



Academic
Engagement
NETWORK

From Insulation to Isolation:

**Why American Jewish Exceptionalism No
Longer Protects Us from Antisemitism—
and What Must Replace It**

Ayal Feinberg

***AEN Pamphlet Series
Pamphlet No. 11***

ABOUT THE ACADEMIC ENGAGEMENT NETWORK (AEN)

AEN mobilizes networks of university faculty and administrators to counter antisemitism, oppose the denigration of Jewish and Zionist identities, promote academic freedom, and advance education about Israel. We envision a world where American higher education welcomes, respects, and supports the expression of Jewish identity and robust discourse about Israel.

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The Academic Engagement Network's pamphlet series is an occasional series that addresses the organization's primary concerns: championing academic freedom on American college and university campuses, opposing the BDS movement, encouraging robust and sophisticated discussion of topics related to Israel and the Middle East, and combating antisemitism. Authors include AEN members and other noted scholars and thinkers who contribute to the discourse on these subjects. Faculty members, academic leaders, and other prominent speakers who present at AEN events and programs may also be invited to adapt their spoken remarks into essays for the series. Certain pamphlets may be accompanied by discussions with the author in the form of recordings or podcasts. For more information, please visit academicengagement.org.

ABOUT THE AUTHOR

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American Jewish exceptionalism—the belief that Jews in the United States have enjoyed a uniquely safe, integrated, and influential existence—once seemed undeniable. Compared to Jewish communities elsewhere, we were more socially accepted, politically connected, and shielded from open antisemitism.

Following World War II, this was, and perhaps remains, the most pervasive self-reflective narrative defining American Jewry (Michels 2010, Gordon 2021, and Tevis 2021, 2023). It is impossible to understand current challenges facing the Jewish community without examining the outsized role this frame has had on our institutions and worldview.¹

PART 1

American Jewish Exceptionalism Kept Us Safe. Now It's Keeping Us Isolated.

American Jewish exceptionalism is like insulating a house so well that it traps its own heat. For decades, this insulation protected us from the storms that battered Jews in Europe, the Middle East, and elsewhere. We celebrated our ability to flourish within American liberalism, to be visible, distinct, and thriving. That very pride, the belief that we had “arrived” and that our experience would diverge from our European forebears, also created a blind spot.

This blind spot was both generated and perpetuated by mistaking representation for safety. From law to Hollywood, from Madison Avenue to Wall Street, we responded to structural discrimination with expertise. And with this professional acumen came “outsized” representation in critical industries including media, banking, and politics. Even when denied entry to country clubs, schools, and hospitals, we simply built better ones.

Despite representing the same ammunition for conspiratorial antisemitism elsewhere, American Jewish exceptionalism understood the United States as uniquely different. Here, in a country supposedly defined by pluralism, heterogeneity, and work ethic, Jewish contributions would not be viewed as a threat, but instead be valued as a critical part of the socio-cultural mosaic that makes America so special.

Jewish contributions were not only for Jews, but for all Americans—and exemplified American potential.

The reliance on this narrative within the Jewish community for generations resulted in two critical and interrelated shortcomings.

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¹ This essay is adapted from remarks delivered at the Academic Engagement Network's Short Course, Roundtable on Contemporary Antisemitism Research, January 6, 2026.

First, our Jewish institutions never prioritized expertise in antisemitism. In the academy, Jewish Studies, as a discipline, largely disregarded antisemitism as something unworthy of systematic study. Antisemitism was viewed as episodic and unpredictable. It was in the error term. Few examples capture this more clearly than the response of the Association for Jewish Studies' *AJS Perspectives*, which describes itself as the "leading forum for exploring methodological and pedagogical issues in Jewish Studies," in the years following 10/7. As the Jewish world searched for answers to surging antisemitism, *AJS Perspectives* published issues on artificial intelligence, conversion, and LGBTQ topics. It still has not published an issue focused on contemporary antisemitism or on interventions designed to confront it.

Without a means of formal training, "expertise" in countering antisemitism was almost entirely developed through professional experiences. While these professionals certainly have been dedicated to serving the Jewish community, those previously and currently charged with securing a Jewish future often lack the scholarly depth necessary to comprehend the complex challenges of antisemitism, let alone provide evidence-based approaches to combat it.

Unfortunately, this is not surprising, given that many Jewish legacy organizations devoted overwhelming resources to call attention to the problem of antisemitism in the United States—to break through the easy dismissal of rising antisemitism as "hyperbolic" among a community who learned only of American Jewish opportunity and success.

Second, with shifting cultural winds in the 1990s and 2000s, the Jewish community was quick to engage in frameworks where they did not easily fit, and to identify with binary terms and theories that failed to underscore the nuance of the Jewish experience. Privilege, whiteness, and power, could be construed to simply (albeit too simply) explain American Jewish exceptionalism.

Consequently, when self-identified marginalized communities constructed and publicized narratives that challenged American exceptionalism, many Jews found themselves at a crossroads—with paths that demanded they prioritize some elements of their identity at the expense of others. Perhaps no factor is more critical in explaining the spike in anti-Zionist and non-Zionist beliefs of younger generations.

In sum, Jews in the United States have remained on a road paved by American Jewish exceptionalism. We supported the moral imperatives of those we considered coalition allies—often vocally, often financially—but increasingly without inserting our own stories, so as not to upset prevailing power-based frameworks. We showed up for others, but not explicitly as Jews. We told ourselves we were showing up by stepping back—that racism, sexism, and the challenges of "other" minority communities mattered more. We often made these decisions without ever consulting the very groups we still considered "our allies."

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And when others—such as the ‘pro-Palestine’ movement and influential actors like Black Lives Matter—interjected their own grievances and histories into the broader conversation about marginalization, we often viewed them not as partners in a shared struggle but as naïve or opportunistic co-opters. They certainly weren’t naïve.

Solidarity cannot be sustained through moral memory alone. Too often, we acted as though the coalition politics symbolized by Abraham Heschel marching with Martin Luther King in Selma were a permanent inheritance rather than a relationship requiring continual renewal, mutual recognition, and honest negotiation. We rested on the laurels of an earlier alliance structure even as the language of oppression, power, whiteness, colonialism, and belonging shifted around us. And because we often muted our own Jewish particularity in those spaces, we failed to insist that antisemitism, too, belonged within the moral grammar of justice.

Now, as antisemitism reenters the mainstream—not as fringe vitriol but as normalized discourse—the insulation that once protected us is keeping us isolated. The house is sealed. The air is getting thin.

We desperately need a new narrative and a reimagining of our approach to countering antisemitism. But how do we call for one without falling into the trap of blaming the victim? How do we embark on something as slow and heavy as redefining the Jewish American story in a moment that demands such urgency, and an environment marred by an often-paradoxical mixture of pride, guilt, admiration, and otherness?

PART 2

The Tensions of Reimagining a New Approach

The project of replacing American Jewish exceptionalism is fraught with tensions that are both natural and unavoidable. They stem not only from the specificities of Jewish history, but also from the broader social, political, and cultural crosscurrents that define the American present.

The first and perhaps most obvious tension concerns whether the very idea of American exceptionalism—not the interrelated but distinct American Jewish exceptionalism—should be celebrated or condemned.

American exceptionalism is the frame that our nation is set apart by its unique mixture of democracy, liberty, and opportunity, and therefore both paved and is destined for a distinctly positive role for humanity. Once an axiomatic position, today the very idea of American exceptionalism is both widely celebrated and condemned.

To many, the narrative of exceptionalism represents the triumph of pluralism—a story of how structural barriers could be challenged and overcome, and how a minority group could flourish within liberal democracy. American Jewish exceptionalism was clearly housed within this view and co-developed symbiotically for American Jews along with it (Tevis 2021, and Valbousquet 2021). To others, however, American exceptionalism cannot be disentangled from the very inequities that persist: systemic discrimination, unequal access, and the use

of pluralism as a veneer for deeper social cleavages. For those adopting this view, Jewish success can be seen as a function of the privilege associated with their perceived whiteness, and occasionally more noxious musings surrounding in-group prioritization that can become indistinguishable from centuries-old antisemitism emerging out of the Renaissance (Goldstein 2006, and Kaye 2013).

Recasting our communal narrative in the face of this debate risks being misunderstood as either a capitulation to illiberal populist critiques or, conversely, as a refusal to reckon with the country's deeply imperfect structures.

A related challenge emerges from the stark polarization that defines this American moment. Constructing a new narrative risks leaving us once again outside of the dominant frameworks of discourse, whether those of populist nationalism or of identity-based progressive politics. If the old story insulated us but left us isolated, a premature new story could repeat that dynamic in reverse—positioning Jews as perpetually out of step with the theories that frame America's successes and failures.

A third tension lies in our own intersectional identities. We are Jews and Americans simultaneously, and no ideological frame should force us to choose between the two nor pretend that either needs prioritization. Likewise, our commitments to Israel and to Zionism should remain self-evident to our peoplehood, even as many of us express frustration—even disgust—at particular Israeli state policies and societal actors. We must make clear that Jewish security and prosperity in Israel are non-negotiable, while simultaneously preserving space for harsh criticism of the state's political decisions. This is not a contradiction, but a mark of integrity, and one that American Jews themselves have long prided themselves on. Yet the challenge lies in how others receive this distinction: too often, such nuance is rejected, misused, or weaponized against us.²

Finally, there is the tension—both practical and academic—around the factors necessary for implementing change. Do we need to fully articulate an alternative narrative before we begin to act, or should we proceed even as a new framework evolves? Jewish history suggests that our instinct leans toward exhaustive debate—toward endless parsing of definitions, positions, and even spellings. Yet, the current moment demands urgency. The risk is that our tendency toward deliberation becomes paralysis. Conceptual clarity is important, but not if it comes at the expense of desperately needed action.

These tensions cannot be resolved overnight. Nor should they be seen as obstacles to progress, but rather as the natural friction that comes with a community confronting the need to redefine itself in real time. To ignore them is to repeat the mistakes of the past; to acknowledge them is to prepare ourselves for the imperfect but necessary steps forward.

2 In practice, this means Jews are asked to prove their moral legitimacy through ritualized denunciations of Israel, then told those denunciations do not count because Jewish attachment to Israel itself is treated as inherently suspect. The result is a political trap in which Jewish particularity is pathologized regardless of what Jews actually say.

PART 3

A Structural Path Forward

How do we move toward action? Our situation demands practical steps—not the illusion of a single silver-bullet solution, but a willingness to invest in strategies that work and have measurable impact. To remain trapped in endless theorizing, or to chase a perfect formula, is to squander precious time in a moment that requires firm resolve.

This means recalibrating our priorities. We cannot afford to devote disproportionate resources to organizations simply because they make us feel represented, or because they deliver immediate utility to particular constituencies. We must instead privilege demonstrated success. Expertise should not be assumed on the basis of organizational legacy; it must be validated by evidence, by rigorous evaluation, and by real-world impact.

It also means confronting the counterproductive competitiveness of our current landscape. Too often, our institutions differentiate themselves not by scope or need, but by politics and personality. Instead of developing distinct lanes, deepening expertise, and serving particular audiences, they replicate each other's programming, jockey for funding, and leave key arenas and challenges under-served. The result is breadth without depth, visibility without sustainability. Encouragingly, some legacy organizations are beginning to recognize this problem and adjust. But progress remains slow, and meaningful reform can only come if donors demand it. Just as punitive approaches to philanthropy have reshaped universities in the wake of October 7th, so too must donors press Jewish institutions toward accountability, coordination, collaboration, and measurable outcomes.

Yet, even if our institutions are pushed toward reform, structural change alone is insufficient without clarity of purpose. Competition and fragmentation are not just organizational flaws; they reflect deeper disagreements over what we stand for, what is negotiable, and what is not. At the heart of this work, then, is a simple but essential principle: we must prioritize consensus where it is possible and necessary, rather than exhausting ourselves in battles over areas that rightly deserve nuance. Several foundational positions should be named:

- The status quo is unacceptable.
- Antisemitism must be confronted based on its consequences, not rationalized by parsing the intent of its perpetrators.
- Jewish diversity—in religious practice, politics, identity, and expression—should be celebrated. But denying the Jewish connection to Israel, historical or contemporary, or weaponizing one's Jewish identity to delegitimize the Jewish identity of others, is dangerous and unacceptable.
- Our coalitions must be rebuilt not as transactional arrangements, but as partnerships grounded in shared values: pluralism, security, and freedom of expression.

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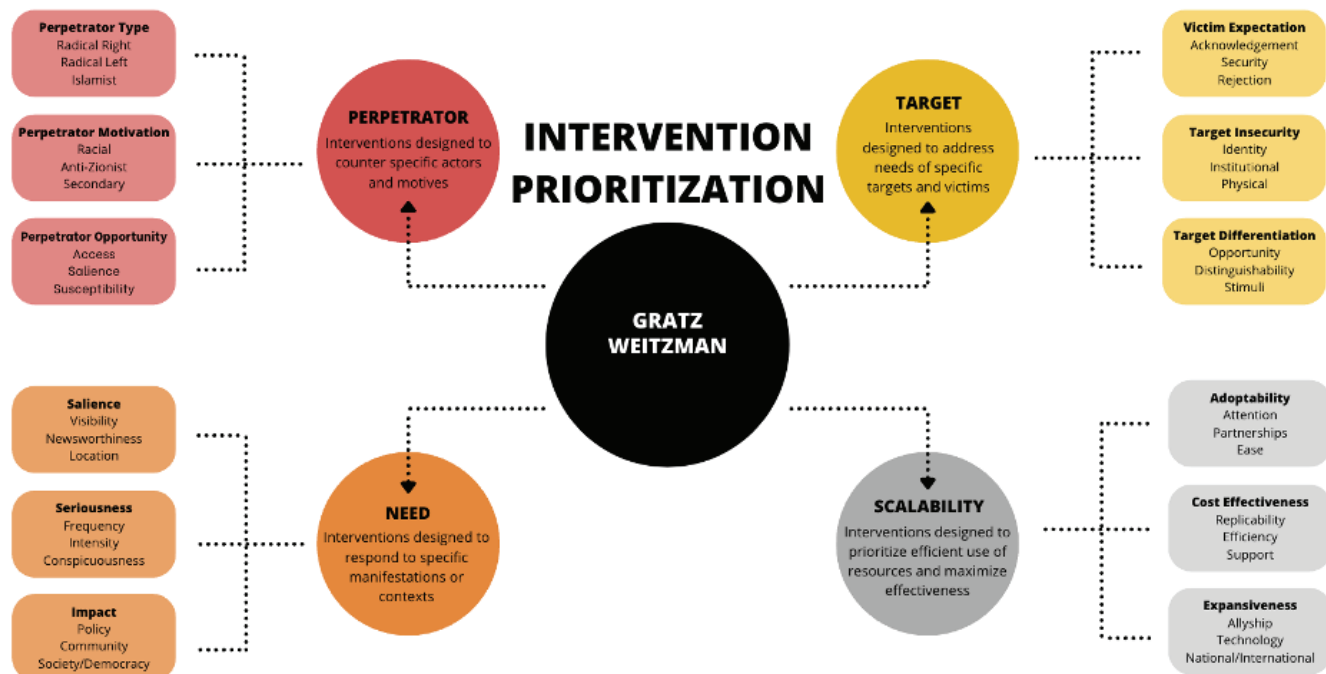
To translate these principles into a plan of action, there are two urgent, necessary steps.

First, formal expertise. We need to develop a professional field dedicated to the study of antisemitism as an interdisciplinary phenomenon. Antisemitism is not adequately explained by psychology, sociology, political science, religion, history, or communications alone. It converges with and diverges from other forms of prejudice in ways that demand a holistic approach. Training in this field must produce practitioners, fluent in multiple disciplines, who are able to design, implement, and empirically evaluate interventions that reduce antisemitic acts and rhetoric. Traditional academic disciplines have failed to foster such expertise, and in many cases have become openly hostile to it—an environment made even more inhospitable after October 7th.

Building up the field of Antisemitism Studies is not optional; it is essential (Lee 2026).

While this field of Antisemitism Studies must focus on developing theory, testing hypotheses, and empirically evaluating the causes and variations of antisemitism, priority must ultimately be given to interventions. It is not enough to describe the problem with greater precision. We must also assess the diverse strategies to counter it. Intervention mapping provides a way forward: a framework for cataloguing approaches, assessing impact, identifying gaps, and allocating resources where they can have the greatest impact (Felten et al. 2025, and Stutterheim et al. 2025).

The figure below illustrates how we can begin to think systematically about this process. It emphasizes that interventions can be designed around perpetrators (actors and motives), targets (victims and their needs), contexts of need (manifestations and severity), and scalability (efficiency and replicability).



Taken together, these categories remind us that no single solution can address antisemitism in all its forms. Just as important, they underscore that understanding the diversity of needs allows us to recognize what an intervention does well, and where complementary approaches are required to fill the gaps.

Second, landscape mapping. It is critical that a structured framework be developed that documents and aligns the wide range of interventions currently deployed against antisemitism. This should begin with a comprehensive mapping of strategies across sectors: education (curricular interventions in K-12 and higher education, professional training for teachers, and campus climate programs), security (infrastructure upgrades, partnerships with law enforcement, and volunteer security training), law and policy (civil rights enforcement, Title VI litigation, hate-crime legislation, and anti-BDS policy responses), digital platforms (AI-driven monitoring, content moderation, and media literacy campaigns), and philanthropy and community work (grantmaking, coalition-building, and interfaith partnerships).

Such mapping should not only catalogue the variety of existing efforts but also evaluate them according to measurable outcomes: which interventions reduce antisemitism, which raise awareness and educate, and which provide little beyond symbolic reassurance. Equally important, this process can expose critical gaps—areas where there has been an underinvestment or where existing efforts lack coordination and collaboration—clarifying which initiatives should be scaled, adapted, or jettisoned. Done well, this mapping would become both a diagnostic tool and a guide for investment. Future funding decisions could be made based on evidence of impact and alignment with communal priorities.

Underlying this work is a recognition that there can be no single solution to antisemitism. It is too complex, too adaptive, and too deeply embedded in social, political, and cultural life. Instead, progress will come through a mosaic of responses—each imperfect on its own, but collectively capable of shifting the landscape. Intervention mapping, by making that mosaic visible and strategic, allows us to move from fragmentation and duplication toward coherence and accountability. Without it, we remain reactive; with it, we begin to build a coordinated and data-driven approach to safeguarding American Jewry.

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Conclusion

American Jewish exceptionalism once gave us confidence, security, and the belief that our story would be different. But as that narrative has frayed, we have been left without the tools or clarity to meet the moment. In this essay, I have traced how insulation turned to isolation and how the task of reimagining our story is riddled with tension.

The essay's final section is more than a roadmap for urgent reforms—it is itself the scaffolding of a new narrative. Unlike the traditional story, which mistook representation for safety and conflated insulation with strength, this narrative locates Jewish life in America within the broader arc of Jewish perseverance. It is a story defined not by exceptionalism, but by the same qualities that have sustained the Jewish people for centuries: commitment to education, creativity in adapting, resilience in the face of hate and discrimination, and the prioritization of shared values over transactional alliances.

The path ahead will not be easy, but it is navigable. We cannot afford paralysis, nor can we resign ourselves to nostalgia for an exceptionalism that no longer protects us. Instead, we must summon the courage to claim this new narrative as our own—one that is rigorous, honest, and grounded in evidence. If we do, we will not only safeguard Jewish life in America, but also demonstrate the resilience, adaptability, and integrity that have always been the truest markers of Jewish survival.

The house built by American Jewish exceptionalism left us trapped—not because the story failed Jews, but because living under a single framework has left us unable to adapt to America's changing view of itself. By telling our story honestly and prioritizing our values, we can rebuild a home resilient enough to weather any condition, as Jewish life has done for three millennia.

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