

"An urgent and compelling report on the clear and present danger of proto-fascism in the U.S." —Kirkus Reviews (starred review)

((((SEMITISM))))

*Being Jewish in America
in the Age of Trump*

JONATHAN WEISMAN

Semitism: Being Jewish in America in the Age of Trump

Jonathan Weisman

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A short, literary, powerful contemplation on how Jews are viewed in America since the election of Donald J. Trump, and how we can move forward to fight anti-Semitism

Anti-Semitism has always been present in American culture, but with the rise of the Alt Right and an uptick of threats to Jewish communities since Trump took office, *New York Times* editor Jonathan Weisman has produced a book that could not be more important or timely. When Weisman was attacked on Twitter by a wave of neo-Nazis and anti-Semites, witnessing tropes such as the Jew as a leftist anarchist; as a rapacious, Wall Street profiteer; and as a money-bags financier orchestrating war for Israel, he stopped to wonder: How has the Jewish experience changed, especially under a leader like Donald Trump?

In *((Semitism))*, Weisman explores the disconnect between his own sense of Jewish identity and the expectations of his detractors and supporters. He delves into the rise of the Alt Right, their roots in older anti-Semitic organizations, the odd ancientness of their grievances—cloaked as they are in contemporary, techy hipsterism—and their aims—to spread hate in a palatable way through a political structure that has so suddenly become tolerant of their views.

He concludes with what we should do next, realizing that vicious as it is, anti-Semitism must be seen through the lens of more pressing threats. He proposes a unification of American Judaism around the defense of self and of others even more vulnerable: the undocumented immigrants, refugees, Muslim Americans, and black activists who have been directly targeted, not just by the tolerated Alt Right, but by the Trump White House itself.

Semitism: Being Jewish in America in the Age of Trump Details

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Miri says

Timely, well-written, and important. I love the generous use of quotes from Zoe Quinn, who knows of what she speaks, and the way the author brutally excavates the anti-Semitism linking together all of these various alt-right figures and publications.

Some gripes: I found it a bit repetitive at times, as in the book would reintroduce events or situations that had already been discussed. Some of the arguments were self-contradictory—for instance, that we should stand up and fight back against neo-Nazism and that some ideas should not be up for debate, and yet somehow certain college students are going too far in shouting down alt-right speakers? I was also a bit taken aback by the author's grim portrayal of American Jews and their supposed complacency; he spends many pages excoriating (justly) the minority of Jews who voted for Trump and the even smaller minority who donated substantial funds or worked in his administration, but doesn't really discuss the activism that many Jewish communities have been spearheading since before the election, save for a few pages at the end. Of course, there's always more to be done, but honestly, it's the non-Jewish white liberals who really need that reminder now.

That said, it's lovely to see another Jewish writer call for Jewish involvement in causes like Black Lives Matter, trans rights, and anti-Islamophobia. He's got all of my agreement there.

Bill Kerwin says

Semitism. That's the way the title is listed on Goodreads. But that's not the real title: the real title is *((Semitism))*. And therein lies a difference.

So what's up with those triple parentheses? If you know what's up already, then you know why you should read *((Semitism))*. If you don't, then you need to read it even more, particularly if you are Jewish. Bad things are going on out there in America, and it helps to keep yourself informed.

The triple parentheses—also known as an *((echo))*—is a punctuation device used by the alt-right and other antisemites to set Jewish names apart, thereby tagging them for identification and harassment. This sort of tagging was even more destructive two years ago, before Google, urged by the Anti-Defamation League, pulled a plug-in which allowed all such designated names to be highlighted on every web page and twitter feed.

Jonathan Weisman, the author of *((Semitism))*, knows how destructive such “echoing” can be, for he himself was a target for harassment. It was May 18, 2016, and Weisman, a *New York Times* writer and editor, active on Facebook and Twitter, had just tweeted a short quote about the rise of fascism to his ten thousand plus twitter followers. Within minutes, he received a response from “CyberTrump”: “Hello *((Weisman))*.” And things went quickly downhill from there.

The stereotypical iconography and verbal abuse soon followed: Jews following paths of paper money into

gas chambers, the Jew puppet-master (with feminists and BLM activists as his marionettes), the hook-nosed Hasid, the Mr. Moneybags Jew, the rabid Marxist Jew, and the inevitable statements of Holocaust Denial (*The Holocaust didn't happen, but boy, was it cool!*).

Weisman chronicles his own experience in detail, as well as those of Zoe Quinn (a female computer game designer originally targeted by chauvinists during Gamergate, but whose harassment quickly turned anti-semitic), Julia Ioffe (a journalist pilloried for her profile of Melania Trump), and Tanya Gersh (a Montana real estate agent who ran afoul of alt-right guru Richard Spencer and his mother Sherry). His account of each of these experiences is absorbing, and entertaining too, in a sad creepy way.

But there are many other reasons for reading this book besides these three instances of alt-right persecution. Weisman is very good when he speaks of his own background, and what it was like for a non-observant Jew—whose ties to tradition were primarily cultural—to be the subject of such violent antisemitism. He also gives good informal histories of the alt-right, and of Jewish assimilation, persecution, and activism. (Weisman is from Georgia, and I found his account of the lynching of Leo Frank, and its effect upon the Atlanta Jewish community, to be particularly moving and instructive.)

Weisman, who once took his Jewishness for granted, does not do so anymore. Assimilation, although it has its virtues, can be a form of hiding, and—in this age of Trump and the alt-right—hiding is not an option anymore. However, although Weisman experiences a new richness, a new seriousness in his Jewish identity, he is still committed to the American liberal ideal of open engagement in the public square. And because of this, he is concerned about the American Jewish people:

Beyond Jewish institutions, Jews ourselves are holding us back. American Jewry is bifurcating into a broad mass of increasingly irreligious secularists and a smaller, ardently tribalist orthodoxy. . . . The Jews who are most interested in a liberal, internationalist future, who wish to live progressive, assimilated existences free of threat, are disappearing. Those willing to accept the rising tribalism—to keep to themselves and fortify the Jewish state as an escape hatch or fallout shelter—are growing in number.

Weisman does, however, find both courage and hope in the words of Rabbi Arthur Herzberg:

"The claim to chosenness guarantees that Jews live unquiet lives. I say it is far better to be the chosen people, the goad and the irritant to much of humanity, than to live timidly and fearfully. Jews exist to be bold."

D says

Oy Vey: Kvetching in the Age of Trump is a puddle-deep histrionic screed, subjecting the reader, through a relentless onslaught of migraine-inducing prose, to the inner workings of the author's particular neuroses without a solitary ounce of perspicacity. Despite this, it is sure to delight European-Style Socialists everywhere. How can you take a book seriously which unblushingly uses the triple parenthesis echo meme on the cover? World-famous Internet celebrity Morraku isn't even credited for the jacket design! According to the synopsis (on the jacket of the book which I am holding in my hands because, yes, I actually read the thing, and no, I did not pay the ridiculously high price of \$25.99 for it), the author wrote this book because social media made him feel sad. I sincerely hope the publishing process served as a therapeutic

emotional release; he certainly needed it.

Andrea Levin says

There are places where I disagree with Weisman's perspective or wonder why he didn't interview a broader range of Jewish people (especially those who are more deeply engaged with Judaism on a spiritual and political level), but, overall, this is a book that I've been waiting a long time to read. It is a thoughtful, well-written, and nuanced exploration of what it means to be Jewish in Trump's America. I feel so starved for nuanced thinking in political discourse that I can handle a bit too much meandering if I get the sense that the writer is willing to engage complex topics on a deep level. I appreciate how this book puts current events in the context of Jewish-American history, as well as how it discusses antisemitism in relation to increases in racist, xenophobic, Islamophobic, and misogynistic activities. I'd love to see this as one of my synagogue's book club picks, but given that we seem to have more Trump supporters than the average synagogue (maybe because I'm in Free-State-Libertarian-New Hampshire), I know that will not happen.

Cynthia Dunn says

Chilling.

Joseph says

((Semitism)): Being Jewish in America in the Age of Trump by Jonathan Weisman is a study of antisemitism in American both personal and general. Weisman is the congressional editor and deputy Washington editor at the New York Times, is the author of the novel No. 4 Imperial Lane. In his 25-year journalism career, he has covered the White House, national politics, and defense for the Times, The Wall Street Journal, The Washington Post, USA Today, and The Baltimore Sun.

Antisemitism is probably as old as Judaism. It was institutionalized in Europe, de facto or de jure, at various times in history not to mention Czarist Russia and Nazi Germany. In America Jews are said to control the banking and entertainment industry -- the bread and circuses of America. In many areas, Jews simply blended into American society. Being Jewish could be something as invisible as being a nonpracticing Catholic or a high protestant. Judaism can be about heritage, tradition, religion, or community. Like many religions, there can be an invisibility to it in public life.

The melting into American society suffered a reversal recently. The rise of the alt-right, neo-Nazis, and White Supremacist that seemed to ride on the coattails of President Trump became a vocal and violent force. Attacks against synagogues have risen. Protests by the above groups have turned violent and with it, a violent left rising up to match their level. although these groups regularly praise the president and offer their voting support, it is doubtful that the President is any part of the movement, although his condemnation of it has been very weak.

Antisemitism has been in America all along but the internet and social media have brought it out and increased its voice. No longer are mimeographed fliers and underground newspapers the source of

propaganda. Websites like the Daily Stormer could virtually reach everyone in the US, Europe, and most of the free world. It's not only on the specific websites. It goes deeper. News and social sites like Twitter are a platform for attacks against individuals and groups. Weisman himself has been a victim of these attacks as well as others he documented. Personally, I had several friends leave Twitter since the campaign and election. Attacks on them had nothing to do with race but with politics. The once friendly online hang out has turned vicious for some.

Internet attacks have grown. The title of the book is in triple parentheses. These are "echo marks" because the names inside echo through history in a negative way according to hate groups. There was a Google Chrome plugin that placed triple parentheses around the names of Jewish people for identification and to make people targets for online abuse. Even this book on Goodreads receives written reviews with good ratings and is offset by plenty of one-star ratings without explanation. Although that does not prove anything it does lead to the idea of hate without reason. The online abuse is more than just words. There have been incidents of public releasing phones numbers and addresses too along with murders and assaults.

Weisman documents and discusses the rise in antisemitism since 2016 in America and gives a history of antisemitism in America and Europe. In an age when general acceptance seems to be on the rise by the majority of the population. There is a vocal and violent minority spreading hate. This group survives and now thrives because we have grown complacent. In the words of Edmund Burke, "The only thing necessary for the triumph of evil is for good men to do nothing."

Alexis says

I wish that we lived in a world that this book didn't need to be written. It was insightful to have a Jewish perspective on the current rise of the alt-right, and the hate that is directed not only at Jews, but women and all other minority groups. While the focus is on antisemitism, the author includes a look at other instances of the alt-right such as church shootings, Charlottesville and gamergate. Information is provided on details about the alt-right and some of their code words, and you get a sense of the devastation and fear the campaigns of cyber attacks cause. A depressing but informative read that will unfortunately likely need a sequel.

Sara says

A brief history of antisemitism and a closer look at how the alt-right exercises its own particular brand of antisemitism and hate of the "other" in the age of technology and with the tacit consent of the Trump administration. Author explains the importance of fighting this movement and provides some guidelines for doing so.

Mary Alderete says

I recommend.

Sarah says

this book was PERPLEXING because it simultaneously offers a well-researched understanding of the profound anxiety & complex social positioning of being Jewish in today's political climate, and also completely misses the mark. There are a lot of places I could choose to criticize - it's really obvious to me that the writer didn't bother connecting with the many many MANY young, progressive Jewish people & groups who are doing the work every day to embody Jewish values by, say, protesting deportations & rallying against the presence of neo-Nazis giving speeches in conservative Jewish spaces. But the take that really bothered me was his insistence that the major distraction preventing American Jews from being fully alert to peril is our continual obsession with, of all things, Israel, implying that we all have a finite capacity for attentiveness and that the existence of Israel & thousands of years of antisemitism aren't connected. It leaves me with a question that Weisman never answers even though it's in his title - what does it mean to be Jewish in America in the age of Trump? To have an understanding of our history, culture, language, trauma? To engage with our belief systems? To show up to Seder once a year? Or to try to live & embody the values that make up our beliefs through our actions by standing up against oppression, falsehoods, deportation anywhere in the world, and fascist action even when not aimed at us? I think we have different answers to that question.

Rhonda Lomazow says

This book shines the awful light on the truth of the amount of antisemitism that has risen its evil head in the time of Trump the alt right trolls on twitter the pursuit and attack on columnist ,those on tv and other media who once identified or believed to be Jewish are pursued at times threatened.An important eye opening book.

Dana says

"Anti-Semitism tends to be invisible until it isn't." This book is a chilling reminder that anti-semitism, often a less visible form of bigotry, is alive and thriving in the US and growing in popularity and acceptance under the Trump regime. Jews face hatred from the alt-right who back Israel because they want the Jews to all leave the US and go to Israel, and from the far left who promote the BDS to the point that they are anti Israel and anti Jewish. The author shares his experience as a journalist of the virulent hatred of the online attacks on Jewish journalists especially and the technique of the alt-right neo-Nazis of surrounding the name of a Jewish journalist with three parentheses on each side to mark them for easy searching to target them online with hateful messages and images including death threats and gas chamber photos. Many policies of hatred perpetuated by the Trump regime and its followers as well as an explanation of the alt-right and neo-Nazis are explained in eye opening ways. I highly recommend this book.

Lissa says

Well, of course I picked up this book as soon as I saw it at the local library. I'm Jewish, liberal, and I remember when the ((()))s started cropping up and when the author of this book was targeted by Neo-Nazi trolls on social media.

It's an important book, although it's disjointed. I do like most of the points the author made, especially towards the end when he called for Jews to be more involved with other minority or persecuted groups and their struggles under the age of Trump, as well. Some of us are intersectional and are already here, but I'd love to see more of us out there.

My three main complaints about this book are as follows.

- 1) Weisman seems to think that all Jewish experiences in contemporary America are similar to his. He was raised in a rather liberal, non-religious bubble where he didn't really come into contact with racism due to him being Jewish until he was much older. Not all of us are so fortunate, and the antisemitism that flared after Trump's election in 2016 didn't take some of us by surprise, considering we'd lived in racist pockets of the country before and knew what was happening out there long before Trump even considered a presidential bid. I would have liked it more if Weisman would have acknowledged that we Jews are a diverse set of people with diverse beliefs and experiences, instead of making it seem as if we are some homogenized bloc.
- 2) The author tended to ramble, addressing numerous minimally-related topics in each chapter. I would have preferred a more cohesive writing style. It was hard to stay engaged with the book as it was, because when the author rambled, I found my mind beginning to wander and got distracted quite easily.
- 3) I never really got the impression of what the author really believes what it IS like to be Jewish in America in the age of Trump. I felt like the book ended really abruptly without a clear conclusion or summary or...really, much of anything. It just stopped.

Kurt Pankau says

Mostly good. I learned a few things and got some insight into an unfamiliar perspective, which I always find valuable. I had no idea, for instance, that the Anti-Defamation League was formed in the aftermath of a Jewish man being lynched in the 1910's. Much of the book is spent chronicling the instances anti-Semitism that spiked after the election of Donald Trump, but Weisman draws a line from the Gingrich revolution of 94--which was largely good for Jews, especially conservative Jews--through to more recent events like GamerGate, the rise of alt-right news sources, the way new-Nazi tactics have changed thanks to the internet, and the success of professional bigots like Richard Spencer. It ties anti-Semitism with broader attitudes about women, blacks, and Muslims.

The book short and fairly readable--Weisman, a journalist for decades, excels at stringing together words into compelling sentences. It's not always an easy read, due to the subject matter, as a good portion of it is devoted to chronicling people saying and doing horrible things to each other. I appreciated that it ended with a call to action and some strong ideas about a path forward. It felt a little unstructured, almost like, a series of unconnected essays more than a book. I wouldn't be surprised to learn that this started out as an idea for a set of Medium posts and then grew. There are a lot of Tweets that would have been embedded or screencapped in another format. A few of the digressions felt like they could have been skipped, a few felt like they really needed to be explored more.

But on the whole, I recommend it.

Sarah Perchikoff says

Okay, let me just get the necessary stuff out of the way before we get to the review. While I will certainly be getting into the writing of the book as I would in any other book review, I am Jewish (Culturally and genetically. I don't subscribe to any religion at the moment), so it is pretty impossible for me to be unbiased about this book. That being said, this was a really tough read for me. I had moments where I wasn't sure I would finish it. But let's get into what the books about and then we can get into what I thought about it.

Synopsis (from Goodreads):

Anti-Semitism has always been present in American culture, but with the rise of the Alt-Right and an uptick of threats to Jewish communities since Trump took office, New York Times editor Jonathan Weisman has produced a book that could not be more important or timely. When Weisman was attacked on Twitter by a wave of neo-Nazis and anti-Semites, witnessing tropes such as the Jew as a leftist anarchist; as a rapacious, Wall Street profiteer; and as a money-bags financier orchestrating war for Israel, he stopped to wonder: How has the Jewish experience changed, especially under a leader like Donald Trump?

In (((Semitism))), Weisman explores the disconnect between his own sense of Jewish identity and the expectations of his detractors and supporters. He delves into the rise of the Alt-Right, their roots in older anti-Semitic organizations, the odd ancientness of their grievances—cloaked as they are in contemporary, techy hipsterism—and their aims—to spread hate in a palatable way through a political structure that has so suddenly become tolerant of their views.

He concludes with what we should do next, realizing that vicious as it is, anti-Semitism must be seen through the lens of more pressing threats. He proposes a unification of American Judaism around the defense of self and of others even more vulnerable: the undocumented immigrants, refugees, Muslim Americans, and black activists who have been directly targeted, not just by the tolerated Alt Right, but by the Trump White House itself.

Usually, I don't include that much synopsis (I usually cut down a little of what Goodreads has) but with this book, I feel like you should know exactly what you're getting into and what the author believes. I don't agree with everything Weisman states throughout the book. There were points where I was rage-reading. Yelling at my computer screen while trying to get to the next chapter. But there were also parts where I was like, "whaaaaat?!" because I learned something I didn't know before. Specifically about Leo Frank. He was a Jewish man who was falsely accused of rape and murder of a young girl. He was then taken out of the local jail by people of the community and killed. I asked my dad if he'd ever heard about this and he hadn't either. I love learning "new" history

Another one of my favorite parts of the book is every Zoe Quinn quote. She is a BAMF and she's been put through the wringer but is now helping people who are being targeted by trolls like she was. If any of her quotes were taken out of the book, I will be incredibly sad. I have to quote her (just once). "The thing that really gets me is this notion that any response emboldens them. No, what emboldens them is showing that there are no consequences for behaving like fucking little monsters."

I also liked that he pointed out that Jews should be helping fight causes other than just our own (and many are doing so!). If nothing else, Jews know what struggle is and they can bring that knowledge to help fight for LGBT rights, and gender, disability, and racial equality. White Jews, especially, can use their privilege to help shine a light on causes that need it.

Now for the bits I yelled at:

There were multiple times in the book where it felt like the author was being condescending, especially when talking about the BDS movement and college students, like college students can't have rational, well-thought-out opinions. It took me out of the book completely and just made me question the credibility of the rest of what I was going to read.

I also think the author discounts how powerful the MRA and anti-feminist sentiments are in some of these hate groups. Hating women is a powerful drug and should not be underrated as the reason all this hate is coming to the surface. Women have been fighting these assholes for years and have been warning of this hateful tide of shit we've found ourselves in for decades.

One quote I found disturbing: "Those racists, anti-Semites, and xenophobes communed in their own world, not in the younger, hipper worlds of 4chan or Reddit or the chat rooms of YouTube." Please never refer to 4chan as hip. *vomits* I just really needed to say that.

I also had a real problem that the author said that morality had never entered his mind when thinking about what the response should be to Nazis and anti-Semites. Like, WTF?! I am 0% religious and I think about morality all the time. You don't need theology to think about whether your response to hate is moral or not. I believe it is my moral imperative to shout down or punch any Nazi I come across. How could you have not thought about morality until you read Rabbi Yosie Levine?!

There also seemed to be an assumption that white Jews are the only Jews throughout this book. Like intersectionality isn't a thing. Like Jews of color don't exist. I'm sure there are plenty of Jews who are fighting for racial equality because they are a person of color. But, that was something that was not addressed by the author at all and it was upsetting that those people were not acknowledged at all in this book.

Additionally, Weisman's views on the Antifa are ridiculous. Maybe it's a generational thing but the Antifa has done a lot to stop assholes like Richard Spencer from feeling safe in public. He has bodyguards now. The Antifa saved lives in Charlottesville, NC. So by claiming that they turn even the smallest crowd of Nazis into "violent street theater," the author is spouting some bullshit.

But what about the writing, Sarah?

Ok, yes. I did say I was going to talk about that. For the most part, (((Semitism))) is a well-written book. Weisman is a New York Times editor and the book reads like a long NYT article. But there were times when it was hard to pinpoint exactly what he thought. I felt like I should have known the author's opinion within the first couple chapters and I didn't really get it until much later. Sure, yes, he's against anti-Semitism. Duh! But I wanted to know what he thought we should be doing to fight against it and I wanted to know sooner than the last couple of chapters. He works for the New York Times, so he might be more reticent to share his opinions, but I wanted him to shout it at me. I wanted him to be more radical and that's not what I got.

Overall, I found (((Semitism))) to be an interesting but difficult read. Weisman quotes a lot of racist, sexist, anti-Semitic assholes and it was hard to read all those slurs in one book. I am giving this book 3 out of 5 stars. I read this book because I wanted to know what I could do against the hate we seem to see more often to see these days but that's not exactly what this book is.

((Semitism)): Being Jewish In America in the Age of Trump by Johnathan Weisman came out March 20, 2018.

Thank you, NetGalley and St. Martin's Press for this ARC in exchange for my honest review.
