

The World Demands Otherwise: A Response to *Jewish Currents*

April Rosenblum

In late May, as [Palestinians](#) in Gaza were still counting their dead from Israel's most recent offensive, Jewish institutions began to sound alarms about a number of violent attacks on [Jews](#) in North American and European cities.

While U.S. Jews' responses to these attacks vary widely – many are shaken, others feel unscathed; some Jews are skeptical of what they see as politically-motivated fear mongering, while others worry that these attacks herald more danger to come – the policy results have been swift and uniform. Jews' fears have been leveraged to strengthen an agenda of heightened [policing](#), precisely when police departments across the country face mounting campaigns to defund police forces and [reinvest](#) in social services.

All of this is cause for mourning, and organizing. But it also makes me wonder: What would this moment in the U.S. look like with an even stronger Jewish Left? Picture us, strong enough to make any leader think twice before proposing legislation that could harm members of our multiracial Jewish community and our Black, Brown, indigenous, immigrant and Muslim family, friends and neighbors. If we were to achieve wide U.S. Jewish support, building safety for ourselves and our neighbors not through [dependence](#) on police but through reliance on each other, what else could we win?

That feels far off now. But the question is a good one, because the U.S. Jewish Left is [gaining ground](#). A major leap forward in the Trump era – the Jewish Left's articulation of antisemitism and our need to fight it – has made new kinds of coalition work possible for us. It's meant that we've not only fought [arm in arm](#) with others, protecting one another, but that we've [taken](#) strong [stands](#) against the Right's misuse of rhetoric about antisemitism to harm our allies. Given the challenges Jews have faced in taking this decisive leadership in a Left that has vacillated on antisemitism [since the 1800s](#), this is a welcome and promising change.

But the Jewish Left's gains are still in flux. There are holdouts – some with prominence on the Jewish Left – who suggest that we'd be better off with less boldness and less Jewishness.

A month before the assault on Gaza, the main U.S. Jewish Left publication, *Jewish Currents*, published an [editorial](#) on antisemitism which read as out of step with the growing Jewish Left, and out of touch with U.S. political realities. It argued that work on antisemitism creates a petty distraction from Jewish Left action on racism. In attempting to flesh out this argument, the editors ended up on shaky ground. Beneath a calm, reasoned exterior, they:

- Claimed that antisemitism is not a significant current danger to Jews; mocked the Jewish Left for resisting antisemitism, while arguing that maybe the antisemitic Right doesn't really mean Jews any harm

- Built a straw man argument against the Jewish Left's imagined work (tracking tropes) by limiting their research to [one website](#), which provided vital education to Jewish voters about Republican candidates with ties to antisemitic movements
- Ignored the Jewish Left's primary organizing work (multiracial [coalition](#)-building); then suggested that the Jewish Left should start doing such work
- Blamed Jewish activists' embrace of Jewish identity for a worsening political climate
- Summed up Christian hegemony as an empty "buzzword," rather than a violent power structure that places Christian Zionist policy whims above [Palestinian](#) survival, threatens [trans](#) rights and reproductive freedom, undermines indigenous sovereignty, unites the far Right and [drives](#) white mass violence.

It should be noted that the editors did mean well. Their words seemed intended to put themselves on the map as authoritative voices for racial justice. Instead, the piece shed light on how easily journalists and intellectuals become disoriented when they lose touch with the movements at the forefront of social change.

What I hear in the *Currents* piece is an echo of an internal conversation that many young Jews with race and class privilege face. It is sobering for white Jews to fully reckon with the brutality of racial capitalism. When white Jews take antiracist commitments to heart, they learn to decenter themselves as a way to take responsibility. As a step toward acknowledging the much clearer, pressing reality of racism, relinquishing concerns about being a Jew can feel like the mature moral position.

But in the case of resisting antisemitism, the world demands otherwise. Antisemitism plays many roles, of which endangering Jews is a serious part, but only one part. It is a steady divide-and-conquer tool used by the mainstream Right to fracture popular support for policies which combat inequality and benefit Black and Brown communities, by portraying such policies as Jewish plots. It is an essential strategy for far Right recruiting to foment violent race war and push the U.S. toward explicit authoritarianism. It is a source of division exploited by the Right to neutralize progressive non-Jewish leaders of color - especially when they speak out against Israel's rule over Palestinians - and to stall our [coalitions](#) as we gain strength.

The world needs Jews to lead on antisemitism, and to do it from a perspective of collective liberation. For those Jews who are white, weaving leadership on antisemitism into a daily and sustained commitment to Black liberation is an act of fuller, deeper responsibility.

Despite their genuinely well-intentioned anti-racism, *Currents* editors fail to see the racial consequences of the advice they give white Jews, to step away from antisemitism. Let's explore one example. As *Currents* editors notice, the Jewish (and non-Jewish) Right is increasing its pace of politically-motivated charges of antisemitism against progressives.

This is not, as the editors imagine, because Left awareness of antisemitism has somehow caused charges of antisemitism to proliferate willy-nilly throughout society. The Right has honed its art

of accusing political opponents of antisemitism for decades. In recent years, as Israeli policies have raised increasingly vigorous public outcry, the Right has leaned defensively on its most reliable tool. Considering that there are people in the U.S. enacting violent antisemitism, it is significant whom the Jewish Right seems much more interested in targeting. Nearly always, it is non-Jewish [Black](#), [Muslim](#) or [Arab](#) progressive leaders who see their careers and social justice work disrupted by these attacks.

I pause here to speak to white Jews like myself: When white Jews on the Left fail to take leadership around antisemitism – when we abdicate responsibility and offer the Right full control over the term itself – we leave Black and other non-Jewish leaders in a highly vulnerable position. Then – as if the stresses already placed on Jews of color, indigenous, Mizrahi and Sephardi Jews in spaces dominated by white Ashkenazim are not enough – we leave Black Jews picking up the pieces and dealing with all the harassment that results.

Likewise, failing to counter campus and city campaigns to adopt the [controversial](#) IHRA definition of antisemitism with our own visionary intersectional understanding of antisemitism means abandoning Palestinian students and activists to political repression. It is hard to imagine a worse move – not only for the safety of Jews but for the safety of our partners – than to leave public strategy on antisemitism in the hands of the Right.

To be clear, it's excellent to see the editors centering Black liberation. *Jewish Currents*, which was revamped by this new staff in 2018, has historically played a vital role in building a Jewish Left deeply invested in fighting both anti-Black racism and antisemitism. And now is a valuable time for the multiracial Jewish Left to reflect on our approach to both of these fights: how bringing in an understanding of antisemitism has [strengthened](#) our wider work against racial capitalism, and how our theory and practice could be improved to make further strides.

Continuing to get this issue right is particularly crucial today. We are now a few months out from a period in which antisemitic white nationalists had access to the highest levels of state power in the United States, and were pushed out by the slimmest of margins. While our day-to-day efforts may be focused on holding a new Democratic administration accountable, we know that the white nationalist far Right is using this time to regroup. They have been energized by their taste of power and are determined to seize it again. [It would be a foolish mistake not to recognize this period for what it is:](#) not a return to “normalcy,” but a moment of political leeway to take advantage of; not a relief, but a reprieve that offers us room to maneuver.

The editors of *Jewish Currents* see this era differently. They believe that Jews – white Jews, at least – can cross antisemitism off the list and move on to real problems. Perhaps a decade ago, they concede, it might have been useful for Leftists to think about antisemitism, but surely it's no longer needed now.

It is unclear exactly how the editors have picked 2021 as the year to stop worrying about antisemitism. Their move seems disconnected from any awareness of far Right conditions on the ground and more reflective of the editors' deepening commitment to fighting racism. To the editors, a choice must be made between fighting for Black *or* Jewish needs. But – as Black

Jewish thinkers and organizers have [taught](#) – an understanding of antisemitism is critical to building multiracial coalitions that can win.

Currents editors are mistaken in treating “Blacks” and “Jews” as two binary categories, and thinking that we can choose between fighting for one or the other. The choice to be made is about resources; about where to direct movement funds in a country with a centuries-long racial wealth gap. Luckily, far more than money, what liberatory work to combat antisemitism takes is creativity. Resources may be scarce. Imagination doesn’t have to be.

To be fair, no one should reasonably expect *Currents* editors to be experts in [tracking the far Right](#), or in the complex and momentous work of mobilizing grassroots coalitions. Magazine editors are experts in language. But what should be their strength ends up warping the editors’ understanding. Attempting to criticize the work of leading Jewish organizations, such as [Bend the Arc](#), they argue that Jewish safety in the U.S. is a “material reality.” Yet the editors seem most comfortable commenting on abstractions. Instead of exploring a half-decade of Jewish Left organizing, they scrutinize language: the tropes found on websites or in random tweets from Jewish Leftists; the “buzzword” of Christian hegemony.

Certainly, they acknowledge, some Jews have – materially – died as the Right has gathered strength. But since white Jews don’t face institutional discrimination, antisemitism can’t really be much of a danger. The images that [inspired](#) those Jews’ white nationalist killers must be merely “vacant signifiers – the shed skins of venomous snakes.”

Fortunately, the leaders at groups like Bend the Arc, JFREJ and Jewish Community Action are under no such illusions. They know what antisemitism looks like in the U.S., and how to [organize](#) against it [in deep relationship](#) with communities of color who are fending off institutional racism and insurgent white nationalism at the same time.

These multiracial teams of Jewish organizers have been debating and designing strategy for years. They’ve long recognized that antisemitism in the U.S. doesn’t work in the same chronically brutal way as the racism embedded in the daily systems of American life. It gains power at moments of political discontent and [division](#).

When the Trump era raised the stakes for both Jews and our allies, these organizers came ready and brought Jews together with non-Jews around the country, [defending each other](#). For the postwar U.S. Jewish Left, this is a new development, and it is remarkable.

In contrast, *Currents* editors’ stance is timeworn. They counsel against “leaning all the way into Jewish identity politics,” as if this is novel advice. In fact, the trend as far back as the 19th century has been for Left thinkers to tell Jews to [stop caring](#) so much about being Jewish. By the postwar era, Jews helping to build the 1960s New Left didn’t need to be told. Unlike liberal or socialist Zionist Jews, Jews based in the wider New Left largely adapted to treating their Jewishness as a private, personal thing.

Over time, this proved unfulfilling for many Jews, and some built vibrant radical [alternatives](#). What finally reversed the postwar trend for good was [national Jewish activism](#) around Palestine. Fighting for Palestinian rights empowered Jews firmly rooted in the wider Left to go public, with passion for Palestinian freedom, and love for Jewish heritage.

But *Currents* editors seem less familiar with the dynamics of the activist Left, and more familiar with the habits of Jewish liberal institutions – the Jews you’ll find in standard works on “Black-Jewish relations.” What would be more relevant to this debate is the history those works tend to omit: the stories of the large numbers of non-Black Jewish radicals who [never split](#) from Black movements, but whose invisibility as Jews cut off the power they might have had in organizing themselves collectively.

Currents editors fear that if Jews on the Left notice antisemitism, it will consign us to a self-absorbed victim role. Trapped in the mindset of centrist and Right-wing Jewish leaders, who have long relied on fear of annihilation to motivate Jews to close ranks, the editors valiantly attempt to do the opposite. White Jews can afford to focus on fighting racism, the editors say, because America is safe; for white Jews, everything is normal. Putting aside for the moment that “normal” in America – for Black people and many other groups – is itself an ominous concept, what does history say about this argument? It was when the illusion of normalcy became the strongest, in the late 20th century, as memories of antisemitism faded and white Jews’ sense of privilege grew, that America’s mainstream white Jewish communities withdrew the farthest from the challenges of solidarity with Black Americans.

What *Currents* editors do best is to notice that America has its own tradition of racism; a tradition which [predates](#) the Holocaust and can’t be viewed through a European lens. But they trip up in trying to apply this. The editors argue that Jewish activists, by rooting activism in images of Jewish history, have harmfully promoted a view of “Trumpism as a throwback to the Nazi past” instead of the very American phenomenon it is. They think invoking Jewish memory “has trained many Americans” to focus on Jews and ignore U.S. racial and colonial violence.

Currents editors are right that these are important complexities facing Jewish activists. They’re wrong, however, to see Jewish activists as at fault for white America’s desire to center the Holocaust. In a country where the impacts of slavery, colonialism and genocide are regularly denied, much of the public has always preferred to talk about suffering, like the Holocaust, that can be blamed on someone else, somewhere else.

It is powerful when young Jewish activists speak out in heartfelt public ways about how their families’ experiences of scapegoating in other countries drives them to resist racist authoritarianism in the U.S. We can also expect that there will be listeners who are relieved to hear a story that implicates them less than the history of slavery or the present-day realities of U.S. policing and incarceration. As activists we will need to think strategically about how to handle this. How to honor global Jewish histories without reinforcing white American denial is just one of the challenges that the newest incarnation of the Jewish Left grapples with as it speeds along its learning curve.

Like so many of us, the editors of *Jewish Currents* find themselves in bubbles that warp their picture of the world outside of their experience: bubbles of race and class, geography and politics. This doesn’t mean they can’t do sharp, powerful work that helps movements on the ground grow and improve. It means they have to make extra efforts to see outside. The way to do this is to be in real relationships with organizers on the ground: the multiracial Jewish organizers

behind Bend the Arc, JFREJ, Jewish Community Action and the many [other](#) groups who have spent years building the expansive thinking we need to rise to the challenges of this moment together.

These are the leaders who know that we cannot fight an anti-Black, antisemitic far Right without fighting racism and antisemitism together; that we'll go far further combatting institutionalized racism when we all have a sense of our stakes in dismantling an unequal system. The good news – for Jews and for all of us who want real and lasting social change in the U.S. – is that such people and organizations are present. They are growing in numbers and filling the ranks of the 21st century Jewish Left. The possibilities this opens for collective liberation are exciting, and for the sake of Jews and all of our neighbors, it can't come soon enough.

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Thank you to this essay's crew of organizers, historians and researchers for your edits, wording, friendship and commitment to fundamental social change, and special thanks to Esther Solomon for originally welcoming me to publish this piece.

Credits: Photo: Kristopher Roller (Unsplash). I've borrowed my title from a phrase in the *Jewish Currents* piece.

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