

Jews & Money: The Story of a Stereotype

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Thank you, Diane [Glazer]. Good evening. I always wanted to be on the stage in Hollywood and I finally made it. Let me begin by trying to answer some questions I am frequently asked. Why write the book? Why this subject? Why write about Jews and money? Why write about an age-old stereotype? Well, because it persists; because it's there; because it's pernicious; because it's everywhere. That's why we fight bigotry. That's why we fight prejudice. That's why we fight anti-Semitism, and every once in awhile one has to focus on the specific aspects of prejudice.

This element, this stereotype, goes back several thousand years. If you examine the roots of Western anti-Semitism you will find that it is one of the two basic pillars of Western anti-Semitism, the first being the charge of deicide, the charge that the Jews – not the Romans – killed Jesus. That became the major legitimizer that enabled the teaching of contempt. That was the basic foundation for so much of Western anti-Semitism. It was the foundation of the Inquisition. It was the foundation of expulsion, and it made it reasonable and rational.

The other pillar at that time was the pillar relating to who sold Jesus out and why? The second pillar dealt with the issue of money – Jews and money.

Jesus was not sold out by Judas for theology; for philosophy; for ideology, as we are told and taught. He sold him out for thirty pieces of silver. And so throughout Western civilization the elements of anti-Semitism were rooted in both elements and they grew and became more and more legitimate.

So, then the next question. So, okay, if it's there, Foxman, why didn't you write about it twenty years ago? Why wasn't it your first book; your second book? Why now? And the answer to that is what started happening in 2008. It's not really Madoff, but Madoff certainly added to the reason. But the primary reason was that in 2008 the world began to experience an economic crisis. An economic crisis of failure, fear for the future, people losing their jobs, homes being foreclosed. And we began to see more and more on the internet, in the fringe media and also in mainstream media references to Jews; Jewish bankers; Jewish influence.

When we looked a little bit closer – because we knew that certainly in Europe, much less so in the United States, in Europe for years – the last time we tested it; we polled, was about five years ago, and again three years ago – that almost 40% of the European public believes that Jews disproportionately have economic power. That Jews disproportionately control economic institutions. So when this economic crisis started we went out to check the polls and attitudes and we found that 31% of Europeans believe that the economic crisis was caused by Jews. Here in our country where attitudes and prejudices... We're not immune. It's a lot better in New York, where almost one-out-of-five Americans believed that.

Then came Mr. Madoff, and all of a sudden people forgot – forgot that Ponzi was not a Jewish name. Ponzi, which had been established as a concept, all of a sudden now it's been replaced by Madoff, and we found it disturbing. If the so-called Jewish-owned *New York Times*, as we read that in the conspiracy view, found it necessary for some reason we still don't know –

because I've had an exchange of correspondence. But when the story broke in the *New York Times* on the front page twice was reference to Mr. Madoff's Jewishness and in the full story three times, and why? What importance did it have then? Later it had importance because Jews were victims; because Jewish charities... But not when the story broke. Not when the indictment was raised. Do they write about other people's religion when someone is accused of fraud? The answer is, "No."

But then it became of a special concern to us because the concept, the issue of Jews and money; Jewish greed; a conspiratorial view of Jews hoarding money; lusting for money in order to get power; power in order to get money, all of a sudden became an avalanche on the internet in ways that we have never seen before. So when the Madoff story began to really play every single day in Palm Beach – where much of the handiwork of Mr. Madoff was done – the level of anti-Semitic response that the newspaper, the *Palm Beach Post*, received was so huge that they were unable to manage it. And the only decision they could make was to send out an announcement that they would no longer entertain on the internet any letters related to Madoff, because the majority of the letters were anti-Semitic.

Only recently there's another case in Florida where the *Miami Herald*, in reference to a gentleman, Scott Rothstein, did exactly the same thing. It's part of our subculture. It's part of our sub-culture in this country. How often do you hear, "Jew him down?" How many times has anybody said, "That's unacceptable? It's bigotry. That's a stereotype that shouldn't be."

The Anti-Defamation League – an organization I am privileged to head – we receive complaints, I would say every couple of weeks somewhere, whether in a middle school, pennies are thrown in a courtyard. Or sometimes at a basketball court, pennies are thrown. Why? Why pennies? Well, you see, if

you want to identify and find a Jew, throw a penny. Only a Jew will bend down to pick it up.

These are games being played in playgrounds; in middle schools. We recently came across a couple instances of complaints at a basketball game. Now, I don't know to what extent you're familiar, but in Europe certain teams have been called "Jewish teams." Nobody knows why. So when the soccer teams play against each other it's attacking the Jews; it's anti-Semitic. Sometimes here, too, certain basketball teams are designated "Jewish." In several instances, primarily in Florida, we have witnessed in the last couple of years that pennies were thrown. Why? To distract the Jewish players on the court.

But it goes much deeper than that. There was a candidate for President three years ago – a nice gentleman. He was the governor of a state; not Alaska – the governor of Wisconsin. He appeared before a group of rabbis. Asked their support for him as a presidential candidate, and in his opening remarks he said, "All my life I've spent in public service and only in the last few years I stepped aside from public service. I went into business. I was successful and now I know what it feels like being Jewish."

There was a buzz in the room and a rabbi approached him and whispered something in his ear. And he said, "Oh. I meant it as a compliment. Doesn't your religion teach you how to make money?" Now, this is not an evil person. This is not malignant. This is ignorant, infected with the stereotype. And this is a person who was a governor; who sat in the Cabinet room. And yet this pernicious stereotype has taken on a life of its own. So at moments of crisis it just plugs in and reinforces.

I travel. One of the places I travel, because [it is] where I come from and because the Germans made it a cemetery of the Jewish people, is Poland and

Eastern Europe. You can travel through Eastern Europe and you can pick up souvenirs. There's a new kind of souvenir – I guess it's not new – I guess we've noticed it recently. It's a souvenir that comes in wooden carved figures. It comes in ceramic. It comes in oil painting. It comes in water colors. It comes in all types of material and value. You can buy it for a dollar or you can spend \$500. What it does is it is a caricature, almost in German-Nazi stryker type, of a Jew – hook nose; big nose; black hat; black caftan, either holding a golden coin or a bag of money; or sitting at a table counting money.

So as I travel in Poland and Eastern Europe I would approach the sales person and say, "What is this?" Some would embarrassingly say "[German word]," the equivalent of "kike." And I'd say, "What for?" Some were a little embarrassed but then they'd say, "It's a good luck charm."

"Excuse me, a good luck charm?"

"Oh yes. When somebody goes into a new business; into a new job; into a new apartment, we buy this for them. We buy this for them as an amulet, for good luck." And what it is reinforcing is that stereotype. But now it becomes what? It goes into a corner of the home; maybe next to a religious object? I don't know.

So, I had the opportunity to meet with the Minister of Education and I said, "I know you cannot ban the sale of things but shouldn't we prepare or do an educational effort in the schools to teach students that this is ugly. This is pernicious. This can hurt?"

The minister said to me, "Oh, Mr. Foxman. Why are you getting so upset? Nobody died because of that." Wrong thing to say to me.

I asked him, "How many locals handed over their Jews to the Germans because they believed they would become rich?" Tell that to Ilan Halimi's family. Ilan Halimi is a young man that, four years ago, was captured and kidnapped in the streets of Paris by a gang. A gang of Muslims; African gang, who kidnapped him because, as they said in court, "Jews are rich and if you want to become rich all you have to do is kidnap a Jew, hold him for ransom and you'll become rich." And then they weren't rich and they didn't have the money and they killed them. So when people say to me, "Oh, why are you getting so upset about Jews having money?" I remind them of Ilan Halimi.

So that's why it's out there, and that's why the timing of the book is now, because the economic crisis continues. The blame game continues, and the internet is rife with conspiracies and then, why? Why write a book? Well, I wrote the book in the hope that I can shine a light a little bit to remind people of what stereotypes are about. How painful; how hurtful; how sinister; how dangerous they are if you let them just be.

It's really a call for good people – a parent to teach their children – for good people to have... we do... you know, there's a lot of work to do in prejudice reduction. Primarily we start with the kids and at some point the kids say, "Well, what do you want from us?" And we say to them, "We want you to have the courage to stand up and say 'no' when you hear bigotry; when you hear prejudice; when you hear racism."

It sounds so simple, and it's not that simple. Look at the tragedies we've been witnessing – the cyber bullying. Bullying is something that we have lived with in this country and society for so many years. Bullying from our perspective is bigotry; it's hatred. "I don't like you because of your color. I don't like you because of your ethnicity. I don't like you because of your religion. I don't like you because of your size. I don't like you because of your

gender." It doesn't really matter – it's whatever is seen by a group as the "other" and if you want to appreciate...

And what is it? How many kids have the courage to stand up and say "no, don't say that." They don't, and that's how bullying not only scars but now it kills, because now it's in the classroom; the school yard, and now it's global. Now we're seeing young people commit suicide because they can't cope with that bullying which is now so global.

You know, what sounds so simple is not that simple. But it's so, so, so important and significant. That is the ability to stand up and say, "It's not funny. Don't say that, it's hurtful." And that simple ability to say, "No don't do it," is not that simple. It's not that easy. It's very, very, very difficult.

My hope is that maybe when people read it, maybe they'll have the courage next time they hear somebody say, "You're Jewing me down," to stand up and say, "Don't say that." I have a chapter which has been reviewed as saying a little bit entertaining and it's not funny. Ethnic jokes are not funny. Remember the period of Jap jokes? Not funny. Jewish-American princess jokes are rooted in the same stereotype of Jews and money, etc. It's not funny. It just reinforces. It's painful. And at the end, it's dangerous.

And it's also an appeal to political leaders; spiritual leaders; religious leaders to have enough knowledge and information to be able to condemn it. To be able to stand up and say, "That's not acceptable. Those are not the values that we want."

It's not a fun book, but I think it's a book that if you read it, I think you'll feel better about yourself for having better understood something that's out there which many of us have ignored, sometimes at our peril. It's a book I never

thought I would have to write or need to write. But it's a book I think may – may – prevent some hurt, some pain, some anguish.

We frequently say, "Never again." And we say it sometimes so often that I'm not sure we truly understand what it really signifies. But for me, writing this book is just another expression to put meaning to what those of us who have survived the Holocaust; the Shoah call the 11th Commandment. It comes out of Jewish experience, but it's universal and the "Never again" basically is never again to be silent in the face of bigotry or prejudice or racism. Never again to be silent when someone is singled out for who they are; what they are; what they believe; what their sexual orientation is; whatever it is that makes them other and different – never again to just stand by and ignore it and be apathetic.

That's truly the motivation of why I wrote the book. So that more people understand that they have a responsibility, which is not that huge a task but to be sensitive; to be respectful, but not only in their heart. To have the courage to stand up and say no to bigotry – that's what the book is about.

Thank you very, very, very much.

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