



EPISODE 3.1

JEWISH SPACE LASERS, PLUS A FEW THINGS YOU SHOULD ACTUALLY BE WORRIED ABOUT

OREN: Welcome to Extremely. I'm Oren Segal, Vice President of the ADL Center on Extremism. I'm super excited that we are relaunching this podcast, but I'm not alone this time.

JESSICA: You're not alone. I'm Jessica Reaves, and I'm the Director of Content and Editorial Strategy at the Center on Extremism. And we're excited to talk about terrible things.

OREN: First of all, I'm excited that you and I will be able to go through this together, this experiment. Second, I'm excited that today we're going to explore a couple things.

One, being the rash of swatting that we've seen around the country. Two, being looking at some of the more high-profile white supremacist events and what that means. And third, talking to one of our colleagues about our threat detection program and some of the insights he has about that work that people may not expect.

JESSICA: But wait, there's more.

OREN: In the second half, you'll hear my interview with Michael Rothschild, where he is going to talk about his new book, Jewish Space Lasers, the Rothschilds, and 200 years of conspiracy theories. So actually quite timely to everything else that we're talking about.

JESSICA: I'm excited to hear about the Jewish space lasers. I'm not going to lie.

OREN: So, for over two months, there has been an effort by essentially a swatting ring online to target primarily Jewish institutions, synagogues, but also other religious, public, and educational institutions across the United States.

These swattings are deliberate acts. They're often selecting targets based on whether or not they are live streaming their services. They call in either to a hotline or 911 and basically say that somebody in that institution is going to do something to themselves or to others and therefore forcing law enforcement to respond.

They want to disrupt services. They want to watch it. They want to record it. And they want to then share it in the online spaces so that other people people do more. This was happening before the high holidays. It's still happening now.

We've seen times where there have been like more bomb threats or threats. This is something that has been pretty consistent and is a challenge for the community to deal with.

I'm struck by the fact that it's not just like people who are trying to just enjoy services or whatever they're doing at that time, but it's the people who are watching services who cannot make it to those buildings who are then watching people being evacuated.

It just feeds on the vulnerability of the community at this time.

JESSICA: It's gross. It's terror as entertainment, looking for the live streams and looking for ways to just kind of capitalize on that. I see this as sort of the evolution of the zoom bombings that we saw towards the beginning of the pandemic.

Just this idea that you can harness all of this anxiety and fear and somehow either monetize it or just use it to recruit people as a show of strength, it's absolutely ubiquitous in this space.

OREN: It wastes the resources that should be put elsewhere. Like every time like local law enforcement is responding to a swatting against a synagogue or an African American church or a mosque or what have you, then they're taking resources away from other things that may be happening.

So, it's not just that something might go terribly wrong when people are going into an area where they think it's possible that there's a live shooter, for example. It's that this has a cascading effect and it's disrupting more than just the institution, but the normalcy within that community.

And it's challenging because there's not great, frankly, laws about swatting. This is a bit beyond sort of my scope, but, and ADL has done work here. But it's a hard thing to tackle.

JESSICA: You cannot overstate the psychological impact of this kind of activity on the community, on the people who are there, on the people who are watching, as you said, the live stream. Each one of those events has a massive impact on ripples of the communities that are targeted. It's just upsetting. It's upsetting. And we're in a challenging moment to say the least. But that's why we're here, I guess.

OREN: 71 swats, 14 states at the time of this recording. And we shall see.

JESSICA: So, Oren, as you may or may not be aware, a couple of weekends ago, we saw a display of white supremacy and neo-Nazis marching in Orlando. There were a bunch of them. There were some different events that happened. It was extremely unnerving to see even from afar earlier in the day, this was early in September, earlier in the day, there was a protest outside of Disney World.

And this is a continuation of what we've been seeing, protests against Disney World for their quote unquote, progressive policies and sort of trolling Ron DeSantis. Seems to be a twofer for the white supremacists. Then later in the day, we saw some different groups with a very different public facing image wearing masks and waving swastika flags, marching through a park in Orlando and across an interstate overpass.

We heard a lot from the community down there about how impactful this was in a terrible way. It speaks to how active, you know, white supremacists are. premises have been this year. We've seen more than 165 white premises events this year, and that's just through mid-summer.

OREN: And many of them that we've seen around the country have been similar to what we saw in Orlando, if not in size, just like with the old school, blatant, no more optic questions, which you have mentioned to me, just like Nazi symbols and virulent hate, they're not even trying to hide it anymore with like a suit and tie.

Why do you think like from Boston to Texas to California and just all over, they're just saying a little more blatant that is more comfortable?

JESSICA: I don't know, I was gonna say masks off, but in fact, they are wearing masks. So that's not apt. But you know, like sort of around the time of Charlottesville in 2017, we were seeing this real reimagining of what it looked like to be a white supremacist. And we saw the guys in their polo shirts and identity Europa and Richard Spencer and as you said, the suit and tie.

And now we're just seeing a complete reversal back to something much more base, much more frankly scarier to look at, even if the ideology is the same, it's much more frightening.

OREN: Still matching, they all wore red, right?

JESSICA: They are very good at matching.

OREN: March of the Red Shirts is what they called it.

JESSICA: Yep, most of them covered their faces for the second march in Orlando that weekend. The protest earlier in the day at Disney World was a little bit more of the old school kind of, the explicit anti-Semitism and white supremacy and anti-LGBTQ plus ideology going on there, but not as matchy-matchy.

OREN: It's kind of an easy way to create fear and anxiety in the community and it's also an opportunity to be performative. Like everybody there was wearing a red shirt and probably most of them were carrying a cell phone, recording themselves for content later to be put online.

JESSICA: It goes back to the point we were making earlier about terror as entertainment and they're monetizing it and we know that this is happening. But knowing that it's happening and then seeing it are two different things. It remains a little bit shocking every time I see this kind of display.

OREN: It wasn't just that they were hoping people would see them on the news. They left reminders that, you know, freak out and scare the community.

You know, they think they're hilarious, but it really does create some issues in the community. I don't think it got massive news coverage the way some others did. Mostly because it was nonviolent, but how much attention should we be giving to this?

JESSICA: I mean, it's so hard. You want people to be aware. You want to sort of prepare them as much as you can mentally for what they're going to see. But on the other hand, we can't predict with certainty what's going to happen.

So, we can't be telling people, you're going to see X, Y and Z exactly. How much of that preparation is actually helpful versus just playing on people's anxieties, which are already high, you know, in a lot of communities very much, including the Jewish community.

It's a line we have to walk and it's a challenge every single day, but it's a huge responsibility that I know we all take really seriously.

OREN: It's pretty disgusting. offensive. I'm using nice words because I'm being recorded.

So now we're going to speak to our colleague Mason Peoples, who is a research assistant in the Center on Extremism. And he has one of the more interesting slash painful jobs, perhaps. He's part of our threat monitoring team, which is dedicated to looking for, detecting, assessing online threats in particular, but looking to in a best-case scenario, stop extremist violence.

The team uses a variety of tools to monitor a range of platforms, both more mainstream, many fringe where the bad actors are. Obviously, what we do with this information is share with law enforcement in the hopes of providing information that can prevent bad actors from doing what bad actors do. So, Mason, thanks for joining Jessica and I.

MASON: Well, thank you for having me. First of all, I'm very excited to be here today.

OREN: So, I mean, I know one of the realities of being in the sort of threat monitoring space is that you're not just collecting and trying to action threats against specific communities, but you're coming across a whole bunch of other extremist and extremist adjacent type of content.

I try to explain this to people when they say what do we do. And I'm like, well, we're signed up to fight extremism antisemitism and hate, but it seems like a lot of us have entered a world that

is well beyond that. I mean, can you talk a little bit about how while you're trying to find extremist and hate based threats, you might be seeing more than what you bargained for?

MASON: Yeah, absolutely. I think you've put it very well where we start from a place that is very focused, that is very targeted, particularly in the threat monitoring world. We have to be looking for something very specific and the more specific we can get, the more relevant results we can see. But the problem with that is that extremism is not that neat. It is not very clean. It doesn't fit very often into very easy to understand categories that do not bleed into each other.

I think this is particularly accelerating as a trend as extremism is moving increasingly online. So, while we might start by looking for threats of violence against the Jewish community or Jewish institutions, very quickly we're seeing the same sorts of language and tactics and aesthetics that we're looking for from people who have typically been threat actors against the Jewish community.

Those same tactics are bleeding over into people who we would not consider members of that typical extremist group and crowd. So, a good example of this is a threat that we identified that came from a user on Discord.

The user had threatened to shoot up their old high school. They had mentioned the name of a high school. They had mentioned a date. They had messages indicating that they were already in possession of weapons and were soliciting people to look at and rate their weapon build.

As we looked into this individual, we weren't able to identify any sort of extremist connections or typical ties to extremist groups that we might see with other individuals that we monitor. So we're left in this interesting position where as an organization who is interested and committed to preventing extremist violence, we're seeing the language and the tactics that extremists use when they commit violence being used by non-extremist individuals.

OREN: So essentially being forced to make decisions on whether to alert authorities or communities beyond threats that are extremist or targeting religious institutions, etc. Like essentially, we're seeing people talking about school shootings, but you can't do everything.

In some ways what I'm hearing from you, Mason, is that the extremists are operating in spaces where we have no choice but to see a whole range of other bad actors, no matter what their motivation is, and then we have to respond.

I mean, Jessica, when you first started working here too, it's not like we said we want to stop school shootings, we want to stop mass violence, right? That's a lot. We of course want to.

JESSICA: To Mason's point, like if you see this stuff, what are your options? You say nothing and live with that? Or you say something and hopefully you stop an act of terrible violence. So there's your binary, Mason, just a circle back.

MASON: Yeah, absolutely. And I feel very fortunate to be, again, an organization that feels the same way about that, that is committed to, when we can, reducing harm and preventing violence in any form.

OREN: Really appreciate you making the time, talking a little bit about what you're seeing. Thanks for being here. We'll hear from you again.

JESSICA: And thanks for your work, Mason.

MASON: Thank you for having me and look forward to talking again soon.

OREN: And now, here's my interview with Michael Rothschild.

Michael, thank you so much for joining me in this conversation. I bump into you periodically at some conference or some forum or something usually when people are super concerned about extremism and antisemitism and want people to make some sense out of it. But just really appreciate you taking the time to talk with me today.

MICHAEL: Absolutely. Happy to.

OREN: So the real reason I was excited to have you on is because of the most recent book, Jewish Space Lasers, The Rothschilds and 200 Years of Conspiracy Theories. So the Rothschild family has been at the center of longstanding antisemitic conspiracy theories that play into stereotypes of Jewish power, connections to money and so on. I don't need to tell you this.

You wrote the book. But if there was a hall of fame of anti-semitic conspiracy theories, this would be up there, right? With Jews poisoning wells in the 14th century Europe or being responsible for the Black Plague in 21st century America.

All this is to say, what was the impetus for you to write this book at this time?

MICHAEL: Well, my last name is Rothschild. And just to get it out of the way, I'm not related to the banking Rothschilds. And one of the things I wanted to do with the book was kind of put all of that to bed and like completely reduce any notion that I have some connection to this wealthy, powerful family.

I don't. My Rothschilds emigrated from a completely different part of Germany at a completely different time. And, of course, the banking Rothschilds, the Frankfurt Rothschilds never actually did emigrate to America.

And one of the things I wanted to do was figure out what in this vast conspiracy of the Rothschilds' controlling America is actually true. And there is virtually no Rothschild presence in

America. So, I really wanted to bust some of the very foundational myths of how we view this family, what this family actually did as opposed to what a lot of people just read on the internet.

You know, it really felt like a natural extension of the work I'd done with my last book on QAnon. You know, QAnon is very much of the conspiracy theory of the moment and the deep state, you know, funded by Soros controlling everything and only Trump and his minions can take it down, blah, blah, blah.

But the Rothschilds really figure into that conspiracy theory as well. I started seeing all these Q posts about Rothschild central banks and the Rothschilds having trillions of dollars. And some of this was stuff I'd written about before. Some of it was new to me. And I just thought somebody needs to put all of this together, because there are quite a few biographies of the Rothschild, but they really focus on the wealth, the largesse, the palaces, the resources, the wine, which is not the most interesting part about the family.

The most interesting part about the family to me is the things that aren't actually real. And the family itself does not talk about any of this stuff. Very early on in the writing process, I reached out to a number Rothschild family members, actual Rothschilds, and I got either nothing or basically no comment, or we don't talk about these things, or we just don't bring it up. So I really wanted to get to why don't they talk about this? What about this is actually true? And how does it lead into the moment that we're in right now?

OREN: It strikes me that if you want to sort of clarify that you are not affiliated with the Rothschild banking family, writing a book about them may not actually be the best way to separate them.

MICHAEL: But you know, that's other people's problem at some point. You know, I've never claimed to be part of the Rothschilds. Many people have. I talk about this in the book quite a bit. Growing up, no one would have thought that I grew up in the Chicago suburbs in a split level tract house built in 1977.

No one would ever have thought that I was the neglected branch of this family with hundreds of trillions of dollars. There's really only once I started writing about conspiracy theories that people are like, oh, of course, Rothschild would say that if I were an actual Rothschild, I would never use the internet. I would have no idea what social media was. I would say as far away from this as possible. And of course, they actually do.

OREN: How did these conspiracy theories using or citing this family? Where did they begin and why?

MICHAEL: Sure. So, the Rothschild banking family comes out of the Frankfurt Jewish ghetto in the late 17 and early 1800s. Mayer Rothschild, the patriarch of the family, he's the court Jew to one of the nobles of the Holy Roman Empire.

He's got a business in coins and rare metals, you know, basically doing the business that the Jews of the Frankfurt ghetto world allowed to do. And his business starts to grow and grow, and suddenly his sons are starting to get involved with the business, and he is tasked with hiding the wealth of the elector of Hess, as the French forces roll into Frankfurt. So, he makes a lot of money hiding this, investing it, making interest off it. He starts to make loans. They start buying gold.

By his death in 1812, he's wealthy. By the time of his son, Nathan's death in 1836, Nathan is the richest man in the world. So, the Rothschilds have grown in wealth and stature and power enormously.

And for the first maybe half a century of their existence as new old money, they're kind of caricatured. There are cartoons. Some of them have a bit of an antisemitic edge. They're talked about in literature of the time, but it isn't conspiratorial.

OREN: Is there a sense that rich people are going to be sort of targeted, made fun of? There are going to be conspiracies. That's natural, but the antisemitism kind of came later.

MICHAEL: Yeah, that's really a lot of it. The early cartoons of Nathan Rothschild depict him as this sort of plump and rotund and smiling and leaning against his favorite pillar at the London Stock Exchange. It's really much more about their wealth and power and less about their Judaism.

It's not entirely not about their Judaism, but that's not the focal point. And it's not the conspiracy theories that we have now come to soak in all the time. That starts in the mid 1800s. There is a train crash on a railway owned by James de Rothschild. There's another one of Mayer's sons. And this crash is written about with the typical style of the time, these very horrific graphic terms, you know, limbs severed, you know, people drowning, all this stuff.

And this pamphlet here writes a pamphlet called the curious and edifying history of James the first, King of the Jews under the name Satan. And this pamphlet is a double accusation. The first is that James de Rothschild's train lines are decrepit and he's too cheap to care about safety and they throw these vast parties for the wealthy and the nobles and the rest of the people suffer.

The other part of it is that Nathan Rothschild, who was at the time before his death in 1836, they call him the commanding general of the family, was at the Battle of Waterloo in 1815, had advanced knowledge of the outcome because he saw it, got on a fast race horse, went to the Belgian port of Ostend, crossed the channel in a once-in-a-century storm, got to the London Stock Exchange and slumped against a pillar.

Everyone looks at him and thinks the British and the Prussians have lost, Napoleon has won, British stock prices plummet, Nathan is giving signals to his agents to buy up all the depressed stocks. Then suddenly the news of the British and Prussian victory at Waterloo comes, those stocks skyrocket in value and Nathan Rothschild is now suddenly the richest man in England or controls 90% of British wealth, whatever number it is.

So this double accusation sparks a pamphlet war in Paris and there are pamphlets for the Rothschilds, against the Rothschilds, this goes on for years. It finally fades away, but the lasting impression is that the Rothschilds manipulated the outcome of the Battle of Waterloo and took control of British finance.

And of course, Britain is the wealthiest country in Europe. And so, the Rothschilds now rule European finance. And that accusation really is still with us. The idea that the Rothschilds manipulated Waterloo shows up in conspiracy theories for generations after that shows up in legitimate biographies. The Rothschild shows up in Nazi propaganda. It's getting regurgitated almost up until right now in various forms. Alex Jones talks about it in his films.

So that idea that the Rothschilds use this one scoop to take control of the world's economy is this very powerful, very alluring image in the growing socialist movement who think that anybody who has too much money, anybody who has too much power is an enemy.

And hey, look, here's this really visible Jewish family that has all the money. They must be our biggest enemy of all. So really all of these antisemitic conspiracy theories really start with this one accusation.

OREN: What explains the staying power of this accusation? Was it the ease in which people were believing it? Was it because there's all these other conspiracy theories that are easily sort of tied together through sort of a center figure? Is it something else? Just like people need to blame others for sort of the problems. I mean, what is your sense of the main reasons why it has stayed such a key part of the antisemitic conspiracy landscape?

MICHAEL: Yeah, it's all of those things. You know, certainly there is the basic human need for scapegoating. Anybody who is wealthier or powerful than we are clearly is keeping us down for their own nefarious purposes.

A lot of it specifically was about the visibility of the Rothschilds. Their palaces are everywhere. Their train lines are running all across Europe. They're expanding into South America, into the United States.

There is a sense that the Rothschilds are the most visible and outwardly wealthy of the powerful Jewish families. And the powerful Jewish families are controlling everything. So the Rothschilds must be the controllers of the controllers. It's the puppet masters. And each puppet is

controlled by a puppet master who is higher than that. So the Rothschilds make very easy scapegoats, very easy puppet masters. And at some point, these things just take on a life of their own.

And they start to land with other antisemites and other cranks who take them in a variety of different directions. So by the time of the Civil War, you get the idea that Abraham Lincoln's electoral opponent in 1864 is being controlled by the Rothschilds because the Democratic Party has a prominent Rothschild agent as part of it.

Then you get into the 1890s. And antisemitism is on the march again in France with the Dreyfus Affair. At the same time, you've got the gold versus silver debate in the United States. And the Rothschilds were a very prominent gold dealing family.

So the pro-silver forces blamed them for everything under the sun. Of course, then we get into the World War I years, then we get into the interwar years. There's always another version of the Jewish conspiracy.

And somebody needs to be running it. Somebody needs to be funding it. Somebody needs to be behind it. And the Rothschilds are always going to be a really good candidate for that, simply because by that point, they just have been for a long time, and it's just easier to scapegoat them than it is to scapegoat somebody else.

OREN: What are the real-world ramifications of such conspiracy theories specifically about the Rothschilds? Does this lead to action, whether it's violence or broader normalization of these conspiracies that we talk about so much in sort of this modern time?

MICHAEL: Sure. And there have been acts of violence against Rothschild family members, but they're often by people who are clearly deranged and they don't really have as much to do with Judaism. What you've seen in general is a vast profit center based around these theories.

The books and the pamphlets that centered the Rothschilds as part of the grand antisemitic conspiracy were huge sellers. Going back to that pamphlet by Satan in 1846, that pamphlet sold something like 60,000 copies. It was reprinted dozens of times. Some of the more antisemitic books in France, there's a book called Jewish France that came out in 1890. It's like 1200 pages. It's totally unreadable. sold 500,000 copies.

Some of the books that have come out more recently, some of them, none dare call it conspiracy by the John Birch Society, speechwriter Gary Allen, sold 5 million copies. It centers the Rothschild and its vast conspiracy. So you have a huge amount of money, a huge amount of dissemination going on, but they are specifically used by some of the worst people.

In one of the examples I read about in the book, there was a film in 1934 called The House of Rothschild. It was made by what was then 20th century studios as a response to what was going

on in Europe at the time, which is right around the time when Hollywood consciously pushed Jewish stories away for fear of inflaming the German film market.

So this film comes out as an Oscar nominee. It's a big hit, but there's a lot of fear that the Nazis might take this and propagandize it because the early part of the film shows Mayer Amschel Rothschild as a very stereotypical money-grubbing Jew, like he's fretting about some shipment of coins that he's never got. It kind of looks like the meme of the shopkeeper. I don't think it was intentional, but it was just sort of how these things were portrayed at the time.

Well, that footage shows up six years later in a Nazi propaganda film called *The Eternal Jew*, which is one of the most vile and disgusting antisemitic propaganda pieces ever made. There's another Nazi film called *The Rothschild's Shares in Waterloo*, which is taking that 1934 film and making it a complete photo negative to make The Rothschilds the villain of this story.

Now, these films weren't hugely popular in Nazi Germany, but they're part of a growing corpus of work that are casting the Jews not just as a problem or sort of parasites, but as an infection that has to be gotten rid of.

And of course, this is around the time when the Nazis are starting to gobble up huge pieces of territory, which have a lot of Jews in them. And there is a feeling that something has to be done about these Eastern European Jews. I mean, not only are they not Aryan, they're the worst of the worst. And you have these films that dehumanize the Jews using Rothschild tropes to extremely powerful combination.

OREN: It's kind of incredible how, you know, as things change, technology changes, the basic tactics remain the same, right? I mean, so using sort of barring clips or sampling pieces to create your own, you know, we're seeing that certainly in anti-Semitic and extremist spaces online today, you know, it's just sort of memes instead of maybe movie clips.

And then you said sort of, there are grifters that are always going to be making money off of hate. And you sort of described what it was like back then using the Rothschilds. And certainly we see that with modern anti-Semitic and extremist groups.

OREN: Michael, really appreciate you making the time to chat about this new book, *Jewish Space Lasers, the Rothschilds in 200 Years of Conspiracy Theories*. And just always really appreciate all the work that you do in exposing the antisemitism, extremism and hatred that is all around us. My team and I are huge fans and really, really appreciate the work that you do in this space.

MICHAEL: Well, it is entirely mutual. What you guys do is amazing. We're all working together. We're all sort of pulling on the same rope and maybe we'll pull it up enough one day to expose some sunlight.

OREN: Indeed. Thank you.

So we are going to end with something positive or something that excited us or I think Jessica called the life raft. So maybe this week you go. What's your life raft?

JESSICA: I'm going to say my life raft this week is being outside. This is the best time of year. It is the time when you want to go to the mountains and hike around. You want to take your dog if you can and you want to watch him swim in an extremely cold lake. That is something I did this week and that is my life raft and I'll be clinging to it. I'm not going to belabor the metaphor here.

OREN: I guess if I had to choose one this week I did have a delicious key lime pie. So there you go. So in the face of swatting, white supremacist events, burgeoning threats.

JESSICA: Watch this space, everyone, for the continued return of key lime pie.

OREN: We have key lime pie and walks and I think honestly it sounds like nothing but it can be everything.