Antisemitism is almost always a current event. It reflects and often magnifies the fears and anxieties of the times. Despite changing times, the lies that define this ancient hatred persist. The blood libel is no exception.

1. Mustafa Tlass
In 1983, Mustafa Tlass, Syria’s defense minister, wrote a book in which he a ritual murder committed by the Jews of Damascus in 1840. In his introduction, he wondered how such a terrible crime could have happened in a place like Damascus. His conclusion?

2. Tlass’s Book Cover
“...The Jews isolated themselves so as to surround themselves with mystery, so the Muslim world knew almost nothing about them. Thus, it is not surprising that Damascus was shocked by this loathsome crime. However, it rapidly overcame its ignorance about the Jews and now every mother warns her son: ‘Be careful not to stray far from home, lest the Jew comes, puts you in a sack, takes you, and slaughters you and drains you blood in order to prepare the Matzo of Zion.’ Generation after generation passed on this message of treachery of the Jews.”

What really happened in Damascus in 1840 reveals how an ancient lie is used in power politics, then and now.

3. Father Thomas and Servant
On the evening of February 5, 1840, a monk known as Father Thomas and his servant disappeared without a trace in Damascus, Syria—then a part of the Ottoman Empire. Neither man was ever seen again. Within days, Thomas’s fellow monks spread the rumor that “the Jews” had murdered him “for his blood.” This was not the first time Christians in the Ottoman Empire made such an accusation. There were similar charges in other cities in the early 1800s. But in every case, the authorities dismissed the accusation as false. This time, they took the matter very seriously. Why?

4. Muhammad Ali and 5. Ottoman map
The new charge came at a time when the Ottoman Empire was beginning to crumble. In 1831, Muhammad Ali, the viceroy of Egypt, took advantage of that weakness to force the Ottomans out of Syria and name his son governor general. Many European nations saw the struggle for power within the Empire as an opportunity to expand their influence in the region by supporting one side or the other. France supported Muhammad Ali. Therefore France’s main rivals—Britain and Austria—backed the Ottomans.

To complicate matters, some people in Damascus and other cities in the Ottoman Empire were not under the protection of a European nation. Among them was Father Thomas who, like other Christian missionaries in the empire, had French protection. That is why the French consul led the investigation into Father Thomas’s disappearance and oversaw the interrogation of one Jew after another. When the Jews refused to talk, the French turned them over to the Syrians who tortured the Jews until they finally told authorities what they wanted to hear.

6. City of Damascus 1800s
The French consul claimed that he had at first doubted that Jews “employ human blood in the celebration of their religious mysteries” but the “mounting evidence” overcame his doubts. That mounting evidence consisted mainly of a few forced confessions.

There is no record that any Christian or Muslim in Syria challenged the idea that Jews commit ritual murder until the French consul targeted a Jewish merchant under Austria’s protection. The Austrian consul immediately insisted that the merchant’s rights be protected. He refused to allow
that Jew to be tortured. The stand taken by the Austrian consul placed Syria in a bind. The only way to get the confessions that the French were demanding was through torture. But to do so in defiance of Austria could be dangerous to him and to his father, Muhammad Ali. It was now clear that the fate of the Jews would not be decided in Syria.

7. Haggadah in English
People in Europe and America knew nothing about events in Damascus until March when the first letters from Syria reached the west. Many of these letters came from frantic Jews. Others were written by diplomats, businessmen, missionaries, and travelers. After reading them, one Paris newspaper noted, “Rightly or wrongly, the Jews have the terrifying and inconceivable reputation of sacrificing a Christian on their Passover and distributing the blood to their coreligionists in the region.” Such comments outraged European Jews who wrote indignant letters to the editors. Some even persuaded newspapers to print the Haggadah, the book read in Jewish homes on Passover, to prove that Judaism does not require ritual murder. Gradually these efforts altered the conversation.

A number of prominent Jews also met privately with government officials to secure justice for the Jews of Damascus. They found the British and the Austrian governments eager to help—mainly because they saw the affair as an opportunity to embarrass Egypt and France. The French government, however, stood firm in its support for its consul in Damascus and Muhammad Ali.

8. Ottoman map, focus on Britain and Austria
By the summer of 1840, the Middle East was on the verge of a war. The Ottoman Empire and its European allies had given Muhammad Ali an ultimatum: give up Syria in 30 days or we will attack. To show they were serious, the British sank a number of Egyptian supply ships in the Mediterranean. Two days later, Muhammad Ali gave up his claim to Syria. He also decided to free Jews held as prisoners in Damascus.

Jews around the world rejoiced. Their efforts did not end the blood libel. It continued well into the 20th century. But their efforts did show what Jews could accomplish if they had the will to do so. Never before had so many Jews in so many places worked together to alter public opinion. Many Jews also took pride in the fact that a large number of Christians supported the Jews of Damascus.

Christians who believed the Jews of Damascus were guilty had a different view the Damascus affair. They saw the outcome as proof of Jewish power and evidence of a Jewish conspiracy.

On the other hand, Muslims in the Middle East in 1840s saw the Damascus affair as a footnote to the larger story of European imperialism.

The affair itself illustrates not only the power of a lie but also why this hatred is so easily manipulated. As Mark Twain once observed, “The truth is not hard to kill, but a lie well-told lives forever.”