Historical Background for Understanding Antisemitic Conspiracy Theories *in Disaster Response*

A NECHAMA RESOURCE

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Introduction

Throughout history, antisemitic conspiracy theories have adapted to the fears, technologies, and political circumstances of their time. While the specific claims change, many rely on a consistent underlying idea: that Jews possess hidden or disproportionate power and use that power to influence events for their own benefit.

Natural disasters and extreme weather have repeatedly provided fertile ground for these narratives. When communities experience events that are frightening, destructive, or difficult to explain, people have historically searched for individuals or groups to blame. Jews, as a religious minority frequently portrayed as outsiders, have often been targeted as convenient scapegoats.

The connection between antisemitism and weather-related conspiracy theories is therefore not a new phenomenon. Contemporary claims that Jews or Jewish individuals control hurricanes, manipulate storms, or possess technology capable of changing the weather represent modern adaptations of much older antisemitic narratives about Jewish power and secret control.

Historical Background: Jews as Scapegoats

Anti-Jewish sentiment is as old as Jewish history itself. The language we use today to describe it is newer, with the term “antisemitism” emerging in Germany in the late nineteenth century. While the terminology has evolved, the underlying patterns of anti-Jewish prejudice have persisted in different forms throughout history.

During the medieval period in Europe, Jews were excluded from participating fully in wider society through religious condemnation, legal restrictions, and social scapegoating. This created and maintained the popular perception of them as outsiders. In addition, they faced employment discrimination from local trade and craft guilds, contributing to their concentration in certain financial occupations. This fed the stereotype that Jews are obsessed with money, which remains common today. In addition to this, Jews were already an extreme minority compared to Christians. Their perception as outsiders made them an easy target for exclusion and persecution. It also made them an easy target for false accusations of being responsible for disasters and social ills, which often resulted in targeted violence.

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Throughout history, Jews have been a common target of conspiracy theories rooted in antisemitic beliefs. Jews have also been commonly blamed for wars and economic crises. There is a prominent antisemitic myth that claims that Jews are on a quest for total world domination, and in that quest, have already gained control of governments, banks, media, and, more recently, even the weather. This myth, that Jews already have too much power in society, relies on historical claims that Jews possess total control over global affairs. One source of these claims is a 1903 book titled The Protocols of the Elders of Zion. It consists of a collection of records of fake meetings held by a fabricated group called "the learned elders of Zion", during which they detailed their plans to control global politics, the economy, the media, and other parts of society for Jewish benefit.

The Black Death: Jews Blamed for Disaster

One of the clearest historical examples occurred during the Black Death in the fourteenth century. As plague devastated communities across Europe, Jews were falsely accused of deliberately causing or spreading the disease. Among the most widespread accusations was the claim that Jews had poisoned wells and water supplies. Some communities also claimed that the Jews had caused the plague as a form of divine punishment for perceived wrongdoings or sins.

These accusations had no basis in fact - the Black Death was not a waterborne illness, instead spreading from infected rats, and later through human contact - but they provided a simple explanation for an otherwise terrifying and poorly understood catastrophe. They also drew upon existing antisemitic ideas portraying Jews as outsiders who secretly threatened the societies in which they lived.

The consequences were devastating. Jewish communities across Europe experienced massacres, expulsions and other forms of persecution as a result of these accusations. In addition, government responses to these acts of violence were minimal, ranging from a total lack of response to tolerance and encouragement of the violence.

From Scapegoating to the "Jewish Power" Conspiracy

In 1350, the plague began to wane, and by 1351, the heightened violence against Jews had decreased significantly, though it had not stopped completely. Violence, persecution, and discrimination persisted in post-Plague Europe. Jews who had survived the violence during the Plague often migrated to other countries in Europe, most notably Poland, which was one of the few countries in Europe whose governments were willing to protect its Jewish population. This mass migration to Poland contributed to its large Jewish population.

Over time, antisemitic conspiracy theories evolved beyond accusations that Jews had caused individual disasters. They increasingly portrayed Jews as possessing coordinated and hidden power.

The "Jewish Control" Trope Evolves

In the nineteenth and twentieth centuries, prominent Jewish individuals and families became frequent targets of claims that Jews secretly controlled global affairs. Part of this overarching "power myth" asserts that any individual Jew who gains a public-facing position of power does not deserve that position and the accompanying responsibilities, purely because of them being Jewish, and not because of their character.

The Rothschild family, for example, became the subject of numerous false conspiracy theories alleging that its wealth gave the family secret control over governments, financial institutions, and world events. In the contemporary era, George Soros has similarly been portrayed in antisemitic conspiracy theories as secretly manipulating governments, elections, immigration, protests, and other major events.

Although these claims focus on different individuals and institutions, they share the same underlying antisemitic premise: Jewish individuals are presented not as individuals, but as evidence of a larger, coordinated Jewish conspiracy.

From Controlling Institutions to Controlling Nature

Antisemitism has mutated and evolved throughout history. The underlying pattern of social scapegoating remains, while conspiracy theories adapt to modern life, technology, and current events. The transition from traditional antisemitic conspiracy theories about Jewish wealth and political influence to claims about weather manipulation can be seen in several modern examples.

In 2018, then-D.C. Councilmember Trayon White Sr. shared a video suggesting that the Rothschild family controlled the weather and was responsible for snowfall in Washington, D.C. White later apologized. That same year, Marjorie Taylor Greene promoted a conspiracy theory involving a supposed space-based laser and Rothschild Inc. in connection with the California Camp Fire, a claim that became widely associated with the phrase "Jewish space laser."

n addition, far-right conspiracy theorist Stew Peters has promoted claims that Jews were manipulating hurricanes to harm the United States, alleging that Jewish people possessed advanced technology capable of controlling the weather.

Social media has significantly accelerated the spread and evolution of these narratives. Conspiracy theories that once circulated within relatively limited communities can now reach millions of people rapidly, often crossing national and linguistic boundaries. Platforms such as X can amplify conspiracy content, while generative artificial intelligence creates additional opportunities for false or fabricated claims to be produced, adapted, and circulated at scale.

This environment has allowed longstanding antisemitic tropes to quickly adapt to new events and reach new audiences. Rather than disappearing, the conspiracy changes its language and its alleged mechanism of control.

Hurricane Helene and Hurricane Milton

Hurricane Helene in 2024 provided a significant contemporary example. As the storm devastated communities across the southeastern United States, conspiracy theories emerged claiming that the hurricane had been deliberately manipulated or engineered. Some incorporated explicit antisemitism, including claims that Jews possessed technology capable of controlling weather or that Jewish and Israeli interests were influencing the U.S. government's disaster response.

The storm also became the subject of political conspiracy theories. In September 2024, influencer Matt Wallace shared a map overlaying Hurricane Helene's path with the 2020 presidential election results, claiming that the storm had disproportionately devastated Republican areas while avoiding Democratic ones. The map fueled broader theories that the hurricane had been deliberately manipulated to influence the 2024 election.

Similar weather-manipulation narratives circulated around Hurricane Milton as it approached Florida. While not every conspiracy theory surrounding the storms was antisemitic, these claims demonstrate how extreme weather can become a vehicle for narratives about hidden technological control, political manipulation, and intentional targeting. These broader conspiracy frameworks can also provide fertile ground for antisemitic narratives that cast Jews or Jewish interests as the hidden actors behind catastrophic events.

These narratives can also move beyond abstract claims and result in direct harassment and threats. During the 2024 hurricane response, FEMA Director of Public Affairs Jaclyn Rothenberg became a target of intense online harassment and antisemitic attacks, including a death threat and the exposure of personal information that contributed to safety concerns for her and her family. Her experience illustrates how conspiracy theories about Jewish control can translate into attacks against Jewish individuals carrying out public responsibilities.

The Pattern Continues

The same pattern has appeared in other recent disasters. Following the 2025 Los Angeles wildfires, antisemitic conspiracy theories falsely connected Jews and Jewish interests to the fires. Jews were accused of hoarding water and of benefiting from or influencing the allocation of firefighting resources, while other conspiracies falsely claimed that fire-control resources had been diverted to support Israel's war in Gaza. Broader claims about weather manipulation, directed-energy weapons, and government control circulated alongside them.

The 2025 Texas floods likewise generated widespread conspiracy theories about weather manipulation and government control. Although these narratives were not uniformly antisemitic, they demonstrate how disasters can create an environment in which broader conspiracy frameworks and, in some cases, antisemitic narratives can take hold.

The pattern has also emerged in Europe this year. CyberWell documented antisemitic conspiracy theories blaming Jews for wildfires in Norway, France, and Spain. The spread of nearly identical narratives across multiple languages illustrates how quickly event-driven antisemitism can cross borders and adapt to new crises.

Why This History Matters

Disasters create fear and uncertainty, conditions in which conspiracy theories and scapegoating can thrive. Antisemitic conspiracy theories undermine trust in public officials Jewish public servants, and relief organizations; discourage survivors from seeking help; slow recovery; and divide communities when cooperation is most needed.

For NECHAMA, combating antisemitism is an essential part of disaster response. It helps protect our volunteers and Jewish communities, build trust across lines of difference, and strengthen the cooperation survivors need to recover, while empowering Jewish volunteers to proudly live out tikkun olam through service.

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