil. In Poland, accusations of Jewish well-poisoning persisted until at least the 1920’s. In modern times, Jews and Israelis are occasionally accused of tainting communal property or assets, such as water bodies or blood supplies. This can be seen, for example, in contemporary claims that Israelis are responsible for shark attacks in the Red Sea.

7. Dirt and Disease

Jews have long been described, literally or metaphorically, as carriers of a physical defect, deformity or disease, often associated with ugliness, weakness, dirt and excrement. In some cases, these defects were associated with Jewish masculinity or femininity. This can be seen, for example, in the myth of Jewish male menstruation. Similarly, the phrase “dirty Jew” has long been common among anti-Semites, and stereotypes of “Jewish odor” were once commonplace. Jews were banned from German swimming pools and quarantined during the cholera and typhus epidemics of 1892. During the nineteenth and early twentieth centuries, white racialists often perceived Jews as possessing inferior nonwhite racial characteristics. Since the mid-twentieth century, conversely, Jewishness has often been associated with a false sense of white racial superiority, sometimes associated with racism and colonialism. In Nazi Germany, Jewishness was often compared to a cancer. Contemporary anti-Jewish and anti-Israeli cartoons tend to emphasize physical traits associated with physical ugliness, such as the hooked nose and shallow forehead. The term “dirty Zionist” is now sometimes used in place of “dirty Jew.”

8. Money and Criminality

Since medieval times, Jewry has frequently been depicted as a wealthy, powerful, menacing and controlling collectivity, demanding the sacrifice of others to their own greed. In these respects, Jews have been associated with Mammon, the deity associated with money, and Moloch, the Ammonite god associated with human sacrifice. These stereotypes are often connected with stereotypical Jewish traits, such as malevolence, criminality, greediness, stinginess, and mendacity. Holocaust denial also tends to embody this view, especially when it presents the destruction of European Jewry as a global hoax perpetrated to defraud gullible humanity. Similarly, anti-Semitism denial, which presents the resurgence of contemporary anti-Semitism as a global Jewish hoax to legitimate supposed Israeli crimes, follows this pattern. Holocaust inversion, which attributes Nazi characteristics to contemporary Jews, is similar. This can be seen when Jews and Israel are compared with Nazis when Jews are derogated as Nazi Zionists, Jew-Nazis, Zionazis, or ZiZis. In a softer form of this



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aspersion, Israel is compared to the South Africa's *apartheid* state. These stereotypes influence depictions of sinister, wealthy, controlling Jews from Shylock to Netanyahu.

9. Global Conspiracy

Jewish conspiracy theories have been traced back to the New Testament's imputation of responsibility to the Sanhedrin for calling for the arrest of Jesus and abounded in the medieval world. In its standard modern formulation, the Jews or Zionists form a powerful, secret, global cabal that manipulates governmental institutions, banks, the media, and other institutions for malevolent purposes, undermining decent values. *The Protocols of the Elders of Zion*, a fraudulent document purporting to record a Jewish plan for world domination, has influenced countless ideas about supposed Jewish global conspiracies including, notably, ideas contained within the Hamas Charter. For example, these writings accuse the Jewish people of starting all modern wars. The myth of global Jewish conspiracy has echoes in contemporary opinions about the putative over-representation of Jewish people in various business sectors. This can be seen, for example, in representations of Jewish control over government, the media, academia, and financial institutions, especially when phrased in terms of a "Jewish lobby." This may also be seen in accusations that Israel or the Jewish people are responsible for virtually any contemporary catastrophe, such as the attack on the World Trade Center on September 11, 2001.

10. Beastilization

Since ancient times, Jews have been compared in derogatory terms to barnyard and wild animals. In some influential ancient Christian texts, for example, Jews are compared to pigs, goats, and cows. In medieval Europe, Jews were often compared to pigs or depicted as having intimate relations with pigs. "*Judensau*," which refers to obscene contact between Jews and female pigs, appeared in thirteenth century Germany and remained popular throughout Europe for several hundred years. Contemporary examples of *Judensau* appear when pigs are portrayed together with images of Jews or the Star of David in cartoons or political commentary. In Muslim texts, Jews have been compared since ancient times to apes and pigs. In contemporary texts and cartoons, Jews

and Israelis are often portrayed as a variety of barnyard and zoological animals and insects.

These elements should be understood subject to the following caveats. Anti-Semitism has never been limited to a finite stock of stereotypes, defamations, distorted images and fables. Instead, it has repeatedly generated new figures while recycling old ones in new forms. Anti-Semitic prejudice is frequently expressed in terms of irrationally paired opposite characteristics, as when Jews are criticized for both rootless cosmopolitanism and narrow communitarianism. Similarly, mutually incompatible discursive elements are often combined, as when Jews are simultaneously portrayed as powerful demons and subhuman beasts. In some contexts, the use of these discursive elements is not anti-Semitic, e.g., when they are uttered in discussions of anti-Semitism. In other contexts, terms that are not primarily associated with Jews, such as the word "apartheid," may be used for anti-Semitic purposes. Similarly, some terms that are not initially associated with anti-Semitic ideology are now primarily used in a derogatory manner to express hostility towards Jews, e.g., "Yid," "Hebe," and "kike." Even the words "Jew" and "Zionist," or their cognates in other languages, are often used in a derogatory manner. Finally, these discursive elements convey anti-Jewish content even when speakers are unaware of their impact.



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About Kenneth L. Marcus

Kenneth L. Marcus is President of the Louis D. Brandeis Center for Human Rights Under Law and author of the award-winning *Jewish Identity and Civil Rights in America* (New York: Cambridge University Press: 2010). Marcus founded LDB to combat the resurgence of anti-Semitism on American college campuses.

About the Brandeis Center

The Brandeis Center, or LDB, is an independent, unaffiliated, nonprofit corporation established to advance the civil and human rights of the Jewish people and promote justice for all. LDB conducts research, education, and advocacy to combat the resurgence of anti-Semitism on college and university campuses.

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