

**A New Angle**

**Episode 120**

**October 26, 2023**

**Justin Angle** This is A New Angle, a show about cool people doing awesome things in and around Montana. I'm your host, Justin Angle. This show is supported by First Security Bank, Blackfoot Communications and the University of Montana College of Business.

**Justin Angle** Hey, folks, welcome back and thanks for tuning in. It is pledge week here at Montana Public Radio and today I'm speaking with Kenneth Stern, director of the Bard Center for the Study of Hate. He's also an award winning author, scholar and attorney. Ken has argued before the Supreme Court and testified in front of Congress.

**Ken Stern** What I find difficult is that people tend to jump to conclusions about anti-Semitism and overlay some of the complexity of the different narratives.

**Justin Angle** Ken will be visiting the University of Montana community on November 6th as part of the President's lecture series. We recorded this conversation prior to the recent eruption and violence between Hamas and Israel.

**Justin Angle** Ken, thanks for coming on the show.

**Ken Stern** It's my absolute pleasure.

**Justin Angle** So tell us, where did you grow up and what did your parents do?

**Ken Stern** Well, I grew up in New York City and both my parents were physicians. My father was a surgeon and my mother was a pediatric hematologist.

**Justin Angle** And could you give us a brief summary of how you would position yourself on the intellectual landscape? How did you get into this work and what area do you think you're particularly interested in?

**Ken Stern** Well, I grew up in the fifties and sixties before going to college in the early seventies, and so I grew up in the civil rights era and anti-Vietnam War era. And I went to college, sort of the tail end of anti-Vietnam protests and so forth, and was always sort of concerned about social justice, civil rights, and, you know, hate has always sort of intrigued me intellectually. But it wasn't really the focus of what I was doing in college. I went to Bard where I'm actually employed now, and I ended up going to law

school in Oregon. And I started seeing some anti-Semitism, too. So that drove me to work on issues of anti-Semitism for 25 years at the American Jewish Committee, I was the point person on anti-Semitism, the director of the division. But I've always been fascinated much more than just the sort of siloed aspect of any particular hatred. I've always been interested in why do we as human beings have this tendency to see who's in us and who's of them and have a say, turn into hatred? And how does it turn into violence?

**Justin Angle** So we press on that last piece a little bit, what is hate? How would you define it?

**Ken Stern** Yeah, I mean, hate, and it's really very interesting because it's partly an attitude, it's partly behavior, it's partly an emotion. And it's very perplexing right? Because there's you know, to me, the root of it is, again, the capacity of human beings to see who's us and who's them. And it has to me, two different aspects. And it looks at the capacity to see the world that way, why and how it leads to dehumanization or dehumanization of other people. Because, you know, there are differences that are innocuous.

**Justin Angle** Sure.

**Ken Stern** But there are some that become not so innocuous and also, you know, can lead to questions of violence, looking at things that curtail it and things that promote it. And the definition of hate studies incorporates both the sort of visceral, angry hatred that we think of, mostly hate them and get your blood boiling, but also the things that are seen as norm and divide people and lead to demonization or dehumanization. I mean, you think of slavery as a good example. That's just how things were. Most people wouldn't get their blood boiling unless you were victimized by it. But the people that were promoting it just didn't know. This is just how the world was supposed to work. So those are the things that I think that are important for us to look at. And there's so much richness in each of the various disciplines that look at that capacity, but it hasn't been sufficiently pulled together to give us sort of theories of what to do and what not to do. And that's part of why I think hate studies is such an important emerging field because it will help provide theories for groups on the ground there, the Montana Human Rights Network, and nationally, groups like the ADL or NAACP and other groups that, having worked on one of them, the American Jewish Committee, I can tell you that there's no sort of testable theory that we refer back to that comes out of the academy that says, how do we think about what we're doing, what we choose to do, what government chooses to do, what philanthropies choose to

do, what works and what doesn't? What are the principles we should be thinking about? And it's partly to build, to make us smarter about that.

**Justin Angle** Yeah. Can you summarize what we know about how, I think the phrase you used innocuous, forms of just, you know, group partisanship, like rivalry between colleges for example, can transform from something like that, that sort of isn't is a normal course of human decision making, to something that is really pernicious.

**Ken Stern** There, you know, there's no simple train that takes you from point A to point B. Clearly, for most people, whether I'm from New York, whether you're a Giants or Jets fan or you root against the Red Sox, or for the Yankees, generally pretty innocuous, but there are forms of identity that become really central to people, empowering to people, and they, you know, can lead to people actually giving over their sort of being to this. This is really who I am. I'm from New York. I'm Jewish. I'm a father, I'm a husband. I'm a suffering Knicks fan. This will be 50 years since they last won a championship, which I remember '73. You know, and we're all all these things, but for some folks, just one thing, whether you're white or whether you're Christian or whether you're, you know, Israel, Palestine stuff, your identity of one group or another can become very much the core of who you are. And we know that when things like that happen, people tend to really maximize looking for the simplest answer. We're sort of uncomfortable with

complexity sometimes, and when you start down that road and you have political figures and culture and other messengers and societies saying, 'yeah, that's right, they are a danger,' that's a problem. And we see some of it in how cable news works, right?

**Justin Angle** So there's, as you've said several times already, there are many factors that kind of contribute into this space. We were just talking a moment ago about the media landscape and how that has the sorting mechanism and the algorithms of engagement have figured out that engagement is the way to keep us engaged and we seem to be living through a moment where almost everything is being framed as part of identity, and we're encouraged to make pieces of our identity so salient. Are we living through a unique time with regard to how we think of identity and how we're sort of encouraged to construct our identities?

**Ken Stern** I don't think it's a unique time. I think that there are unique circumstances of the current time. What's sort of different is that we have different ways of encouraging people and discouraging people from going down these paths. You know, one of the things that people talk about is the danger of hate on social media, which is, you know, real. But, you know, people talked about danger of the printing press and then the radio and television. So you always have new vehicles. One of the things that social media has done, though, is to encourage people to go further into these buckets. But

on the flip side of it, it's also what a lot of us see what was really behind closed doors before and have a better understanding of what's going on in our world. So, you know, to me, the hateful ideas are the core. The delivery system is interesting and maybe ways of using the delivery system to promote hate or using the delivery system to combat and how we should think about using them more effectively to combat hate, to me very strongly without censorship. But the idea's and the capacity of humans to just be seduced into these comforting buckets of vilifying the other that interests me the most.

**Justin Angle** Sure. So let's talk about anti-Semitism in particular. Is anti-Semitism, I mean, it certainly has a complex and long history. Is it an especially pernicious form of hate? Does it operate differently than other forms of hate?

**Ken Stern** Yes and no. I mean, I think that anti-Semitism is a subset of a human capacity to hate. There's no question about that. It's not like the only type of hatred that plagues the world. And each type of hatred has some of its unique characteristics, although they all share the cornerstone, the bedrock of who's the us, who's the them. There are reasons why anti-Semitism has existed for so long. I mean, part of it early on was theology. And for our purposes we could just talk about, you know, the beginning of Christianity. I mean, you have a society where this is a truth that Jesus is God and

that society's built around that, and then you have these stubborn people who say, you know, we don't believe that. And what do you do with people who are outside the societal conclusion that this is the truth? So that's why Jews historically were ghettoized and kept out of certain trades and so forth, and shown as an example of what happens when you reject the obvious truth. And then, you know, later on, especially once you started having ideas of race, with Darwin and others, the idea of Jews as a religion got subsumed to the idea of Jews as a sort of racial group. Now Jews are a race, Jews are many races, Jews are a people, and you can talk about that more if you want. But that type of thinking got infused into how people thought of Jews, especially with some of the old religious background. Tropes about Jews conspired to harm humanity, and that conspiracy explains what goes wrong in the world. And those sorts of tropes got sort of modernized. So you had something called the Protocols of the Elders of Zion, which is a Czarist forgery, but promoted in the United States very much by people like Henry Ford that talked about everything that goes wrong, controlling the media, controlling the government, controlling money. All this is, you know, it's all a Jewish conspiracy. Those things, you know, had a lot of staying power. So you still see some of that. But when I talk to congregations about anti-Semitism today, you know, people obviously get concerned when they hear Kanye West or they see other things. Desecration of a synagogue, flyers out, all those things. There are a bunch of different measures. So one of them is the number of hate crimes. One of them



is number of attitudes, which is still fairly, fairly good compared to where we were 100 years ago. But anti-Semitism, you know, gives people the vehicle, a consistent ideological and sometimes in some places, a theological way of understanding their world and what goes wrong with it. And it's all the Jews fault.

**Justin Angle** We'll be back to my conversation with Ken Stern after this short break.

**Justin Angle** Welcome back to A New Angle. I'm speaking with Ken Stern about hate and anti-Semitism.

**Justin Angle** And is there a way to bridge from that understanding of anti-Semitism to how to, how the lay listener can understand the Israel-Palestine debate? Both of our political parties try to compete for their support for Israel in many ways. But those positions we hear articulated by some of our political leaders don't necessarily align with some of the views of the members of their, you know, the voters within their parties. So how do we kind of understand how that role of anti-Semitism in this country has sort of mapped on to how we should understand the Israel-Palestine debate and how it's framed?

**Ken Stern** So, you know, from a sort of mainstream Jewish perspective, if you can look back over the last 140 years, there is always a Jewish yearning for the land of Israel. If

you read the Bible, the Hebrew Bible, you see the connection of Jews to the land. It's very palatable and strong. It's religious, its cultural, its identity and its historic. There've always been Jews in the land now known as Israel. But the movement of Jews to Israel from other places in the world was partly a response to anti-Semitism first, and a lot of it, especially after the Holocaust and the obvious implications of where anti-Semitism could lead, that led to the establishment of Israel. In the aftermath of the establishment of Israel, a lot of the Jews that were historically in Middle Eastern places, both Arab and non-Arab places, Iran, Iraq, Egypt, Morocco, a lot of Jews were sort of forced out. I mean, not sort of, I mean, they really were. Obviously, you have also an Arab community there that for understandable reasons, wasn't entirely happy with this influx of new people that was coming in and having some capacity to have an impact on their lives. What I find difficult is that people tend to jump to conclusions about anti-Semitism and overlay some of the complexity of the different narratives. So for some folks who were Jewish and who were Zionists, like I am, I believe in the right of Israel to exist, there are some folks who will see anti-Zionism as saying, well, this is just anti-Semitism because it's denying to Jews the same right everybody else has, so how could you deny that? This is part of my identity, it's a core. Or you have to be able to have the emotional capacity to look at people that look at the world differently. And I know, and I'm friends with some Palestinian academics and activists and others who are not anti-Semitic. They just don't like the fact of what Israel's existence means to

them. They don't believe in the tropes, they don't play into those stereotypes. They just have a different view. You know, there's one group that basically says that, you know, tries to put everything that happens, that's, you know, harshly critical of Israel in ways more than, you know, Jews internally to be critical of some things that happened in Israel and try to paint that as anti-Semitic. And to me, that cheapens the term. And there are some on the other side who say that it's all about a national conflict, and ignore some of the manifestations of anti-Semitism that we do see. Of course, we want to be in our own community and have easy answers to difficult questions.

**Justin Angle** And so you mentioned a moment ago your your latest book, "The Conflict Over the Conflict, The Israel Palestine Campus Debate." This is a debate that has raged on many college campuses however, it hasn't been super salient at the University of Montana campus, at least not in the 12 years that I've been here. Can you briefly summarize what is happening on campuses and why it is so alarming?

**Ken Stern** To put it in perspective, I think what's happening in Missoula is more of the norm. In most places Israel is not a burning issue on campus. There are some campuses where it is and those tend to draw attention. This is a difficult political issue. People have strong feelings about it. So you have all of these different views and attitudes and connections to an issue and there's a temptation to try to shut out the

other side, rather than saying this is a really good educational opportunity. But we've seen too many times where there's a desire to just stop speech and violate academic freedom, it could be from the pro-Palestinian side trying to use, heckler vetos to shut down speakers, and I've seen it from the pro-Israel side, too. Everybody is trying to get the other side to not have a forum. And that's neither something I think consistent with free speech ideas, and it certainly isn't something that would take maximum advantage of the campus's ability to teach about this and to have students think about why this is such a disquieting issue for so many.

**Justin Angle** I'd like to think of campuses as a place where these sorts of ideas should be debated and students should be exposed to them and that discomfort that comes with being exposed to a variety of ideas, many of which you don't agree with, I mean, that is the value of the education in many ways. How can universities do better?

**Ken Stern** The basic idea is that opinions and things that people say are ones that even when we fundamentally disagree with it, we don't want to be in a position that tries to use instruments of state to suppress those ideas. I'm not saying ignore them. I'm not saying that people should be harassed because they shouldn't. People shouldn't be intimidated. People shouldn't be bullied. People shouldn't be discriminated against. But there's a fundamental difference between bullying,

intimidation and so forth, and hearing something you don't like. The notion that, you know, we want authority to stop speech we don't like is again very much in that black and white, good and bad view of the world. If you give government the power to decide what speech is okay and what isn't just based on its content, not on true threats and things like that, but just on the content that it's inherently disturbing, government's going to always opt to stop the speech it doesn't like, not the speech you or I might like. So I think it's a terrible model. It's not like there aren't other ways to fight back against speech we don't like. And one of them that I think I mentioned in the book actually happened in Montana. You recall a few years ago the threats against the Jews in Whitefish, Montana, and there was going to be an armed march on Martin Luther King Day in 2017, and I work with the Montana Human Rights Network, I was running a small foundation at the time, to use social media to get people to make pledges of money tied to this group actually showed up in March, it would go to things that they would detest. So security for the people being threatened, police training, anti-bias education and so forth. They ended up not showing up. But what it did is it made people on the ground there feel that others around the world supported them by going for that pledge and it gave people something concrete to do. So that's just one example. It's not a question of suppress speech we don't like or we have to allow it and ignore it. There are many, to me, much more effective things that we can do. But when

we expect some sort of rule to be a big delete key we miss all those things that are, you know, much, much more valuable to me in the long run against hate.

**Justin Angle** Yeah, I certainly agree with you that, you know, any state mechanism to to constrain speech is a big problem. There are some cultural mechanisms that are concerning as well. There has been a trend toward more, higher percentages of faculty, particularly in social sciences, self-identifying as liberal over the course of the last 30 years. Campuses have grown more liberal in their political disposition across the faculty, that can create a sort of group think. I mean, campuses are not often a safe place for small C conservatives. There are capital C conservatives in many ways, and is that a problem? I mean, it's certainly creating fractures in how our populace views higher education as a good that has value. What do you think of that as far as groupthink on a college campus?

**Ken Stern** Yeah, I think, you know, it can exist in some places, in some departments and so forth. I'm sure it does. But, you know, to and one of the things that I'm very pleased at Bard, even though it probably also, I'm sure also, has you know people are much more to the left the president there has from time to time, you know, just made a point of bringing in conservative speakers because, again, they are conservatives in the

world, and you want to have people that can expose students to a different way of thinking.

**Justin Angle** Right.

**Ken Stern** But it also comes down to the question for individual faculty of what's my job? And I think we see sometimes I mean, I've seen on some of the Israel-Palestine debate, I've seen outside groups that somebody has this view, you know, it's going to be a problem, it's going to make Jewish students feel uncomfortable. But to me, it's not necessarily so. When I teach on anti-Semitism, we always have a section of the course on Israel and Zionism and so forth, and, you know, we live in the age of Google, right? People can know what I think they can Google. So I'm not going to hide it and I'm going to tell them this is what I think I'm going to say to them, I do say to them, the only way for sure to get a bad grade in my class is to parrot back to me what you think I think.

**Justin Angle** Hmm.

**Ken Stern** I want to hear what you think.

**Justin Angle** Yeah. I love that wisdom of remember what our jobs are. And that takes courage. You know? It takes courage at the faculty level, it takes courage for a student to disagree with their professor. You know, and that the welcome environment that you create to foster that, all of that takes hard work and intention.

**Ken Stern** I don't, I disagree with you. I don't think it's hard work.

**Justin Angle** Okay.

**Ken Stern** If I'm spending my time putting together a class, and I'm there with students and if I'm not creating that space for them, they can go read my book, they can see what I think. I really want to create that environment that's vibrant for them and I want them to really be able to engage with difficult issues and feel that they're supported. I've had students who have family in the IDF and very, you know, people very much of a connection to the pro-Palestinian movements and able to have a civil discussion because we all understand why we're there. Nobody in my classroom is going to solve the Israel-Palestine conflict, but hopefully everybody gets a better insight in how to be a critical thinker.



**Justin Angle** Well, I am sure some of the attendees of your upcoming talk on campus will get to hear some of the things you do in your classroom to create that dynamic that you just described. Is there anything else you can tell listeners what they might expect if they attend your talk on November 6th?

**Ken Stern** It's an important general topic. I'm going to talk less about Israel-Palestine or the campus stuff and more about how we think about hatred. And then also, you know, something we really haven't addressed much, but to me is becoming more and more critical is the importance of preserving democracy. I want to hear what's on people's minds and things that I might not have thought of, but I always find it really very useful for me when there are connections afterwards. And I'll give people my email then and encourage them to contact me.

**Justin Angle** Fantastic. Well, I certainly am looking forward to it. Ken's talk will be on Monday, November 6th at 7:30 in the UC Ballroom. For more information and to register, visit [umt.edu/president](http://umt.edu/president). Ken, it's been great getting to know you a little bit better, I'm excited for your talk and thank you for spending some time with us today.

**Ken Stern** Oh, thank you for inviting me and I look forward to meeting you and everybody else in a few weeks.

**Justin Angle** Thanks for listening to A New Angle. We really appreciate it. And we're coming to you from Studio 49, a generous gift from UM alums Michele and Loren Hansen.

**Justin Angle** A New Angle is presented by First Security Bank, Blackfoot Communications and the University of Montana College of Business. With additional support from Consolidated Electrical Distributors, Drum Coffee and Montana Public Radio. Keely Larson is our producer. Ella Hall is our production assistant. VTO Jeff Ament and John Wicks made our music and Jeff Meese is our master of all things sound. Thanks a lot and see you next time.