

Crises and Conspiracies

WRITTEN BY

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It is as predictable as day follows night. A crisis erupts — pandemic, financial, security — and the conspiracy theorists come out of the woodwork. Today is no different.

With the jet propulsion provided by social media platforms, their claims circle around the globe with warp speed and can find receptive, even eager, audiences. After all, why grapple with the realities of menacing issues such as COVID-19, when social hucksters peddle all-inclusive, readily-packaged, and diversionary explanations of who is really behind it?

And, alas, it is equally foreseeable that, sooner or later, the Jews will be among those blamed. Isn't the heart of antisemitism, past and present, the assignment to Jews of evil powers and demonic aims?

From the poisoning of wells to the Black Plague, from using the blood of murdered Christian children to bake Passover matzoh to seeking world domination, from foisting capitalism to propagating communism, and from inventing the Holocaust to generate sympathy for a Jewish state to Israel's enthusiasm for spreading AIDS in

neighboring countries, the antisemites' outlandish libels have been many, stubbornly resilient, and at times deadly.

On September 11, 2001, it took mere minutes for the conspiracy theorists to blame Jews, Israel, the Mossad, Zionists — all one and the same in the twisted minds of the accusers — for the terrorist attacks that killed nearly three thousand people on American soil. Even as the trail led directly to 19 hijackers organized and led by Osama Bin Laden and Khalid Sheikh Mohammed, some suggested they were mere puppets in the hands of fiendishly clever Jews trying to tarnish the name of Islam and turn the United States against the Arab world.

I vividly recall urgent messages from several European Jewish communities within days of that indescribable tragedy. The local media reports, they said, repeated the canard that 4,000 Jews who worked at the World Trade Center deliberately stayed home, having been advised of the planned attack. Could I send actual names of Jews who were among the victims in the Twin Towers, so they could disprove the allegations. Ironically, one request came as I was headed for the funeral, at a New York synagogue, of the husband of a former American Jewish Committee colleague, who was killed in the terrorist attacks.

Now, with a pandemic circling the globe and threatening us all, irrespective of race, religion, creed, or nationality, the conspiracy theorists, unsurprisingly, are at it once more. And again for the antisemites, it presents an opportunity to pin the blame on, who else, the Jews, even as the outbreak began in Wuhan, China, where, incidentally, no Jewish community exists. Nor does it matter that Israel is battling the coronavirus tooth-and-nail, or that a number of American Jews have already succumbed to the pandemic. Antisemitism is an irrational pathology. It doesn't bend to rational statements and facts.

Here are four immediate examples of that hopelessly irrational mindset:

- A neo-Nazi was killed in a shootout with FBI agents in Kansas City on March 24. A few days earlier, he posted: "If you don't think this whole thing [Covid-19] was engineered by Jews as a power grab, here is more proof of their plans. Jews have been playing the long game. We are the only ones standing in their way."
- The senior pastor at Flowing Streams Church in Vero Beach, Florida, who is also a radio host, asserted, on March 24, that God is spreading the coronavirus in synagogues as punishment for "those who oppose his son, Jesus Christ." Earlier, he had asserted that the impeachment effort against President Trump was a "Jew coup," yet another conspiracy claim.
- Iran's government Press TV claimed, on March 5, that "Zionist elements developed a deadlier strain of coronavirus against Iran."
- According to the Middle East Media Research Institute, Yemeni scholar Ibrahim Al-Ubeidi delivered a sermon on March 27 in which he claimed that Jews (and Americans) created COVID-19 with the intention of closing down the Islamic holy sites of Mecca and Medina.

To some, the reaction is a shrug of the shoulders. So what, they say. Nothing new here. I beg to differ.

In the past, such conspiracy theories have too often had real-life consequences for Jews, from ostracism to pogroms. Moreover, the power of social media today creates a reach previously unimaginable, which can touch both fellow believers and, no less importantly, the impressionable.

Stopping the conspiracy-mongers and their hateful incitement may not be a simple task. After all, they have been around for centuries, if not millennia. Failing to monitor and confront the threat they pose, however, would be shortsighted in the extreme.

David Harris is CEO of American Jewish Committee (AJC).

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