

Antisemites Are Thriving Amidst Coronavirus Pandemic



April 10, 2020 — New York

This piece originally appeared in [Times of Israel](#).

By Manya Brachear Pashman

Not even a global pandemic can hold back zealous haters.

Enterprising antisemites around the world have not let the coronavirus pandemic go to waste, using it as an opportunity to churn out conspiracy theories that also blame the Jews.

According to the Turkish news network ATV, a pro-government television channel, Israel's development of a vaccine indicates that it likely spread the virus to profit off a cure. In France, a former health minister, daughter of a Holocaust survivor, is accused of blocking use of a drug that allegedly could have prevented the crisis. Iranian leaders claim their country has been sabotaged by the one-two punch of [a Zionist biological weapon](#) and U.S. sanctions.

Meanwhile, [white supremacist David Duke](#) has suggested Israel and “the Global Zionist elite are up to their old tricks.” And the FBI has warned authorities across the U.S. that racist groups are urging their devotees to contract the virus and seek out Jewish people to infect.

The vile absurdity is a stark reminder that vigilance in combating persistent antisemitism is as critical as washing our hands and maintaining social distance.

History shows that plagues are not a time for complacency among Jews. In the 10th century, the Jewish population of Sparta was expelled by Nikon the Metanoenite to rid the city of sickness and starvation.

After the bubonic plague wiped out populations across Europe in the early 14th century, pogroms annihilated hundreds of Jewish communities from Barcelona to Belgium as survivors sought to exact revenge.

Jews' relative isolation in ghettos and their rituals of cleanliness are believed to have shielded many from the Black Death. Experts surmise that because the plague peaked near Passover, Jews had removed grains from their homes that ordinarily would have drawn flea-infested rats transmitting the disease. The higher survival rate in Jewish communities led to conspiracy theories that they poisoned wells to infect the general population.

At the end of the 19th century, tuberculosis was dubbed the "Jewish disease" or the "tailor's disease," because of its spread through sweat shops in New York City's Garment District, although data shows other ethnic groups contracted the disease at a higher rate.

The "pattern of stigmatization of particular groups has been applied to Jews over the millennia," Alan Kraut, author of *Silent Travelers: Germs, Genes, and the 'Immigrant Menace*, told AJC. "To say 'I hate somebody' seems almost rational if you associate them with a disease that's endangering a community. That's why this medicalized prejudice keeps popping up from time to time."

Kraut, a professor of medical history at American University, said during the 1918 Spanish influenza, Jewish immigrants were unrelenting about following regulations to control the spread of the flu. With past pandemics and persecutions as their guide, they successfully kept blame at bay by publicizing their compliance. *The Forward* in Yiddish published front page headlines urging people to stop spitting on the sidewalk, use handkerchiefs, and avoid using common drinking cups, often attached to water fountains in those days.

But Kraut pointed to last year's measles outbreak among Hasidic Orthodox Jews in suburban New York and Brooklyn as a more recent, albeit localized, example. Clerks and shoppers avoided getting too close to visibly Jewish customers. Vandals scrawled "dirty Jew" on the walls of Jewish institutions. Large Orthodox Jewish families quite unjustly and irrationally became the representatives of a fringe community that opposed vaccines.

Similarly, Asian-Americans are bearing the brunt of the blame for the novel coronavirus simply because of their physical features.

Since most people now in lockdown are consumed with staying healthy, some experts such as journalist Yair Rosenberg say anti-Semitism might be slow to emerge. That said, universal confinement is steering more people to social media's echo chamber where antisemitic propaganda offers virtual community and an enticing dogma for those who feel victimized and oppressed.

Just tune into the online fundamentalist Christian network [TruNews](#), where pastor and anchor Rick Wiles has warned Israel that God is sending a plague upon the Jews for opposing Jesus Christ. Wiles gained notoriety for coining the term "Jew coup" to describe the impeachment proceedings for President Trump.

Meanwhile users posting on the encrypted messaging app Telegram have suggested that COVID-19 was a Jewish scheme to exploit the stock market.

Other white supremacists already have shown they are emboldened by the chaos surrounding efforts to contain COVID-19. A federal law enforcement agency report warned that “members of extremist groups are encouraging one another to spread the virus, if contracted, to targeted groups through bodily fluids and personal interactions.” Jews, no doubt, are a targeted group.

Looking ahead, when people confront the foreboding economic consequences of the crisis, they will be searching for scapegoats.

“Economic tensions often play out in antisemitism because the Jew is associated with wealth, greed, and money lending,” Kraut said. “It’s an old trope, a recurring theme, and we’re going to see it again. Whether we see it expressed violently or not remains to be seen.”

The intensity of the backlash following the bubonic plague – that Jews were simply put to death for merely surviving – never quite ended in Europe. Attacks on Jews have continued to be bloody and vicious, culminating with the Holocaust, but continuing to this day.

We must be realists. We will never fully keep antisemitism at bay. But we must be vigilant and sound the alarm when it rears its head.

“The only way to answer it is to answer it with truth,” Kraut told me, “but don’t expect that to be the remedy.”

Manya Brachear Pashman is co-host of People of the Pod, an American Jewish Committee (AJC) and Times of Israel podcast about global affairs through a Jewish lens.

SHARE THIS



SHARE THIS



BACK TO TOP ▲

MORE ANTISEMITISM NEWS

AJC Welcomes Decision to Remand Man for Plotting to Bomb Jewish Assisted-Living Home

[READ THE PRESS RELEASE ►](#)



Give Us Reliable Data. It's The Most Effective Way To Fight Hate Crimes

[READ AJC'S ANALYSIS ▶](#)

SIGN UP
TO STAY INFORMED

Enter your email

SUBMIT

STAY CONNECTED



GLOBAL VOICE

WHO WE ARE

ISSUES

TAKE ACTION

GLOBAL FORUM

SUPPORT OUR WORK

LEGAL INFORMATION

PRIVACY POLICY

PODCAST

CONTACT US

AJC's mission is to enhance the well-being of the Jewish people and Israel, and to advance human rights and democratic values in the United States and around the world.

© Copyright 2020 AJC