

BOISI CENTER INTERVIEWS



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MARK SILK is the director of the Leonard Greenberg Center for the Study of Religion in Public Life and professor of religion in public life at Trinity College in Hartford, Connecticut. He spoke with Boisi Center interim assistant to the director, Jack Nuelle and Boisi Center director, Mark Massa, S.J., before the Boisi Center's October 16, 2018 panel discussion entitled, "What Does it Mean to be Jewish in the Age of Trump?" The following conversation touches on anti-Semitism in America and abroad, the phenomenon of the alt-right, American Judaism and the ways certain American Jews situate themselves politically. It has been edited for clarity and content.

NUELLE: Do you see a more visible appearance of the alt-right and more blatant anti-Semitic language, action, threats, and violence to be a continuation of a trend, or something new?

SILK: I think it is a departure from the trend that we have grown accustomed to since World War II, which has been one of the disappearance of anti-Semitism on the right and, depending on where you exist in the Jewish community, the rise of hostility, certainly to Zionism, to Israel, to Israel, and in some way, shape, or form, to Jews generally on the left.

The first thing I would say about it is that I do not think there is much concern about it generally, and I would caution that we do not know where things are headed. To some degree – and I say this slightly tongue-in-cheek, although one should not be tongue-in-cheek about right-wing anti-Semitism – people on the left welcomed the revival or the reappearance of anti-Semitism on the right, since that has been the kind of anti-Semitism they have been familiar with: the historic, anti-Semitism of the fascist right. To see that it is not dead, and to be able to wave that as, "See, we are concerned about this Trumpian, neo-fascist, lumpen-populist anti-Semitism," shows that we have continued to be in the right place with respect to anti-Semitism.



This is not significant as the numbers are small, but there are some Jews on the alt-right. Breitbart himself was Jewish. You have a few right-wing Jews. There was a story in the paper yesterday about how well the Alternative for German party did in Bavaria. There is a sense that what the populist right, the neo-fascist nationalist right in Europe and in America, are really concerned about are Muslims.

If you are on the right – the Jewish right – then we ought to be concerned about you, too. But as of now anti-Semitism in general is not being taken very seriously anywhere. It serves as a reminder that this right-wing anti-Semitism came out of 19th-century Europe, culminated in the Holocaust, and has not disappeared entirely. You can still find it. But no one is seeing it as a major threat or a major element in political configuration. We

may end up seeing more of it – especially if you look in some places in Eastern Europe, Poland in particular, where it is a serious concern.

The extent to which this has hooked into the consciousness of American Jews, however, seems limited, but it may become more pronounced.

NUELLE: When you say it is a serious concern, you mean it has manifested itself in more widespread violence?

SILK: I do not know about violence, and I am not an expert on the Polish situation, but the denunciation of Jews in the sort of liberal, left, cosmopolitan circles in Warsaw seems to be seriously taking place, and that is a traditional Polish anti-Semitism. I think it could be of greater concern in the consciousness of the Jewish community, which has been far more focused on left-wing anti-colonialist hostility to Israel. This has not risen to a very high level in their attention. In the overall configuration of Euro-American politics, the story of what is occurring in Eastern Europe, not only in Poland, but also in Hungary, in the rise of the right in Germany, and elsewhere – all of this has not crystallized in the Jewish community. It may be impossible to keep these two things in tension in their minds at once.

NUELLE: I want to return to the Israel question, but, first, how much of this is

directly attributable to Trump? He has made it increasingly socially acceptable for folks like this to come out of the woodwork. These are not new problems, as you have been pointing out, but Trump has facilitated this kind of discourse by his own anti-discourse, in a sense. Where does Trump fall in this landscape?

SILK: I would divide the Americans and Trump from the international scene. I would say Trump has permitted other countries. He has opened the door to various kinds of bad behavior, in part by being cozy with some pretty bad actors. We are now seeing the whole Saudi issue play out; we have gone through the Putin issue; there is the Duterte issue with the Philippines; he likes North Korea. The succession of authoritarian leaders that he seems cozy with, and the profound lack of interest in anything having to do with human rights (with the exception of the persecution of Evangelicals), this has all opened the door to bad acting in the rest of the world. Anti-Semitic behaviors are, in a way, the least of it. I would imagine that a Hillary Clinton regime at this moment in the United States would be paying a good deal of attention to Myanmar, for example. The Trump administration could not care less.

That is how I would address the question internationally. Domestically, I would say that what was thought to be the alt-right, a kind of extension of the Tea Party, has now been subsumed into the Trump Republican Party. There was Charlottesville, but there was no real follow-up to Charlottesville. Those people seem happy with their president, and he gives them dog whistles that we all can hear with sufficient regularity.

What has tended to keep the “legitimate far-right” or the “legitimate right” from going in an anti-Semitic direction is Israel. They like Israel; they dislike Muslims more than they dislike Jews; and there is not much impulse outside of small, un-reconstructed Nazi circles to spend time on Jews. I may be wrong, but I do not see it, and even the Charlottesville language

was sufficiently murky. If I had to guess, and I am just guessing, I would say that they are saying of the Jewish question, “We don’t need to go there. Maybe sometime in the future, but this isn’t where we need to be.”

And although the degree to which Trump does not connect with it is remarkable, he does have Jewish grandchildren. It may have dawned on these folk that they love

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their president, they are happy with his nativist, white, racist views, and they’ll leave the Jews for another day. It is just not a major concern of theirs.

NUELLE: The “legitimate right,” are those mainstream Republicans? Or the alt-right?

SILK: The people we used to call the alt-right. If you will notice, nobody is particularly using alt-right anymore. They are fringe characters, but they did not show up at Charlottesville again. There is not anything very visible out there at this point. Whatever one wants to say about the current administration, it has not activated some kind of mob action in the streets by fascist groups, unless you consider the folks who show up for his rallies to be those people. But as an independent, even Tea-Party kind of exercise in rolling Republicans, it is not happening. I think that is because it has been subsumed as Trump has taken over the Republican Party; wherever it is, he has brought in the alt-right. That is the forty percent that he has.

NUELLE: That is pretty frightening; to name this worldview as fringe, but

somehow also legitimately democratic or political.

SILK: Yeah, I think so, and certainly there is no Tea Party functioning now. If there is an alt-right, it is below the surface.

NUELLE: Coming back to the Israel question: you talk about how the Republican Party writ large likes Israel. Can you say a few words as to why that is? And can you talk about tension between Jews in America who are appalled at the anti-Semitic discourse in the current political air, and those who are more squarely focused on the Israel question?

SILK: Let us begin with why the Republican Party likes Israel. A core constituency of the Republican Party as it exists today are white, fundamentalist Evangelicals. They have long been attached to Israel. It has long been customary in the Jewish community to see this attraction as a piece of the end times scenario, that the Jews will be gathered in the Holy Land and there will be the battle of Armageddon and the end times will come. There is some truth to that, but if you look at the survey data and you examine – I think it is not as dominant as progressive Jews would like to believe. I think these are people who read their Bible, they look at Genesis, they see that God made a deal with Abraham, you get this land, and that is good enough. So the idea of the Jews in Israel works for them without having to do a lot of fancy millennialist thinking.

It has now been decades since Israeli leaders have been happy to embrace Evangelical embassies; going back to Menachem Begin, that has continued and certainly currently to a fare-thee-well. At this point, white Evangelicals, who are certainly more numerous than Jews in America (about 25% of the population as compared to 2%), are more enthusiastic supporters of the Israeli regime than American Jews. They are more supportive of the recognition of the capital in Jerusalem, more supportive of moving the embassy, more supportive of the whole thing. The real politicians in Israel have

been happy to have Evangelical support, and they understand that a lot of American Jews are like the readers of Haaretz, the progressive, left-leaning, intellectual Jews in Israel that they have no use for. I think there has been a slow shift.

At the same time as this has happened, although the Democratic Party establishment remains very strongly pro-Israel, it is less so, I would say, than it used to be. The progressive wing of the Democratic Party is certainly more critical. The behavior of Prime Minister Netanyahu towards President Obama made life difficult for Democratic supporters of Israel, and that whole exercise over the Iran Deal was bad. I would not say that the Obama administration was totally without blame, but in the long history of America-Israel relations going back to Truman and Eisenhower, the idea that these countries were bound at the hip and that whatever the Israelis wanted to do was just fine with us – that is a very, very recent phenomenon, more of the current administration than anything else.

I would say that with this religious engine and the political affinities between an increasingly conservative Israeli population – one that is, not without reason, skeptical and distrustful of the Palestinians – there has been a coalescence of the Republican Party with the Israeli governing party for most of the last twenty years. There is not a very strong Israeli peace party at this point.

NUELLE: There seems to be a tension. Someone like Jonathan Weisman, who just wrote the book *(((Semitism)))*: *Being Jewish in America in the Age of Trump*, thinks that synagogues which display banners outside saying, “We stand with Israel,” would not necessarily also display banners saying, “We stand Against Hate” in reaction to the anti-Semitic turn.

SILK: What exists in the Jewish community is a very pronounced division. It is now less clear than it used to be, but certainly in the middle of the twentieth century there were about three main



streams of Jewish religious identification: Orthodox, the most traditional in their observance and behavior, who are on the right, if you will; on the left, Reform Jews, connected to the original Reform movements in the end of the 18th century in Germany and very much adaptive to American and modern European styles of living; and a kind of in-between position, Conservative Jews. The Orthodox were a small and remain a relatively small proportion, perhaps ten percent, maybe as high as fifteen percent of the population. There are a lot of unaffiliated Jews now as well.

Jews voted over seventy percent for Hillary Clinton as a whole and something under about a quarter for Donald Trump. That’s roughly consistent with the vote over the past several presidential elections, Democrat and Republican. But Orthodox Jews, the most observant, have trended increasingly Republican, and I saw a survey (maybe not entirely trustworthy) suggesting that over ninety percent of Orthodox Jews support Donald Trump. So Orthodox Jews are very much Trumpians, and the rest, not so much. That is a division that has been in train for a long time. It may be locked in now, particularly with some of the policies, like the moving of the embassy of the Trump administration, but that is not anything new. One of the more disturbing of these developments is the emergence in the organized Jewish community – not just among the Orthodox but more broadly – of very strong Trump

supporters, who are often rich, influential people.

One of the effects of this is that it has become increasingly difficult for the umbrella organizations of the Jewish communities, the Federations, to take any position at all. Now this is not unique to Judaism. I happen to know that at the most recent Greek Orthodox Clergy-Laity conference, the bishops wanted to issue a statement condemning separation of children and parents at the border, and there were prominent Greek lay people there who said no, to the astonishment and distress of the bishops. I think that the quieting of religious voices is part of the consequences of this division. It is hard to imagine, returning to the Jewish community, a public issue that would touch more deeply, a general public one, than separating children and parents at the border. There were many statements issued by various places, but vigorous opposition from some quarters.

MASSA: As you know, elements of the current administration have quite consciously tried to divide the Protestant population of the United States by gaining Evangelical support. Would you say that Trump or his family has consciously targeted the Jewish-American community for support? Particularly when thinking of Israel, and moving the official embassy from Tel Aviv to Jerusalem--do you think that is an effort to gain Jewish-American support for the Trump administration?

SILK: There is no question that Trump himself is connected, particularly in the early days of the administration, with the ambassador to Israel. These are people plugged into part of the Orthodox community. Jared and Ivanka themselves have a rabbi who is part of Chabad. That has been their reference point. What kind of outreach, with what degree of sophistication, have they made to other parts of the Jewish community? I cannot say. I know of none, but that does not mean they do not exist. Given the chaotic nature of the White House, I would be surprised if it was very well organized.

Regarding the Orthodox community, it is not just that they are the most actively involved with or most identified with Israel, though they are. It is also that they are increasingly the portion of the Jewish community that is interested in staffing the Jewish organizations. Disproportionately to their numbers, they comprise a large portion of the administrations of Jewish organizations. Talented Jewish administrators do not have to stay in Jewish administrative posts. You can become heads of centers at Trinity College, or founding directors, or presidents at Harvard. Jews now do not have to stay within Jewish communities to find leadership roles.

The organized Jewish community has moved to the right of the Jewish population as a whole, which is an important issue. When Christians are on the march, Jews tend to run in the opposite direction. There are good historical reasons for understanding why that should be the case, and I think it helps explain why there are not more Jewish Republicans. The degree to which the Trump administration has thrown its arms around some of the least attractive elements of the Evangelical community puts Jews off. When he invites religious people to the White House, you do not see a lot of Catholics, and you do not see a lot of rabbis. You see some of these fringe characters.

MASSA: You don't think that the Trump promise – in fact, the Trump delivery – of moving the embassy from Tel Aviv to Jerusalem was aimed specifically at Orthodox Jews?

SILK: I think it was certainly meant to appeal to Jews. Under the 1995 Jerusalem Embassy Act, the U.S. was obliged to move its embassy from Tel Aviv unless the President signed a waiver every six months. Clinton, George W. Bush, and Obama did so, but after signing the waiver once, Trump decided, "We'll just move it." Overwhelmingly the Israelis thought this was a good idea. Jerusalem has been their capital. There is a kind of silliness

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– diplomatically coherent silliness, to be sure – in refusing to acknowledge Jerusalem as Israel's capital pending agreement of the city's "final status." All the Israeli government buildings have always been there. A survey done back in June of the Jewish community on this issue showed that American Jews were absolutely divided over it: forty-seven percent against, forty-six percent in favor.

MASSA: What are the reasons for that?

SILK: Anything that Trump does is going to be opposed by some considerable number or portion of the Jewish community, but I also think that there is a sense that, "Well, if we think there

ought to be peace between Israel and the Palestinians, why lodge a sharp stick in the eyes of the Palestinians by doing that?" There was much less reaction to the whole thing than people anticipated. There were a fair number of anti-Trump people who thought, "Fine, do it." There are divisions on a whole range of things, like the separation between Israeli and American Jews on settlement policy, which tells you that American Jews are on the left for most of these issues.

MASSA: Do those divisions reflect the divisions of the Jewish community itself? In other words, would Reform Jewish-Americans typically believe one thing, and Conservative Jews another?

SILK: I think you can map it pretty clearly on that spectrum, all the way over to unaffiliated "None Jews." There are always exceptions, but we are talking aggregates here, and, in general, the Orthodox have been aligning with Republicans across the board, including on some of the conservative social issues that have divided religious communities altogether.

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