

B L A C K S A N D J E W S

In recent months, the tension between blacks and Jews has once again become a focus of national media attention. The New York presidential primary was dominated by discussion about this issue, precipitated in part by Mayor Koch's pronouncement that any Jew would have to be crazy to vote for Jesse Jackson. At the same time, large numbers of blacks on college campuses have shown up to cheer Louis Farrakhan, displaying particular enthusiasm at moments when Farrakhan explicitly chides the Jewish people. Last fall, hoping to put the "Jewish issue" to rest by allowing Jesse Jackson to explain his views in considerable detail to the Jewish world, Tikkun printed a lengthy interview with the man who would go on to be the first black presidential candidate

to amass millions of white votes. Unfortunately, the interview itself became the subject of controversy. Some readers found evidence of the very problems they had most feared, and others were upset that the questions Tikkun asked pushed Jackson too much and ultimately caused him to give unsatisfactory responses.

We present here some reflections on the way that problems between blacks and Jews have developed historically, hoping that these reflections will provide a context for further discussion. In future issues we will present other perspectives on the history of black-Jewish relations, as well as further discussion of ways that blacks and Jews can work together.

Blacks and Jews: An Historical Perspective

Jonathan Kaufman

One morning in 1984, Black Muslim minister Louis Farrakhan, who had angered many Jews by saying that Hitler was a "great man ... wickedly great" and denounced Judaism as a "dirty religion," spoke at the *Boston Globe* where I work. For several years, at the *Globe* and at the *Wall Street Journal*, I had written about black issues: poverty in black families, problems facing black executives in business, and violent attacks against blacks in Boston. I had just finished a series on job discrimination and racism in Boston. Soon I would be working on a major story on Jews in politics. I was anxious to hear Farrakhan in person.

His speech, from a news point of view, was unremarkable. Farrakhan said more or less what he had been saying in public all year. But what happened after Farrakhan left overwhelmed me. Within minutes, shouting matches erupted between blacks and Jews in the newsroom, many of them reporters and editors who had worked together for years. How, black reporters asked, could Jews claim to be political allies but be so opposed to quotas and critical of affirmative action? How, Jewish reporters responded, could blacks be so blind to the impact of the Holocaust and brush off

both the terror Jews experienced when hearing anti-Semitic slurs and their feelings of vulnerability in a world that could turn hostile at any moment? The arguments were as much over personal responses as they were over politics. I stood in the newsroom arguing with a black college intern that banks and newspapers were not, in fact, owned by Jews. A black friend of mine stood in the parking lot for forty-five minutes saying that no one—no white, no Jew—could understand what it had been like to work for a white-owned newspaper for fifteen years. Allies in so many causes, friends at so many levels, it was clear how little blacks and Jews knew about each other.

As a young Jew—I was born in 1956, two years after *Brown v. Board of Education* outlawed segregation in public schools, the year of the Montgomery bus boycott and the 1956 Arab-Israeli war—I grew up taking black-Jewish cooperation for granted. I knew how the two groups had marched together in Mississippi and had sung songs together along the road from Selma to Montgomery. I knew that Jews had contributed money to black organizations such as the NAACP, the National Urban League, and the Congress of Racial Equality (CORE). The first two presidents of the NAACP had been Jewish brothers, the Spingarns. Jack Greenberg, head of the NAACP Legal Defense Fund and architect of many landmark cases establishing civil rights, was a Jew. And two of the three civil rights workers killed in

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Mississippi in the summer of 1964 were Jewish: Michael Schwerner and Andrew Goodman.

James Baldwin once wrote: "The Negro identifies himself almost wholly with the Jews, [considering] that he is a Jew, in bondage to a hard taskmaster and waiting for a Moses to lead him out of Egypt." Baldwin's words made sense to me. I knew that, as Jews, my family and I would always be outsiders. Blacks were outsiders, too. Returning to my parent's home in 1986 for Passover, I watched as friends of my parents—longtime liberals whose oldest son, now nearing thirty, had passed out leaflets as a toddler for John F. Kennedy—led everyone at the table in a chorus of "We Shall Overcome." I know how proud my father, an advertising executive, had been back in the 1960s when he was asked to write some advertising for the NAACP. And I knew how hurt he was one day when he came home and said he had been fired from the account because he was white.

It was clear long before 1984 that the alliance that fought for civil rights in the South in the 1950s was becoming weaker. The growth of Black Power, coupled with the increase in city crime, much of it committed by blacks, unnerved the residents of my neighborhood on the Upper West Side of Manhattan and disrupted our lives. The killing of Martin Luther King in 1968 seemed to break the final link many whites felt with a black movement that was becoming more angry and more frightening, filling the TV screens with images of people carrying guns and demanding reparations. The disputes over Israel in the 1970s and 1980s and the debates about affirmative action were added evidence that blacks and Jews were drifting further apart.

In the 1984 presidential election, blacks and Jews were two of only a handful of groups—the others being Hispanics, Asians, and the unemployed—who deserted the Reagan landslide to vote for Democrat Walter Mondale. But that electoral coalition masked deep fissures in black-Jewish relations. Jesse Jackson's campaign and the controversy over his "hymie" and "hymie-town" remarks aggravated the pain and anger that had been brewing for a long time.

Still, the passions unleashed by Farrakhan at the *Globe* surprised me. I wanted to find out what had happened. What was it that first brought blacks and Jews together and why have they now split so bitterly apart?

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In the 1930s, 1940s, and 1950s blacks and Jews shared a common enemy: the prejudiced, white gentile. It was not preordained that Jews would enlist in the civil rights struggles of the 1950s and 1960s or embrace the liberalism of the New Deal, the Great Society, and the Democratic party. Reading from a

prayer book and being exposed to Jewish values did not guarantee a political commitment to helping blacks or other minorities. Unlike the Quakers, or even the blue blood Protestant Brahmins of Boston, American Jews did not have a history of becoming involved in liberal causes, even during the Civil War. Rather, several strains in the history of Jews in America came together and set the stage for the liberal outlook that dominated Jewish political life from the end of the Second World War onward: the flood of Jewish immigrants from Eastern Europe that began in the latter part of the nineteenth century; the rise of anti-Semitism in the United States; and the Holocaust in Europe.

Black attitudes towards Jews were intimately tied up with their attitudes towards whites.

The influx of more than two million Eastern European Jews between 1880 and 1920 overwhelmed the Jewish community already in the United States and transformed its politics. The first wave of Jewish immigrants from Germany had arrived with business on its mind and success in its future. Politically, these Jews clung to a conservative outlook that they had brought with them from Europe. The new arrivals, however, were overwhelmingly poor and working class, and they brought with them a new ideology, largely unknown in America: socialism. Thus, a Jew growing up in a Jewish neighborhood between 1910 and 1950 did not have to be a socialist or a communist to inhale the talk of socialism and equality that blew all around. It permeated life, creating a worldview in which blacks were objects of sympathy rather than hate, potential allies rather than foes, people who could be helped and who could make Jews feel good for having helped them.

The rise of anti-Semitism in the United States, beginning in the late nineteenth century, reinforced the sense that Jews were outsiders. Exclusions from country clubs and quotas at universities, the rantings of Father Coughlin and Henry Ford—all these things pushed Jews towards demands for greater tolerance and change. One of the many legacies of the Holocaust was the belief among Jews that what happened in Germany could happen again anywhere. In 1946, only months after the discovery of the Nazi death camps, a poll showed that twenty-two percent of the American people considered Jews to be a "menace to America." As the twentieth century's ultimate victims, Jews could easily identify with other victims of oppression and injustice. So, when Martin Luther King called for a society that judged men "not by the color of their skin but by the

content of their character," he spoke a language that touched not only blacks but Jews.

Among blacks there was a strong history of positive feelings towards Jews, rooted in the biblical story of the Exodus which resonated among slaves, in the charitable work of businessmen like Julius Rosenwald (the founder of Sears Roebuck, who funded the so-called Rosenwald schools across the South), and in the political activities of Jews like William Liebowitz, who defended the Scottsboro Boys.

But there was also a strong history of ambivalence. St. Clair Drake, one of the country's leading black sociologists, recounts the story of walking down the road in Staunton, Virginia, in the Shenandoah Valley with his grandmother one day in 1920. Drake was accompanying his grandmother to a school for white girls where she worked as a maid. They passed the house of one of the only two Jewish families in town—a wealthy family that owned a chain of stores. The sun was beating down. The Jewish woman on the veranda invited Drake and his grandmother for a glass of water. Drake knew that the two Jewish families were the only white families in town to allow a black on their veranda. Yet Drake recounts that at home it was common for him and his family to talk about the Jewish family stores "Jewing" them. "They'll cheat you. You got to be careful," people would tell him.

In many ways, this story is a paradigm for the way many blacks looked at Jews. Jews were both good and bad. They were some of the best friends blacks had. They were also some of their most humiliating exploiters. The contradictions often existed side by side.

Black attitudes towards Jews were intimately tied up with their attitudes towards whites. Reaching back to the nineteenth century, with the growth of the first back-to-Africa movements, the black community had been pulled between the competing strains of cosmopolitanism and nationalism, cooperating with whites and trying to integrate versus separating from whites and going their own way. Just as the growth in popularity of Malcolm X after 1964 signaled the start of what would become the Black Power movement, with its strong overtones of black separatism, so the emergence of leaders like Martin Luther King in the 1950s signaled the ascendancy of the cosmopolitan strain. With blacks seeking cooperation from whites, Jews were a welcome choice for allies. They were willing to help, and they had access to money, influence, and intellectual circles. The ambivalent feelings many blacks held toward Jews could be buried. The positive could be emphasized and negative stereotypes put aside while the two groups worked together for a broader goal.

Jews responded. In the early 1960s three-quarters of

the money for the major civil rights organizations—the Student Non-violent Coordinating Committee (SNCC), CORE, and King's Southern Christian Leadership Conference (SCLC)—came from Jewish donors. More than half the white Freedom Riders who went South were Jewish, as were two-thirds of the white students and organizers who flooded Mississippi to help register black voters in the summer of 1964. Jewish groups filed the first case against school segregation in the North and were the first to take advantage of court decisions barring racial covenants in housing deeds. Jewish lawyers dominated the civil rights struggle. Jack Greenberg was Martin Luther King's lawyer, and William Kunstler, Arthur Kinoy, and Morton Stavis represented the Mississippi Freedom Democratic Party and other organizations. Where there was a black-white alliance in the 1960s it was often a black-Jewish alliance.

The bonds blacks and Jews forged in the 1950s and 1960s were personal as well as political. Black novelist Alice Walker met her husband, a Jewish lawyer from New York, when he bailed her out of jail after a Freedom Ride.

And yet, though many Jews deny it, there was an air of paternalism that hovered over the early days of black-Jewish cooperation in the 1950s and early 1960s. Jews in the civil rights movement had the money and often the access to power. They frequently dominated interracial meetings, doling out advice as if they were the elder brothers in suffering. Jewish students might come South for the summer in 1964, but they would return to college in the fall, leaving black civil rights workers to carry on the battle.

Yet as the civil rights movement rolled up success after success—integration of lunch counters, passage of the Civil Rights Act and the Voting Rights Act—these tensions were easy to overlook. So were the tensions that grew out of the legacy of black-Jewish encounters in northern ghettos where Jews were often the landlords and store owners in poor black neighborhoods.

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The alliance between blacks and Jews split open in a hotel ballroom in Chicago over Labor Day weekend, 1967. Hundreds of civil rights and antiwar activists had gathered at the ornate Palmer House for the National Convention on New Politics. Martin Luther King addressed the opening session. There was talk that the convention might nominate King and antiwar activist Benjamin Spock to a third-party ticket to run against Lyndon Johnson in 1968. Within days, however, the convention collapsed in a torrent of factional disputes.

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AN HISTORICAL PERSPECTIVE

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The black caucus gained control and passed a resolution denouncing the “imperialistic Zionist war”—Israel’s victory in the Six Day War three months earlier.

There had been rumblings for several years about tension between blacks and Jews. As calls for Black Power replaced King’s plea for integration, black organizations became more hostile to whites, especially Jews. The proximity of Jews made them easy targets for antiwhite hostility. Many blacks also seemed genuinely

puzzled that Jews, of all people, did not understand the black turn towards nationalism and a civil rights movement that was black-led and black-controlled. After all, weren't these desires mirror images of what Jews had done with Israel?

Jews located opposition to Israel in black anti-Semitism. For many blacks, however, hostility to Israel was part of a broader identification with third-world struggles across the globe. Oppressed themselves, many blacks felt more affinity for those newly oppressed, like the Palestinians.

But the resolution at the National Convention on New Politics capped a series of incidents that descended into gutter anti-Semitism. Shortly after the Six Day War, SNCC published a newsletter picturing Israeli General Moshe Dayan with dollar signs for eyes. The Black Panther magazine chortled:

We're gonna burn their towns and that ain't all
We're gonna piss upon the Wailing Wall
And then we'll get Kosygin and DeGaulle
That will be ecstasy, killing every Jew we see.

Within eighteen months, the split that opened in Chicago had become an abyss. In the fall of 1968, New York's schools were shut down for weeks in a dispute that pitted the largely Jewish teachers' union against a black community school board in the poor Ocean Hill-Brownsville section of Brooklyn. The community board wanted the right to control the education of its students, including the right to hire and fire teachers. The union objected and struck New York's schools until several teachers fired by the community board—all of them Jewish—were reinstated.

As the strike dragged on, someone put anti-Semitic leaflets in the mailboxes of several teachers. Albert Shanker, the head of the teachers' union, reprinted the leaflets by the thousands—a move opposed by many of the Jewish teachers in Ocean Hill-Brownsville, who believed that blacks in the neighborhood were angry at whites, not at Jews.

New York snapped. Television screens and newspapers were filled with bitter charges of Jewish racism and black anti-Semitism. Diane Ravitch, a historian of New York's schools, calls the teachers' strike a "seismic" event for New York. It was an event from which the city, and black-Jewish relations, never recovered.



As the black-Jewish alliance that supported the civil rights movement began to crumble, a quieter but just as fundamental split was occurring between poor and working-class blacks and Jews. The battleground here was neighborhoods. In the South, blacks had not known

many Jews, and the Jews they had known seemed benign in comparison with other whites. But in the North, contact between blacks and Jews was intimate, especially in the ghetto. A popular saying in the 1960s noted that of five people a black meets in the course of a day—the shopkeeper, the landlord, the social worker, the teacher, and the cop—the first four were Jews while the fifth was Irish.

These Jews acted like whites. Some storekeepers overcharged; some did not. Some teachers worked hard with students; others brushed them aside. There was nothing “Jewish” about their behavior. And while they may have been the whites that wielded day-to-day control over black lives, they were not the reason that unemployment was high, housing was dilapidated, schools were poor. They were part of the problem, not all of it. But for a black whose view was shaped by his or her neighborhood, Jews wielded enormous power, and many blacks resented that power.

This constant and unequal contact between blacks and Jews was exacerbated by the wave of neighborhood changes that transformed cities in the 1960s. In city after city—from Boston to Chicago to Los Angeles—Jewish neighborhoods in the late 1960s turned inexorably into black neighborhoods. Blacks sought to break out of ghettos and move into better housing. Part of the reason they chose Jewish neighborhoods was that, unlike the residents of ethnic neighborhoods such as South Boston or Mayor Richard Daley’s Bridgeport in Chicago, Jews did not respond violently when blacks moved in. More often than not, the Jews just moved out.

The blacks who moved into these neighborhoods were poorer and received fewer city services. Crime rose. For a period during the 1960s, it seemed that every Jew had an elderly relative, friend, or coworker who felt trapped in a once-Jewish, now-black neighborhood. The impact on these Jews, and on the Jewish community as a whole, was devastating.

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By the time Allan Bakke applied to medical school in 1973, black-Jewish relations were already near the breaking point. Bakke was not Jewish, but his challenge to the concept of affirmative action galvanized the support of prominent Jewish neoconservatives and the three major Jewish organizations (the American Jewish Committee, the American Jewish Congress, and the Anti-Defamation League.) Not all Jews vocally opposed affirmative action, and a good number of Jews as well as some Jewish organizations supported it; but the attack by these intellectuals and organized Jewish groups against affirmative action eliminated any hope

of restoring the black-Jewish alliance. Black criticism of Israel struck Jews at their most vulnerable point. It was like a blow to the solar plexus. Similarly, Jewish criticism of affirmative action cut to the heart of the emerging black agenda. It meant attacking not only a key black issue, but also the most articulate and influential members of the black community. Most blacks who had risen to positions of power in government, business, or universities credited affirmative action programs for at least partially starting them on their path to success; and attacking affirmative action meant alienating them.

Some Jews saw in affirmative action the specter of quotas that had once kept them out of medical and law schools. But for blacks, affirmative action was a floor, not a ceiling, a way to get in the door of corporations and universities that were resistant to hiring and promoting blacks. And blacks were not blind to the fact that Jews were doing increasingly well in these corporations and universities. Jewish interests and black interests no longer seemed to coincide.

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Franklin Delano Roosevelt had created the New Deal coalition in 1932 with blacks and Jews as charter members. By 1984, that coalition had crumbled under twenty years of black-Jewish tension. Jews had long distrusted Jesse Jackson because of his embrace of Yasser Arafat and his insensitive comments about the Holocaust and about Jewish influence in the press and politics. When Jackson used the words “hymie” and “hymietown” in private conversation and paraded his association with Minister Louis Farrakhan, it confirmed suspicions many Jews had all along.

Jackson and his supporters felt unfairly pursued by the charges of anti-Semitism. It was all the press wanted to talk about. They never wanted to talk about Israel’s trade with South Africa or about the way in which Mayor Edward Koch fanned tensions and hatred in New York.

Donna Brazile, a young black staffer for Jackson from New Orleans, had been too young to march with Martin Luther King. Growing up, she had considered the Jews the “good” white people. Her family doctor was Jewish; so was its lawyer. But when the controversy over Farrakhan erupted, Brazile spoke to her mother down in New Orleans and was shocked by what she heard. Farrakhan, her mother said, was right. Those Jews were no good. Her doctor had always given her the wrong medicine. When Brazile went home to where she grew up in Kenner, Louisiana, she talked to black teenagers in her neighborhood. They considered Jews the enemy. Jews wanted to “get” Farrakhan. They wanted to “get” Jesse Jackson. They would not be satisfied until

Jackson was destroyed.



In the interviews I have conducted over the past two years, Jews and Jewish leaders pine again and again for a more “moderate” black leader to replace Jackson, someone like Los Angeles Mayor Tom Bradley or Philadelphia Congressman William Gray. But whether Jews like it or not, Jackson is likely to be the most important prominent black politician in the country through 1988 and beyond. He is likely, at the very least, to emerge as a leader of the Democratic party’s progressive wing. He will also probably run again for president.

Commentators have long talked about Jackson’s “Jewish problem”—the fact that his views and past comments make Jewish voters hostile to him. It is a striking failure that a man who has built his success in 1988 on his ability to connect with the pain and concern of others—blacks, gays, laid-off workers, poor farmers—remains unable to understand the pain and concerns of Jews.

So where does that leave Jews, especially liberal and progressive Jews who still care about an alliance with blacks. (It seems unlikely in the current atmosphere that neoconservative Jews will have any interest in linking up again with black concerns.). Alliances are worth something only when each side feels valued. To be frank, even though Jews sometimes wax nostalgic about the old civil rights days of black and white together, we ought to understand why blacks, by and large, do not. They resented the paternalism of the early alliance, with Jews too often acting as the elder brothers in suffering. Considering that history, Jews must be wary of the impulse to write off Jackson, to bypass him in favor of other more “acceptable” leaders. To do that, in the opinion of many blacks, would smack once again of Jews telling blacks who their leaders should be.

Liberal and progressive Jews must continue to talk to Jackson and to other black leaders in order to find areas where they can work together. Liberal Jews can endorse much of Jackson’s and the blacks’ progressive agenda: support for affirmative action, for the opening up of the top levels of universities and corporations to blacks, and for a renewed attack on poverty and a more genuine attempt to eliminate the American underclass. But Jews, in the spirit of a true coalition, must demand that attention be paid to their concerns as well. They must demand that black leaders denounce anti-Semitism, whether it comes from Farrakhan or anyone else, and that blacks defer to Jews on questions of Israel—that they acknowledge that Israel is a special issue for American Jews much as affirmative action and South Africa are special issues for American blacks. Only by showing

respect for each other's concerns can blacks and Jews hope to reassemble an alliance that works for both groups. \square