

United States of Anxiety: The new fears of American Jews

BY URIEL HEILMAN OCTOBER 27, 2020



There's a growing feeling among American Jews that maybe the calamities that befell Jewish communities elsewhere in the world could happen in the United States, too. (Getty Images)

([JTA](#)) — American Jews are anxious.

They're worried about COVID-19, which already has killed a quarter million Americans and is spreading more rapidly as winter approaches. They're nervous about a precarious financial future.

They're concerned about anti-Semitism and violence on the right driven by increasingly active white supremacist groups with funny names and unfunny agendas, like the [Proud Boys](#), [QAnon](#) and the [Boogaloo Bois](#).

They were unnerved when some Black Lives Matter protests in the spring and summer were accompanied by occasional violence, lawlessness, and anti-Semitic and [anti-Israel vandalism](#). They're

uneasy with the rise of a certain kind of progressivism in some corners of the left that seeks to make support for Israel a political and moral sin.

Most of all, however, they fear for the demise of American democracy.

President Trump has spent months undermining the legitimacy of the Nov. 3 vote, and he hasn't committed to a peaceful transfer of power if he loses. It's possible that a disputed election – or even a clear win by one candidate or the other – will result in massive civil unrest and political chaos. Jewish institutions are being told by the FBI to brace for possible violence around Election Day, no matter who wins.

And in a community that is solidly Democratic – polls show American Jews prefer Joe Biden over Trump by a 75%-22% margin – most American Jews are deeply worried about the possibility of a second Trump term and what that may mean for the future of the country they call home.

Among Trump's Jewish supporters, including most Orthodox Jews, there's a fear that a Biden win will accelerate a breakdown of law and order and elevate a progressive left that's hostile to religion and the Jewish state and intent on turning America into a socialist country.

"It's a time of great anxiety in America generally, and it's not restricted to Jews. There is a real concern that America is declining. The coronavirus has only heightened it," observed Jonathan Sarna, a historian of American Jewry at Brandeis University. "If one understands that the deep fear is that America's best days are behind it, then this anxiety is not only momentary, but especially for Jews – who grew up with stories of the Holocaust – the question is: Maybe we should be looking around."

For the first time in memory, American Jews are talking seriously about obtaining second passports, "just in case." They're looking into emigrating to Canada, obtaining citizenship from a European country, or immigrating to Israel. This year, a record number of American Jews started applications with Nefesh B'Nefesh, the agency that handles aliyah from North America.

“A surprising number of Jews, if they’re honest, have had a conversation that would have been unthinkable for them 10 years ago: What if we have to leave the country?” Sarna said. “What’s the Plan B?”

Liliana Schaefer of Winchester, Virginia, is most of the way through the process of obtaining citizenship from Germany, where her father was born.

“I’ve been seeing a rise in anti-Semitism on both the left and the right, and even though I identify with more leftists politics it’s making me be more afraid,” said Schaefer, 19. “I just want to have an extra passport. Europe is a place I can leave to if things get bad here.”

Schaefer added, “You can never have too many passports. It’s always good to have a backup plan. That might be intergenerational trauma talking, but having an escape is always a good idea.”

Heather Segal, a lawyer in Toronto who has been handling immigration inquiries for 25 years, says she’s never before seen interest this high by Americans looking to move to Canada. Most of her clients are American Jews.



Heather Segal, a Canadian immigration lawyer, says she has gotten far more inquiries from U.S. citizens this year than ever before, and most of them have come from Jews. (Courtesy of Segal)

“I’m not going to get stuck,” Segal says her clients have told her. “There’s going to be a civil war. It’s going to be the end of democracy. I’m very concerned for our future. I don’t want to wait and see what happens. My grandparents left Poland in World War II.”

They say: “I never thought that I would be looking for this. I’m well established in the United States. My family is here, my business is here. This is not something I ever thought would happen or that I even considered.”

Segal added, “That line is not one person saying it. I hear it several times a day.”

While the last few months of sickness, civil unrest and political tumult has brought American Jewish anxiety to the fore, it had been building steadily for years, surveys suggest. In the June 2019 version of an annual survey conducted by the American Jewish Committee, 65% of respondents said they considered the status of American Jews less secure than a year previously (15% said it was more secure), up

from 55% in 2018. In this year's survey, released this week, 43% said U.S. Jews are less secure than a year ago and 52% said it's about the same as last year.

In previous years, when the question asked about anti-Semitism specifically, 41% said in 2017 that anti-Semitism was a serious problem in the U.S., up from 21% in 2016, 21% in 2015 and 14% in 2013 (there was no survey in 2014).

Anti-Semitism at home

American Jews traditionally think of anti-Semitism as something that happens over there – in France, in England, online, in the Muslim world.

But the signs that anti-Semitism has come home have become harder and harder to ignore: Months of attacks against Orthodox Jews in Brooklyn in 2019. The massacre in Pittsburgh at the Tree of Life synagogue in October 2018, which killed 11 and was the deadliest-ever anti-Semitic attack in U.S. history. The shooting at the Chabad of Poway, California, in April 2019, which killed one. Attacks weeks apart in December 2019 in Monsey, New York and Jersey City, New Jersey, in which four people were killed by assailants.

“First, we need to recognize the problem for what it is: an epidemic. We are no longer talking about isolated, occasional actions – bad enough as those are – but a regular phenomenon,” wrote a Jewish congresswoman, Nita Lowey, along with the head of the American Jewish Committee, David Harris, in an op-ed in The New York Times that month. “Second, we must acknowledge that there are multiple ideological sources feeding this paroxysm of hate; it is not a result of a single political outlook.”

Today, the anti-Semitic sentiment seems to come from all sides: QAnon conspiracy theorists who, alleging that Satan-worshipping Democrats are running a secret global pedophile network, are also promoting classic anti-Semitic tropes. College students who harass and marginalize Jewish students who dare to openly support Israel or fail to denounce Zionism as racism. Black

athletes and celebrities posting anti-Semitic messages on social media.

Republican congressional candidate Marjorie Taylor Greene, who is heavily favored to win her election next month to the U.S. House of Representatives, has posed for photos with a former neo-Nazi leader, shared a video with an anti-Semitic claim about “Zionist supremacists” trying to flood Europe with refugees and promoted conspiracy theories that accuse George Soros and the Rothschild family of trying to control the world.

Then there are the actual anti-Semitic incidents, which hit an all-time high in 2019, according to the Anti-Defamation League. Over 2,100 incidents of anti-Semitic assault, vandalism and harassment took place in 2019, including five killings. In 2020, pandemic lockdowns that limited outdoor activity seem to have reduced the number of actual anti-Semitic assaults. However, anti-Semitic rhetoric has flourished online, where some conspiracy theorists blame Jews for spreading the virus.



A memorial for the victims of the Tree of Life synagogue shooting in Pittsburgh. (Hane Grace Yagel)

With coronavirus cases now disproportionately high in New York neighborhoods with large haredi populations – and following raucous demonstrations by haredim in Brooklyn’s Borough Park neighborhood protesting pandemic restrictions – some New York Jews are worried about a possible anti-Semitic backlash against all Jews for spreading the virus.

Much of the anti-Semitism seems to have nothing to do with the virus. When Black Lives Matter protests sparked by the police killing of George Floyd spread across America in May, synagogues in Los Angeles, Wisconsin, Minneapolis and elsewhere were vandalized by anti-Semitic or anti-Israel graffiti. In late August, arsonists set fire to the Chabad house at the University of Delaware. Days earlier, a Chabad house in Portland, Oregon, caught fire — twice (authorities are investigating the cause). In October, a self-described skinhead pledged guilty to a plot to blow up a Colorado synagogue.

Synagogues in America now routinely have security at the entrance — a practice that’s been commonplace in Europe for decades but was rare in the United States up until a few years ago. Some of the funding for securing Jewish institutions comes from the U.S. government in the form of grants from the Department of Homeland Security.

The election

Perhaps no factor weighs more heavily on the minds of American Jews right now than the upcoming election.

The stakes are high. Biden’s Jewish supporters — including roughly three-quarters of U.S. Jews — share the fears of U.S. Democrats generally: A second Trump term, they worry, would further stoke the divisions in American society, impede an effective U.S. response to the coronavirus and continue to hollow out U.S. institutions from the Centers for Disease Control to the State Department.

They’re also worried about Trump’s approach toward white supremacists. In this season’s first presidential debate, when Trump was asked by moderator Chris Wallace (who is Jewish) to clearly condemn the Proud Boys — a group of violent, armed right-wing extremists — Trump said: “Proud Boys, stand back and stand by.” His

declaration was quickly taken up as a rallying cry by the Proud Boys. After a torrent of criticism, Trump subsequently issued a more forceful condemnation of white supremacy.

The pattern was reminiscent of Trump's response to an August 2017 "Unite the Right" demonstration in Charlottesville, Virginia in which marchers carrying torches chanted "Jews will not replace us!" and a far-right demonstrator killed one anti-fascist counterprotester in a car-ramming attack. Trump drew widespread criticism for initially condemning the "hatred, bigotry and violence, on many sides" rather than specifically calling out the racist and anti-Semitic organizers of the event. He then criticized neo-Nazis and white nationalists, but also said there were "very fine people" on both sides of the protests.

Trump's Jewish supporters — largely Orthodox, according to one recent poll by an unnamed firm that showed Orthodox Jews favor Trump by 83% to 13% — have their own concerns about a Biden win: violence and unrest on the left, embrace of anti-Semitic or anti-Zionist progressives by the left-leaning political, cultural and corporate establishment, and a White House that takes a harder line on Israel.



President Donald Trump speaks at an event honoring Bay of Pigs veterans in the East Room of the White House, Sept. 23, 2020. (Mandel Ngan/AFP via Getty Images)

At the same time, there are plenty of Republican Jews who share Jewish Democrats' worries about anti-Semitism from the right, and Democratic Jewish voters who are concerned with anti-Israel sentiment on the left.

The writer Bari Weiss, who grew up in Pittsburgh attending Tree of Life, has repeatedly accused Trump of creating an environment in which right-wing racists and anti-Semites feel emboldened. At the same time, she has been a prominent voice warning against trends on the left that could undermine the place of Jews in American life.

"Did you see that protesters tagged a synagogue in Kenosha with 'Free Palestine' graffiti? Did you hear about the march in D.C. where they chanted 'Israel, we know you, you murder children too?'" wrote Weiss, a former New York Times opinion columnist and author of "How to Fight Anti-Semitism," in a recent piece in the online Jewish magazine Tablet. "There is another danger, this one from the left. And unlike Trump, this one has attained cultural dominance, capturing America's elites and our most powerful institutions. In the event of a Biden victory, it is hard to imagine it meeting resistance. So let me make my purpose perfectly clear: I am here to ring the alarm. I'm here to say: Do not be shocked anymore. Stop saying, can you believe. It's time to accept reality, if we want to have any hope of fixing it."

One seemingly undecided Jewish voter in New York, Arnie Singer, described his political dilemma as a choice between his heart and his brain.

"The question is with those voters who align with the Republican platform but can't stomach Trump, the man. He has made it very difficult for us, because while we might like some of the things he has done (tax cut, Middle East/Israel policy, business mindset), we hate the way he communicates, bullies, throws tantrums, and panders to far right sympathies (although he himself is not a blatant racist and certainly not an anti-Semite).

"A vote for Biden," Singer wrote on Facebook, "is also a vote for a Democratic party that has strayed too far to the left, and has a powerful segment whose Israel policy scares us. Although Biden

himself might not scare us, those who will influence him and who will inevitably take his place in 4 years (or sooner) do.”

On both right and left, there is a creeping feeling among American Jews that the orthodoxies that have undergirded their sense of security in what was once deemed “the goldene medina” (the golden land) are melting away. Maybe American democracy is not unshakeable. Maybe liberalism is not an impermeable guarantor of Jewish safety. Maybe the calamities that befell Jewish communities elsewhere in the world could happen here, too.

Ben Sales contributed to this report.