

I never encountered antisemitism in my youth. Not once, not in the street, nor in the media. My proudly displayed Jewishness provoked no negative reaction; at University, my kippah (usually of an especially distinctive green hue) generated a total of three comments – of which two were inquiries as to whether it was worn in the shower.

Arriving in Melbourne, in the wake of a tour by columnist Melanie Phillips promoting her book, “Londonistan” which described how the UK had become a hotbed for antisemitic extremism, I was met with looks of pity and sympathetic words about “the terrible situation for British Jews”. But I knew better, and would respond with a confident and dismissive “blown out of all proportion” comment.

In 2008 I told my graduating class at school that they were lucky to live in a time when the world financial system could collapse, where Russia could fight Georgia, and no-one blamed the Jews. Antisemitism belonged in the past.

I was wrong.

Today Jews in Finland are advised not to wear “Jew clothes” for their own safety. An MP in Hungary seeks to make a register of Jews as they pose a security risk. 15% of Swedes believe that Jews have too much power. Assaults and vandalism on Jews and their institutions are so common in central Europe that they have ceased to be remarked on.

And in London, as Phillips claimed, the belief that Israel is an inherently evil country, with no right to exist, let alone defend itself, has spread from the extreme left to the mainstream of opinion formers and politicians.

In Australia, although on the other side of the world from Europe and a million miles from that climate of fear, a cartoonist in a respected newspaper can defend his right to equate Israelis with Nazis in the name of “free speech”, describe them as “excessively homicidal” and hint darkly that “doors will close” on anyone with views like his. But evidently the doors have not yet closed while *The Age* gives a platform to such racism. Leunig’s claim that “I am not an antisemite because I know I’m not” is as nonsensical as it is wrong.

Let’s be clear; it is theoretically possible to be an anti-Zionist without being an antisemite, but it’s quite a challenge. When Israel is singled out as deserving of condemnation while repression and genocide in dozens of other countries are ignored; when each Israeli action is “a threat to the peace process” but Hamas demanding Israel’s annihilation or matching that rhetoric with thousands of rockets is not; when classically racist canards such as the power of the “Jewish lobby” are unearthed; and above all, when the Jews are denied the right to the national self-determination automatically granted to every other people - that’s antisemitism. And it’s growing, fast.

It turns out that the halcyon days of my childhood were not the dawn of a golden age when antisemitism would be banished for good. That evil never died; it was just hiding in shame after the Holocaust exposed its ultimate consequences. But the passage of time and the passing of

generations have distanced too many from that horror, and the sickness is no longer afraid to show its face.

We are therefore reverting to what was a staple feature of Jewish life from pre-history until recent times; the irrational and inexplicable distrust, fear and hatred of Jews. It was contradictory; Jews were hated by the left for being capitalists and by the right for being Communists, just as today the left scream “get out of Palestine” and the right yell “go back to Israel”. It evolved and changed with the times; blood libels that were once literal accusations became a metaphor for financial exploitation. When the defining mark of a Jew was his religion it was Judaism that was condemned; today, it is the Jewish national identity and our right to a homeland that is attacked.

But in this old-new world the crucial challenge is not to our safety or comfort. It’s to our self-image, and the vision of being Jewish that we pass to our children and students.

Will Jewish identity be defined as eternal victimhood, the object of what others do to us? Will Jewish life be no more than monitoring attacks and seeking protection?

Or will we be able to rise above our detractors, and extol Jewish life and learning, the way we change our world and that of others? Will we celebrate Israel and all that it has achieved, or only defend it through apologetics or advocacy? Will we show our children that being Jewish gives meaning and beauty to our lives, or just fear?

Antisemitism exists. It affects us in ways beyond our control. But whether it defines us – that remains in our hands.