

Chabad Society Speech – “Resurgent antisemitism and the future of free speech” - as delivered, 24 October 2025

Thanks for having me here - it's great to be here with the Oxford Chabad Society - and to see such a strong turnout. I know that the Chabad Society and other Jewish societies around Oxford are renowned for the wide range of welcoming events they offer, from the weekly Friday Night Dinners to the infamous end of term party, Jewbilation.

Here at Oxford, we have been blessed with a strong Jewish community for many decades, ever since Gladstone's Universities Test Act in 1871 opened up the way for religious minorities to take up academic posts and student roles at universities. One of the first academics to do so was the mathematician James Joseph Sylvester who served as a Professor of Geometry and came up with the matrix - the mathematical device, not the film. Later, Oxford became home to Isaiah Berlin, the philosopher who came up with the framing of the Hedgehog and the Fox, dividing those who view the world through the lens of a single defining idea (the hedgehogs) and those who draw on a wide variety of experience (the foxes). And today, Oxford is lucky to be home to people like Dinah Rose, the President of my own college of Magdalen.

I could spend the whole evening talking about the proud and distinguished contribution that Jewish people have made to our university and our country. However, given the recent appalling attack on the Heaton Park synagogue in Manchester I feel I should talk to you about antisemitism and what more can be done to address this poison which we find seeping deeper and deeper into our society.

As I set out in my speech on Admission as Chancellor in February, I am proud that “Oxford is a home of free speech within the law, coupled with the understanding that such rights involve a duty to listen to and include others, to have an open mind, and to regard diversity

of thought as a strength". I made clear that at our university "we can debate the big global issues while understanding that those can never be an excuse for antisemitism or any other kind of religious or ethnic hatred, the great evils of history".

These great evils of history are regrettably alive in modern Britain. While the Manchester attack was shocking, for anyone who has been paying attention over the last two years, that something like that could happen was not very surprising. Anyone who regularly uses social media will have noticed a significant uptick in antisemitic abuse online, such as posts about how Jewish people are involved in satanic rituals, control the world, and how the Holocaust never happened.¹ Anyone who has seen coverage of the Palestine marches, where some activists openly support terrorist organisations like Palestine Action, call for an "intifada", and shout "From the river to the sea", will have known that antisemitism is becoming more accepted offline.² And anyone with Jewish friends will have known that the synagogues they worship at and the Jewish faith schools where they take their children have been forced to hire security guards for many years now.

I recognise that many Palestine protestors merely wish to criticise the actions of the Israeli Government and they have every right to do so. As former Israeli Prime Minister Ehud Olmert has argued, "you don't need to be antisemitic to be against the current Israeli Government".³ A number of the Board of Deputies of British Jews recently wrote to the Financial Times accusing the Israeli Government of "openly encouraging violence against Palestinians in the West Bank".⁴ Furthermore, I am a lifelong supporter of Israel - in fact the Conservative Friends of Israel was the first political organisation I joined. Yet I have also been highly critical of some of the actions of Benjamin Netanyahu.

¹ <https://counterhate.com/research/a-home-for-hate/>

² <https://www.thetimes.com/uk/politics/article/palestine-action-protests-latest-news-london-manchester-3wctrfmqt>

³ <https://www.newstalk.com/news/ehud-olmert-2184769>

⁴ <https://www.ft.com/content/6a506d98-40a0-48e7-8e98-2882beb30914>

But when we see protestors reach beyond criticism of the Israeli Government, to deny Israel's right to exist, to profess support for proscribed terrorist groups, or to claim British Jews are responsible for the actions of Netanyahu - all of which we have seen all too often in the last two years - this is clear antisemitism. And when a significant minority of activists and political figures choose to turn a willingly blind eye to racism in their midst, the spillover from extremist speech to violent acts becomes a matter of if, not when.

Since October 7th 2023, antisemitic incidents have doubled across our country.⁵ One-in-three British Jews reported experiencing at least one antisemitic incident last year. The proportion of Jews that say they feel unsafe in Britain has grown threefold since then.⁶

While this growth in antisemitism is a crisis and a tragedy for our country in and of itself, it also points towards a wider problem in our society. As Leader of the Opposition, I was fortunate enough to have many discussions with the late Chief Rabbi Jonathan Sacks, and to benefit from his kindness and wisdom. He once wrote that “historically the emergence of antisemitism into the political mainstream has invariably been an early warning sign of societal breakdown. When people search for a scapegoat like the Jews to blame for their ills”, he argued, “they are displaying the first signs of societal dysfunction and democratic collapse”. Guided by these words, in the wake of the Manchester tragedy, all of us need to ask some profound questions about the state of our country’s social fabric and the way we manage political differences between one another.

Broadly speaking, there are at least three trends that are driving antisemitism and broader extremism in our country.

⁵ <https://cst.org.uk/research/cst-publications/antisemitic-incidents-2024>

⁶ <https://www.theguardian.com/news/2025/oct/02/uks-jewish-community-feels-much-less-safe-since-7-october-attack-survey-finds>

The first trend is that the right to free speech has become increasingly decoupled in some people's minds from a duty to exercise that freedom in a responsible way.

Free speech and academic freedom are vital to the future of our university and our country. As I made clear in my address on becoming Chancellor, "in an age in which ideas will change so rapidly, freedom of speech and of academic work and research will be of paramount importance. We cannot prepare for the turbulent decades to come by shielding ourselves from inconvenient arguments, wrapping ourselves in comfort blankets of cancellation, or suppressing minority views because they conflict with the beguiling certainty of a majority."⁷

The United Kingdom, Jewish leaders, and Oxford University all have a long and proud history of supporting freedom of speech. To return to Jonathan Sacks, in his book *Morality* he recalled how studying at both Oxford and Cambridge - although we won't talk about the latter! - was "a glorious experience, thrilling, bracing, mind-expanding". He attributed this to the fact that our university "was a place where you listened respectfully to views radically opposed to your own, in the knowledge that others would respectfully listen to yours".

However, this "respectful listening" version of free speech has sadly become less common in recent years. Many people have adopted a less empathetic version of free speech, focused on an individual's ability to say whatever they like, no matter how incendiary, no matter the consequences. This "abusive broadcast" version of free speech prevents people with different views working through their differences constructively.

⁷ <https://www.williamhague.com/chancellor-of-oxford>

We have seen this with the Palestine marches held every week over the last two years. Of course we should support the rights of people to make their voices heard through protest, but to force the Met to police protests on the same issue over and over again, straining our officers' resources to deal with crimes, including antisemitic attacks, is clearly wrong.

Following the Manchester attack, the reasonable thing to do would be for the activists organising it to suspend their march that weekend. When many British Jews were at an even further heightened fear for their safety from copycat attacks, the activists should have recognised that they had a responsibility to exercise their free speech rights in a less divisive way. Instead, the protests went ahead.

Again, on the recent anniversary of October 7th, protestors should have refrained from yet more marches filled with antisemitic chants. Instead, the marches went ahead. One protestor at an event in Manchester gave a speech warning that they would "continue resisting until the Zionist entity" - in other words, Israel, "has collapsed".⁸ And of course all of us are aware that a student at Oxford has disgraced themselves and our university with their actions at these marches.⁹ I am pleased that swift action can be taken in such cases.

That the activists organising these protests chose not to suspend their activities in the aftermath of the Manchester attack and on the anniversary of October 7th shows the extent to which they have decoupled their right to free speech from their obligation to listen to the views of others. I am therefore glad that the Home Secretary has announced plans for new police powers to control these protests, including allowing senior officers to consider the 'cumulative impact' of previous protests.¹⁰

⁸ <https://www.thetimes.com/uk/politics/article/student-protests-today-latest-news-october-7-pgmfnstsf>

⁹ <https://www.thetimes.com/uk/politics/article/protester-who-chanted-put-zios-in-the-ground-is-oxford-student-c2kx722s9>

¹⁰ <https://www.gov.uk/government/news/new-police-powers-to-protect-communities-from-disruption-caused-by-protests>

The second trend driving antisemitism and extremism is linked to the decline in “respectful listening” free speech. It is the rise of a deeply flawed and emotive way of thinking which has crept into our society, particularly among younger people.

In their landmark book, *The Coddling of the American Mind*, Jonathan Haidt and Greg Lukianoff sum these up as three great untruths that are driving polarisation. The Untruth of Fragility - the idea that what doesn't kill you makes you weaker, and that people need to be shielded from arguments that they might find “triggering”. The Untruth of Emotional Reasoning - the idea that we should always trust our feelings. This can lead to people interpreting the actions of others in the least generous way possible - every perceived slight becomes a racist or sexist microaggression.

Finally, there is the Untruth of ‘Us Versus Them’ - the idea that life is a battle between good people and evil people. Identity politics contributes significantly to this problem. So too do concepts like intersectionality - the notion that the connection of different characteristics like race and class link to form axes of privilege and oppression - perpetuate grievance and victimhood.

To see how these great untruths connect with the issue of antisemitism, all you need to do is read the account of my fellow Times columnist Matthew Syed of a recent Palestine march he attended. After politely asking activists if they believed Hamas bears any responsibility for the crisis in Gaza, he was met with examples of all three untruths. Protestors immediately began to swear at and intimidate him - the Untruth of Fragility meant these activists saw a mild question about beliefs as a threat to their sense of self. They called him prejudiced and racist, quickly interpreting his actions in the least generous way possible, an example of the Untruth of Emotional Reasoning. And finally, in a subsequent conversation on women's rights in Gaza, a protester lectured Matthew on the intersectionality of “colonialist

oppression” and refused to accept that women were being repressed by Hamas - the Untruth of ‘Us Versus Them’ in action.¹¹

Where have these great untruths come from? Haidt and Lukianoff point to a number of different factors. This includes everything from the decline of academic freedom at American universities, the rise of overprotective parenting, and the spread of medical concepts like “trauma”, “triggers”, and “anxiety” from the realm of healthcare where they belong into wider social norms where they do not.

As such, arresting the rise of these great untruths will therefore require a range of different policy responses.

This brings us on to the third big trend that is fomenting antisemitism and extremism, and one of the key culprits that Haidt and Lukianoff have identified as driving the Great Untruths - social media and its algorithms.

On the vast majority of social media platforms, algorithms drip-feed users with content specifically identified to maximise user engagement with the site. With hate, fear, and anger among humankind’s strongest emotions, these are naturally the emotions algorithms choose to elicit. These rage-baiting algorithms have already been shown to contribute to ethnic cleansing by inciting violence and hatred in developing countries. The UN has concluded that Facebook’s algorithm played a “determining role” in the genocide against the Rohingya in Burma in 2016 and 2017, while the same platform has been accused of contributing to ethnic cleansing in Tigray during the recent Ethiopian civil war.¹²

¹¹ <http://thetimes.com/uk/politics/article/pro-palestine-protests-cg3mm5zvq>

¹² <https://www.bbc.co.uk/news/world-africa-67275219>

A further challenge is what Jonathan Sacks described as “narrowcasting: news filtered to reflect our given interest and political stance” with the result that “we see the world the way other people like us see the world”. By doing so, the models of these social media companies make the “respectful listening” version of free speech on their platforms impossible to achieve.

Finally, there is the role of disinformation. This was having a significant impact on Jewish communities even before October 7th. For example, in 2022 analysis by the Oxford Internet Institute found that 19% of Holocaust-related content on Twitter, and 17% on TikTok denied or distorted facts about the Holocaust.¹³ Since then, analysis by the Institute for Strategic Dialogue has documented the role of Iran and Russia spreading disinformation about the October 7th attacks. Meanwhile, both online and offline there are growing conspiracy theories propagated that the October 7th attacks were a false flag operation designed to justify an Israeli attack on Gaza.¹⁴

Of course, antisemitic hatred and disinformation is hardly a novel development. The blood libel began in 12th Century England, after Jews were blamed for the murder of a young boy in Norwich. As explained in a recent episode of *The Rest is History*, the local clergy helped concoct this conspiracy theory so they could venerate the boy as a martyr and attract more visitors and donations to their church.

Tech companies are providing a platform for antisemitic hate and conspiracy theories and spreading them with their algorithms on a scale of which the clergy of medieval Norfolk could not dream. Analysis by the Centre for Countering Digital Hate showed that on X in 2024

¹³ <https://www.ox.ac.uk/news/2022-07-13-un-report-oxford-analysis-reveals-half-holocaust-related-content-telegram-denies-or>

¹⁴ https://www.isdglobal.org/digital_dispatches/capitalising-on-crisis-russia-china-and-iran-use-x-to-exploit-israel-hamas-information-chaos/
<https://www.washingtonpost.com/technology/2024/01/21/hamas-attack-october-7-conspiracy-israel/>

alone, they found 679,000 antisemitic posts, involving conspiracy theories about Jewish control, satanic rituals, and Holocaust denial.¹⁵

Artificial intelligence could make this problem worse. AI chatbots are already used to direct the activities of fake “bot” accounts on social media platforms. There is growing concern about the ability of AI to change people’s views, with a study led by the AI Security Institute finding that chatbots could change people's political views after less than 10 minutes of conversation.¹⁶ This has the potential to be misused by extremist groups, and Musk’s Grok AI chatbot has already been manipulated into praising Hitler as the best person to deal with “anti-white hate”.¹⁷

AI is now also capable of creating convincing deepfake images which could erode trust in all visual media. When the Allies liberated the concentration camps in 1945, General Eisenhower told his soldiers to “Get it all on record now ... get the films, get the witnesses, because somewhere down the track of history some bastard will get up and say this never happened.” Despite Eisenhower’s rigorous documentation, there is a very real risk that AI will destroy the next generation’s ability to believe in any of those harrowing images.

Given the role social media is playing in spreading hate and antisemitism, and the potential for artificial intelligence to accelerate this, finding new ways to respond to these challenges will become more urgent.

The author Yuval Noah Harari has put forward an interesting proposal for achieving this. His solution is to be clear that free speech is for humans, not for automated bots or algorithmic programmes that are designed to turn us against each other. If, he argues, a group of people

¹⁵ <https://counterhate.com/research/a-home-for-hate/>

¹⁶ <https://www.ft.com/content/31e528b3-9800-4743-af0a-f5c3b80032d0>

¹⁷ <https://www.bbc.co.uk/news/articles/c4g8r34nxeno>

were standing in the street discussing politics when some robots approached them, entering the discussion and shouting unfounded rumours, the people would give them very short shrift. Yet in the online world we allow robots to speak to us as equals, believe what they say and let them choose most of what we hear.¹⁸

I have outlined three trends that together I think at least contribute to a significant increase in antisemitism - first, the shift from “respectful listening” free speech to “abusive broadcast”; second, the great untruths of fragility, emotional reasoning, and ‘Us Versus Them’; and third, the role of technology companies in allowing hate and disinformation.

Government, institutions, and society as a whole must do more to counter antisemitism and extremism. History has shown us what happens when hate against Jews goes unchallenged - it swiftly spills over into real world violence. The spread of the blood libel conspiracy theory across 12th Century England contributed to a series of pogroms in London, York, and King’s Lynn.¹⁹ In the 14th Century, the lie that Jewish people had caused the Black Death by deliberately poisoning wells led to massacres of European Jews. The involvement of a Jew in the assassination of Tsar Alexander II in 1881 led to pogroms across Russia. And all of us are familiar with how claims that Jews were responsible for Germany’s defeat in the First World War led to the Holocaust.

As I read my friend Danny Finkelstein’s recent book *Hitler, Stalin, Mum and Dad*, I was struck by the remarkable efforts of his grandfather Alfred Wiener in Weimar Germany. Alfred worked tirelessly at an organisation called the Central Association of German Citizens of the Jewish Faith, where he organised mass meetings, published newspapers and books, brought court cases against antisemitism and defended Jews in court. However, while Alfred

¹⁸ <https://www.thetimes.com/comment/columnists/article/democracy-depends-on-taming-tech-giants-7f8f3t7nr>

¹⁹ <https://www.historic-uk.com/HistoryUK/HistoryofEngland/Pogroms-1189-1190/>

and the rest of his organisation did vital work in resisting the antisemitism of the Nazis, their efforts were ultimately not enough. The root causes of antisemitism in Weimar Germany were too deeply-entrenched.²⁰

To return to the UK today, we must learn from the past and tackle the root causes of extremism before they become too deeply-entrenched. Doing so will be vital not only for addressing rising antisemitism, but general increases in racially motivated violence which we have seen with the Stockport Riots last year and the clash between Muslims and Hindus in Leicester in 2022.

As our country becomes more multi-ethnic and the world becomes increasingly unstable, with a rise in conflicts, finding ways to minimise these sorts of tensions will only become more urgent. All political leaders need to be very clear in denouncing antisemitism and explaining to their supporters why it is unacceptable.

So what would a prospectus to challenge the root causes of antisemitism and extremism look like in practice?

First, we need to ensure free speech is coupled with a duty to exercise it responsibly. With specific regard to the Palestine marches, the Government is taking some first overdue steps to empower the police, including allowing senior officers to consider the ‘cumulative impact’ of previous protests.²¹ Going further, Ministers should seek to create a greater deterrent for the hundreds of people that are being arrested for showing support for proscribed terrorist organisations like Palestine Action, by exploring heavier penalties.

²⁰ D. Finkelstein, *Hitler, Stalin, Mum and Dad*, pp. 27-29.

²¹ <https://www.gov.uk/government/news/new-police-powers-to-protect-communities-from-disruption-caused-by-protests>

More broadly, as a society we need to do more to actively support “respectful listening” forms of free speech. As Vice-Chancellor Irene Tracey said in her recent Oration, “Oxford has a proud culture of freedom of speech” and we must support “the power of speech amid cancel culture”.²² Our university is already showing the way forward on this, through the Vice-Chancellor’s Sheldonian Series of panels which facilitate the free exchange of ideas in a respectful way and celebrate diversity of thought.²³

There are plenty of other examples which we can learn from too. In February, the Chief Rabbi Sir Ephraim Mirvis and leaders from the UK’s six main Muslim denominations agreed the Drumlanrig Accord, setting out “a new framework for engagement” between Britain’s Muslims and Jews “built on mutual respect, dialogue, and practical collaboration”.²⁴ At Dartmouth College in the United States, two academics, one Israeli, one Arab, co-teach a class on ‘The Politics of Israel and Palestine’, designed to give the perspectives of both sides.²⁵ Participation in debate clubs in schools have been shown to help children concentrate when listening to others speak and be more confident giving their opinion on issues.²⁶

Second, we need to do more to challenge the great untruths of fragility, emotional reasoning, and “Us Versus Them”. To combat fragility and emotional reasoning, we need to do a better job of instilling resilience and critical thinking skills in children and young people through our education system.

To combat “Us Versus Them” thinking, more must be done to help people from different backgrounds connect with one another. That is why I have called for a form of collective

²² <https://www.ox.ac.uk/news/2025-10-07-vice-chancellors-oration-2025>

²³ <https://www.ox.ac.uk/news-and-events/The-University-Year/sheldonian-series>

²⁴ <https://www.thetimes.com/uk/religion/article/british-muslim-and-jewish-leaders-sign-reconciliation-accord-7nzn9kpw>

²⁵ <https://www.newyorker.com/news/daily-comment/co-teaching-a-class-on-israel-and-palestine>

²⁶ <https://debatebate.com/schools/impact/>

service to the nation or community to be introduced for young people, requiring them to spend time volunteering in our health and social care system, planting trees, or building houses. Not only would this help school leavers develop strong skills and confidence, if organised well, it would force people from different economic backgrounds, different ethnicities, different religions to mix with each other.

And when it comes to the most poisonous examples of “Us Versus Them”, found in identity politics, all of us should take inspiration from Danny Finkelstein’s parents who survived the Holocaust. As he notes in his book “while they had the right to act as victims, it wasn’t a right they were going to exercise”. “Despite all the apparent political power of victim status, often justified, they could see that it was enfeebling”.²⁷

Third, as a society we need to strive for a much better form of free speech on technology platforms. Rather than the current social media business model that relies on addiction and outrage, we need a model that allows for the rational exchange of ideas. As part of this, Yuval Noah Harari has rightly called for a ban on all bot accounts on social media that are not labelled as such, which would make it much harder for hate and disinformation to be spread.

We can also do more to ensure AI algorithms do not actively seek to sow hate and division. In his excellent book *Digital Republic*, Jamie Susskind has argued that social media platforms should be required to “have reasonable systems in place to encourage civil deliberation on matters of public importance”, which could be defined with increasing precision, over time by Ofcom, parliament and the courts.

²⁷ D. Finkelstein, *Hitler, Stalin, Mum & Dad*, p. 386

And when it comes to AI chatbots, we must act to limit their ability to persuade vulnerable people. As much of their powers of persuasion rely on access to the personal data of the user, one option would be to require AI companies to wipe user data on a regular basis.

Finally, we need to see all public figures, especially those politicians and activists leading the campaign over Gaza, not merely condemn antisemitism, but spell out for their followers why it is unacceptable. Without this kind of total clarity from the Palestine movement's leaders, it will be very hard to arrest the growing levels of antisemitism among their followers. Failure to do so will not only risk further attacks on British Jews, but also damage support for the Palestinian cause.

All of this will require renewed efforts by government, institutions, universities including our own, and wider society. Working together, we can tackle the root causes of antisemitism and extremism.

I would like to conclude with one final reflection from Jonathan Sacks. "Civility is more than good manners. It is a recognition that violent speech leads to violent deeds; that listening respectfully to your opponents is a necessary part of the politics of a free society; and that liberal democracy, predicated as it is on the dignity of diversity, must keep the peace between contending groups by honouring us all equally, in both our diversity and our commonalities".

With those thoughts in mind, let us all resolve to each do our utmost to restore civility to civil society. Thank you.