There are topics in Dara Horn's *People Love Dead Jews: Reports from a Haunted Present* that speak directly to me. I have been teaching a course titled “Contemporary Antisemitism: Same old or something new?” for about five years to international students, both Jewish and non-Jewish, who come to study at Israeli universities, and I have been recently contemplating adding this work to my undergraduate syllabus. Her chatty style and sarcastic wit would make this a provocative read. But what about her arguments? Are they suitable for an academic forum and could my students benefit from them? In this review, I will concentrate particularly on the essays of her book that discuss this subject.

The book contains an introduction and twelve individual essays in which Horn, a professor of literature at Harvard University and a renowned Jewish novelist, uses her own childhood experiences, travel, teaching, and research to put forward her thesis that the world has a widespread obsession with dead Jews at the price of concern or empathy for living ones. Her calling out of the emergence of a deadly form of antisemitism in the United States is loud and clear. This has occurred, she argues, because “people” (both non-Jews and “Jews with little education in the culture”) suffer from Holocaust fatigue. Since the number of Holocaust survivors is dwindling, non-Jews are less intimidated to express their hatred of Jews. “Never again,” she believes, has now lost its meaning, and despising Jews has become normalized.

In her search for answers as to why this is, Horn argues that museums and writers have failed in their methods of commemorating the Holocaust and educating the public about the specific nature and history of antisemitism. Instead of exposing the brutal sadism of the Nazis for what it was, they speak of victims, trauma, healing, representation, and remembrance—everything but antisemitism. This softhearted reverence becomes, in Horn’s mind, not only Holocaust distortion, but an offense to human dignity. Such a lens allows educators to reaffirm the facile moral values of their society rather than taking political lessons from the Holocaust.

This, I believe, is one of the strongest messages of the book and Horn suggests that Jews are themselves partly responsible for this. Holocaust education—the long process of absorbing, researching, documenting and teaching the genocide—has failed in its messages about antisemitism. When Horn does find a Holocaust exhibition which reaches her standards in what it teaches, it makes her nervous. She argues that perhaps there is a threat that providing all the information in meticulous detail may cause people to commit these heinous crimes again. Horn provides no
solutions to these fears and problems, nor does she delve into the issue of Holocaust denial.

Chapter 1 is one of Horn’s most brilliant chapters. Here she questions the recent event in one of the most famous museums in the world—the Anne Frank House in Amsterdam—in which the management ordered a Jewish worker to remove his skullcap/yarmulka in the workplace, forcing him to hide his religion. Horn remarks sarcastically that hiding is exactly what the museum is about: “that closet, hiding place for a dead Jewish girl, is what millions of visitors want to see” (p. 3). Horn then digresses by imagining Anne Frank’s life had she lived and become a successful writer. One of her accomplishments would be, in Horn’s imagination, her reporting on the capture and trial of Adolf Eichmann—Horn proposes that Frank would have done a better job than Hannah Arendt (whose work on this topic Horn criticizes later in the book). The last part of the chapter compares Anne Frank’s idealistic imaginings in her diary with devastating descriptions of the words of Chaim Zalman Gradowski, a Jewish prisoner of the Sonderkommando (special force) in Auschwitz. It is a voice that Horn believes the anti-Semites cannot bear to hear because it demands rage and not sorrow.

Chapter 2 (“Frozen Jews”) turns to the topic of the commemoration of Jewish tragedy. For almost two decades (1917-31), the city of Harbin, in the province of Heilongjiang (formerly Manchuria), housed tens of thousands of Jewish migrants from Russia, until their deportation or extermination by the local Fascist party and invading Japanese armies. Hoping to attract wealthy Jewish tourists, China has recently constructed a theme park on Jewish Harbin with a synagogue (now a concert hall), hotels, stores, and even George Segal-style life-size sculptures of Jews at work and play. Tourists to Harbin are therefore shown a replica of a wealthy and prosperous Jewish community even though there were plenty of poor Jews living in Harbin in the interwar years. Instead of information explaining the complex Jewish background of the sites, the daily religious life, economy, interaction with the authorities and host society, culture, art, synagogue architecture, and why Jewish life was extinguished, this Jewish heritage theme park almost mockingly suggests that these dead Jews are still there—alive, well, and rich. Despite the Chinese government’s intentions, the theme park has not been a successful tourist enterprise.

In contrast to this superficial heritage site, which clearly fails to provide a realistic story of Jewish life, chapter 9 describes the phenomenal virtual museum project of Diarna, which attempts to meticulously record the lost communities of North African and Middle Eastern Jews. By using high-tech photography and imaging, Diarna has created online versions of Jewish spaces that are no longer accessible or no longer exist. What Horn implies, but does not explicitly say, is that the Jews’ presentation of their own history tends to be more accurate. The Israel Museum in Jerusalem has done similar work, providing a virtual-reality tour of the ancient synagogue in Aleppo (this will be available until the end of December 2023). By wearing virtual-reality glasses, visitors to the museum can walk around the oldest synagogue of Aleppo, where Jewish prayer continued uninterrupted until the 1990s, and view its ornate Torah ark at the height of their glory. The synagogue was destroyed in 2016 during the Syrian civil war. So, even though there are unfortunately many places where past Jewish life is inaccurately depicted, there are also many others where authentic Jewish history is kept alive. Here, instead of a sense of loss, one feels a sense of comfort to be standing in places where Jews lived, prayed, and interacted for many centuries. Yet this more accurate depiction of Jews still demonstrates Horn’s thesis that “people love dead Jews,” however authentic the depiction.

Chapter 4 (“Executed Jews) takes a topic close to Horn’s heart—and one depicted in her 2006 novel, The World to Come—that of the Moscow
State Yiddish theater company in the interwar years. She emphasizes how Soviet Jewish performers were forced to reject their own traditions, practices, and support for Zionism, and how this elimination of their Jewish civilization was also a method of killing. The Stalinists naively argued that their anti-Zionism was different from the visceral hatred of classic antisemitism. But the utilitarian pendulum of fostering unified Soviet patriotism could quickly swing against these assimilated Jews to accuse them of being Zionists disloyal to the state. Horn thereby shows that in Soviet Russia anti-Zionism was not really distinct from Jew-hatred. The proof was the Jews’ imprisonment in the gulags, and the torture and massacre of thousands. This essay could be used in class discussions on whether anti-Zionism can ever be separated from antisemitism.

As an Israeli academic, I found chapter 6 particularly intriguing. Here she proves that the core legend of American Jews, that their ancestors changed their surnames during interviews on Ellis Island when they arrived, is false. This, she says, is an American Jewish myth that needs to be rectified. In fact, she blames this foundational story for causing American Jews to foster a false belief that they were welcomed into the “golden medina,” without ever facing antisemitism. But in fact, these interviews were twenty-minute meetings with highly trained immigration inspectors who were fluent in all the languages spoken by Jews, and their purpose was purely to check on the background, identity, and reputations of these new immigrants. They did not write down the immigrants’ names since these had already been provided by their ships’ manifests. Instead, thousands of Jewish immigrants filed petitions to change their and their children’s names in court—particularly the New York City Court from the 1920s to the 1950s—thereby in effect erasing their past identities. This was often a result of failure to succeed academically or professionally, which was felt to result from antisemitism. These Jews were succumbing to discrimination, rather than fighting for their civil rights and defending who they were and where they came from.

The reason why this myth has prevailed, Horn argues, is that American Jews had every intention of denying that it was antisemitism that inspired them to change their surnames. More important than historical accuracy, it was necessary for American Jews to create a founding legend that connected them to the place where they established themselves and still lived. This, she argues, is actually a trait in Jewish history. Examples abound of Jews creating foundational legends as to how they first reached a diasporic country. One of my favorites regards the Jewish presence in the British Isles. Scottish folklore records that the “Stone of Jacob” was used as a pillow by the patriarch Jacob at Bet El and was then brought to Ireland by the prophet Jeremiah and thence to Scotland. Unfortunately, and perhaps this is Horn’s point, these foundational legends did not prevent the Jews’ expulsion from these places. It shows instead, the underlying vulnerability of Jewish diasporic communities.

Three of Horn’s chapters—3 (“Dead American Jews Part One”), 7 (“Dead American Jews, Part Two”), and 12 (“Dead American Jews Part Three: Turning the Page”)—turn to contemporary antisemitism in America by examining the terror attacks in Pittsburgh (2018), San Diego (2019) and Jersey City (2019), respectively. New forms of antisemitism on the internet and social media have encouraged its proliferation, allowing uneducated people to form their worldviews and exchange ideas with like-minded people. It is the third attack that was felt most personally by Horn: an attack on a Jewish supermarket, twenty minutes from Horn’s home, whose real target was the Jewish children in the elementary school directly above the store. Horn remains shocked by the lack of empathy and support of her non-Jewish American neighbors.

Chapter 8 (“On Rescuing Jews and Others”) is her longest chapter and clearly her most meticu-
lously researched. Here Horn makes a psychological study of Varian Fry, a rescuer who saved roughly two thousand Jewish artists, musicians, composers, scientists, philosophers, intellectuals, and writers from the Nazis while living in Marseille, and was the first American to be named a “Righteous Among the Nations.” Horn is determined to understand what provokes a rescuer to choose to save only the most educated and gifted of a people, and why those he rescued never publicly or privately acknowledged their debt to him. Horn concludes that assuming that the Jews were going to die otherwise, Fry was only interested in saving those who represented Western civilization. Fry’s motivation should have been rage, and he should have demanded that every Jew be saved. Horn concludes that those rescued by Fry declined to acknowledge or maintain contact with him in later years because they were traumatized by their experiences and wanted to forget them. They were probably overcome with their own personal guilt of survival and the knowledge that they had been vetted in order to be saved.

Horn’s book is, in many ways, a call to action. American Jews need to speak out and not hide away from difficult issues in this changing world. America is now riddled with antisemitic perceptions that have not been exorcised by the Holocaust. Negative beliefs about and attitudes toward Jews are so normal and ingrained in Western society that people (both gentiles and Jews) are no longer able to recognize them for what they are.

Perhaps the best option would be to use her most well-researched and powerful essays on Holocaust distortion, Jewish heritage sites, anti-Zionism, and Jewish foundational legends in my syllabus. Of course, there is much about American contemporary antisemitism that is missing here, too: the QAnon movement; the far Right in America; the harmful antisemitism on university campuses; the role of self-hating Jews, and more generally, from a global perspective, the ideological war against the state of Israel and the continual reaction against the “aggressive” Israeli response to violence.

I conclude by emphasizing my enthusiasm for Horn’s work. It is a profound, complex, and personal reaction to antisemitism—confirming for us, in her impeccable way, how this irrational hatred is now bound up with matters of prejudice, racism, intolerance, and the abuse of democratic principles and citizenship, as well as notions of human dignity.
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