

Clayborne Carson

The Politics of Relations between African-Americans and Jews

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■ **T**he troubled relationship between African-Americans and Jews survives in part through the pretense that relations were once better. Like married couples who habitually quarrel in public, members of the two groups remain in a relationship that survives for reasons that many observers find inexplicable. More than fifty years ago, Ralph Bunche, then a political scientist at Howard University, commented ruefully: "It is common knowledge that many members of the Negro and Jewish communities of the country share mutual dislike, scorn, and mistrust."* A 1961 article in *Commentary* lamented a revival of anti-Semitism among blacks and concluded that the black-Jewish coalition faced "disruption" and

*Bunch, Foreword to Wedlock Lunabelle, *The Reaction of Negro Publications and Organizations to German Anti-Semitism* (Washington, D.C.: Howard University Press, 1942), quoted in Robert G. Weisbord and Arthur Stein, *Bittersweet Encounter: The Afro-American and the American Jew* (New York: Schocken Books, 1970), p. 59.

“dissolution.”* In 1988, journalist Jonathan Kaufman entitled his treatment of black-Jewish relations *Broken Alliance: The Turbulent Times between Blacks and Jews in America*.†

The existence of the so-called black-Jewish alliance is difficult to explain, therefore, given the reoccurring public disputes and the persistent pessimism about future ties. Why do articulate members of each group so readily seek out opportunities for publicly airing intergroup grievances? Why are they so willing to combine conciliatory appeals for good relations with attributions of blame for bad? Why do some in each group even talk to one another when they have nothing nice to say? The literature on black-Jewish relations mixes spiteful polemics and self-serving analysis, manifesting the reasons for intergroup conflicts even while diagnosing them. Yet, while recognizing the folly of speaking out, it is difficult for those of us who are black or Jewish to resist doing so when others speak for us or about us. I find myself wanting black-Jewish dissension to stop—after I have the last word.

Historical perspective tells me that these quarrels will continue, for they have become ritualistic. A typical controversy begins with a controversial statement or action by a black person, which is then publicly condemned by Jewish leaders as a sign of increasing black anti-Semitism. The initial stimuli for past crises in black-Jewish relations have often been statements by obscure individuals; yet the understandable desire of Jewish leaders to expose black anti-Semitism has the effect of transforming obscurity into notoriety. The 1967 anti-Israeli statement of a few individuals in the Student Nonviolent Coordinating Committee (SNCC) was published in an irregular newsletter sent to a few hundred supporters; most people, including those of us close to SNCC, first learned of it in our morning newspapers. In 1968 a high school student's anti-Semitic poem was heard by few listeners of a public radio program before it was widely publicized by New York teachers'

*Tom Brooks, "Negro Militants, Jewish Liberals, and the Unions," *Commentary*, September 1961, p. 709.

†(New York: Charles Scribner's Sons, 1988).

union officials who were embattled with black community control advocates. Farrakhan's anti-Semitic rantings at Nation of Islam rallies made him a nationally known figure while also damaging Jesse Jackson's 1984 presidential campaign. In 1993, a speech delivered to students at Kean College of New Jersey by Khalid Muhammad, a previously little-known minister of the Nation of Islam, was reprinted in *The New York Times*, thereby stimulating a controversy that remained in the news for months afterward. For many Jewish commentators, these events were used as evidence that some black leaders harbored anti-Semitic feelings and that others were unreliable friends who were reluctant to stand up to the black anti-Semites. For many African-Americans, the events suggested that Jewish leaders were overbearing in their insistence that black leaders publicly repudiate isolated expressions of anti-Semitism over which the leaders had no control.

The rituals associated with these recurring crises in black-Jewish relations have usually involved Jewish leaders and intellectuals turning to their black counterparts for assurances that never seem to be adequate. No significant African-American leader has ever admitted to being anti-Semitic, but some leaders with negligible followings, recognizing the benefits of notoriety among alienated blacks, do not fear the label. Jewish concerns are rarely allayed by the attempts of friendly black leaders and intellectuals to distance themselves from anti-Semites. Combining defensiveness and militancy, black assurances of goodwill are usually given reluctantly, often with hints that black anti-Semitism is not high on the list of black concerns. Worried Jews invite black representatives to symposia that are intended to lessen intergroup tensions but sometimes exacerbate them. Outpourings of public statements by national African-American and Jewish leaders never resolve the festering resentments and suspicions in each community.

Scholarly discussions of black-Jewish relations have been more successful in identifying the reasons why members of both groups work together on behalf of civil rights reform than in explaining the ways in which these relationships are disrupted.

Similarities in the historical experiences of the two groups—common experiences of slavery, collective oppression, and minority status in predominantly white, Christian societies—are usually cited to explain the close ties between black and Jewish civil rights advocates. A less noted but related similarity is that some members of both groups have responded to minority status in American society by identifying with the universalistic, egalitarian ideals of the Western liberal tradition. Although, during the past two centuries, blacks and Jews have wavered between integrationism and separatism as strategies for group advancement, the spread of democratic ideas in Europe and the Americas strengthened the former orientation. Because African-Americans and American Jews have seen themselves as at least potential members of the modern, democratic societies, they have been particularly drawn to progressive political movements that have expanded conceptions of citizenship rights and lessened social inequality. Moreover, in the United States, the two groups have been among the most consistent supporters of twentieth-century labor movements and of the liberal wing of the Democratic party.

In addition, small minorities within each group played crucial roles in the development of a tradition of leftist social activism centered in the Communist party of the United States. I have suggested elsewhere that some of the most committed black and Jewish activists in the southern black freedom struggle were products of this leftist tradition of political dissent, despite the fact that it was severely weakened by cold war repression.* One of the ironies of the dispute over SNCC's pro-Palestinian stand in 1967 was that Stokely Carmichael and several other outspoken black critics of Israel had been influenced by black-Jewish Left culture, as were other black firebrands such as Maulana Karenga and LeRoi Jones/Amiri Baraka.

These historical factors help to explain the durability of

*Carson, "Blacks and Jews in the Civil Rights Movement," in Joseph R. Washington, Jr., *Jews in Black Perspectives: A Dialogue* (Rutherford, N.J.: Fairleigh Dickinson University Press, 1978), p. 133.

black-Jewish political ties during the period after the founding of the NAACP in 1909, but other historical factors explain the repeated disruptions of those ties. Because they recur regularly, black-Jewish conflicts and controversies cannot be understood merely as responses to particular events but as reflections of underlying social, political, and psychological realities that are different for members of each group. Indeed, African-Americans and Jews often react angrily to suggestions that their oppression is not unique. For example, during a 1979 visit to the Yad Vashem Holocaust Museum, Jesse Jackson once incurred the wrath of many Jews when he used the phrase "one of the great human tragedies of all times" instead of "unique" to describe what he had seen commemorated.* African-Americans are similarly disturbed by any equation of their oppression in the United States with that of Jewish Americans. As James Baldwin once commented: "One does not wish, in short, to be told by an American Jew that his suffering is as great as the American Negro's suffering. It isn't, and one knows that it isn't from the very tone in which he assures you that it is."†

A common identity as oppressed people is less important in explaining black-Jewish conflicts than the differences in the historical experiences of African-Americans and Jews and the divisions within each group. Jews and African-Americans have followed different strategies of group advancement and remain internally divided over the extent to which their own interests coincide with those of the other group. In a broad sense, most blacks and Jews supported efforts to eliminate racism and bigotry, but only a small minority in each group have been civil rights activists. Civil rights activists and, more generally, political activists who participate in black-Jewish political alliances have faced challenges from leaders who question not only the tactics and goals of the civil rights movement but the importance of civil rights as a means of group advancement.

Moreover, African-American and Jewish civil rights activ-

*The incident is described in Kaufman, *Broken Alliance*, pp. 253-254.

†James Baldwin, "Negroes Are Anti-Semitic Because They're Anti-White," *The New York Times Magazine*, April 9, 1967, p. 150.

ists have often been distinguished from other members of their group because of their class and educational backgrounds or their assimilationist outlooks. Such activists are vulnerable to the charge that they have lost touch with their communities. Although among Jews, religious values encouraged a generalized pro-civil rights sentiment, active involvement in the twentieth-century civil rights efforts has continued to be more common among secular Jews than among those with strong religious commitments. As historian David Lewis has pointed out, black and Jewish civil rights activists of the pre-World War II period were distinctively assimilationist. Early Jewish NAACP supporters, he found, not only constituted an elite—affluent individuals, usually from German-Jewish backgrounds—but also exhibited ambivalent and sometimes antagonistic attitudes toward the rapidly expanding population of Eastern European Jews and toward Judaism as a religion.* More generally, the widespread involvement of Jews in liberal and radical political movements was a byproduct of the nineteenth-century movement of European-American Jews away from Jewish traditions.†

African-American civil rights activists have also tended to be assimilationist, although this was less often the case as the southern black freedom struggle expanded in scale during the 1950s and 1960s. Responding to pressures from grass-roots leaders and from black nationalists such as Malcolm X, civil rights activism became increasingly tied to group goals rather than the ideal of an interracial “beloved community.” For black Americans achieving equal citizenship rights was not simply an idealistic goal but also a strategy for group advancement.

Although civil rights reform has not been the sole objective of black politics, it has been far more central to the aspirations of African-Americans than to those of Jewish Americans. Both

*David Levering Lewis, “Parallels and Divergences: Assimilationist Strategies of Afro-American and Jewish Elites from 1910 to the Early 1930s,” *Journal of American History* 71 (December 1984): 543–564.

†Sara B. Goldrick, “The Martin Luther King, Jr. Papers Project,” *Working Papers*, March–April 1983, pp. 19–25.

blacks and Jews have experienced discrimination, but the former have been far more adversely affected by such discrimination than the latter. Although European pogroms and the Holocaust of World War II shaped modern Jewish-American identity, African-Americans have been more directly affected by a tradition of overt and often terroristic racism in the United States. Lynching of black people remained a vivid reminder of inferior status long after the lynching of Leo Frank.

The anti-Jewish sentiments held by many Americans are quite different from antiblack ones. The former included stereotypes of group achievement and influence, the latter featured stereotypes of group inadequacy and impotence. The impact of anti-Jewish sentiment on American Jews has never been comparable to the institutionalized discrimination encountered by black Americans. Jews in America have never been forced to depend upon special governmental protections of their citizenship rights; there has been, therefore, no American Jewish movement comparable to the African-American civil rights movement. Not only have Jews refrained from mobilizing mass movements of Jews to secure better treatment, they have seen such movements as counterproductive, given their ability to use their economic power and influence to protect their group interests. Until recent decades, there has been little inclination on the part of Jews to use federal legislation as a direct weapon against anti-Semitism, which rarely affects the life chances of individual Jews and has no appreciable effect on national policies affecting Jews as a group. Only in 1967 and afterward when the question of support for Israel became a major element in Jewish politics did it become conceivable that African-American attitudes might potentially affect the group interests of Jews.

African-Americans and Jewish Americans worked closely together in these civil rights efforts, but the success of these efforts affected the lives of black people more than they did the lives of Jewish Americans. Yet, despite the centrality of civil rights in African-American politics, the success or failure of civil rights reform efforts is dependent upon the support of

nonblacks. In addition, given the small amount of support for civil rights reform among non-Jewish whites, Jewish support for civil rights efforts has been a matter of considerable importance to black civil rights leaders. During the past quarter century, moreover, Jewish attitudes regarding an issue such as affirmative action could affect national policies regarding the life chances of individual blacks and, more important, national racial policies.

As the civil rights movement expanded and became increasingly militant after 1955, however, both black and Jewish civil rights activists faced new pressures from members of their own race who disagreed with the direction of the movement. This was particularly the case after the resurgence of black nationalism during the mid-1960s, when Malcolm X and the Nation of Islam gained a following as a result of their strong criticisms of the civil rights movement and its integrationist leadership. Even before the rise of the black power movement of the period after 1965, many black activists accepted the notion that their struggle sought more than civil rights reform. Some Jewish civil rights activists agreed with this conception of the struggle, but the growing emphasis on economic and political goals exposed differences between black and Jewish leaders over the ultimate purpose of the civil rights movement. By the late 1960s, some Jews who were former supporters of the civil rights movement had become convinced that black militancy was going too far and questioned the ability of the minority of pro-black power Jews to speak for their community.

The increasing frequency of black-Jewish conflict after 1966 reflected the resurgence in both groups of insular perspectives and of leaders who sought to demonstrate their loyalty to group interests by attacking those involved in intergroup political alliances. While some blacks and some Jews continued to work together to eliminate racial discrimination and bigotry, other blacks and other Jews focused their energies on the achievement of more narrowly conceived group interests and goals. The latter trend was part of a general reassertion of ethnicity as a positive value and a valuable commodity. This

trend was encouraged by the black power movement, but it was not caused by it. In 1964, for example, Nathan Glazer presaged the black power arguments of Stokely Carmichael when he affirmed the notion of a "group pattern of American life" which would allow groups to maintain "exclusiveness" and areas "restricted to their own kind."^{*}

The upsurge of black self-interest politics during the last of the 1960s revived well-established nationalist and separatist traditions that had never completely disappeared. Some of the black community leaders who placed less emphasis on civil rights goals than on economic and political goals were themselves products of civil rights ferment. Black power politics of the post-1965 period was often portrayed as a decisive break with the previous period of black activism, but the black struggles of the early 1960s were catalysts for the emergence of local black leadership who challenged established civil rights leaders.

While the NAACP brought a small minority of blacks and Jews into a usually close and supportive relationship with each other, black nationalists such as Elijah Muhammad and Louis Farrakhan, black evangelists Daddy Grace and Father Divine, and numerous local black political leaders built substantial grass-roots movements that involved little black-Jewish interaction. Black leadership at the local level has often expressed resentment of Jewish economic and political power, especially when that power manifested itself in black communities. This resentment has been expressed in anti-Semitic harangues by generations of Harlem street corner agitators and exploded in anti-Jewish vandalism during New York race riots in 1935, 1943, and 1964.[†]

*Nathan Glazer, "Negroes and Jews: the New Challenge to Pluralism," *Commentary*, December 1964, p. 34. Glazer writes: "The force of present-day Negro demands is that the sub-community, because it either protects privileges or creates inequalities, has no right to exist. That is why these demands pose a quite new challenge to the Jewish community, or to any sub-community."

†See Isabel Bolko Price, "Black Response to Anti-Semitism: Negroes and Jews in New York, 1880 to World War II" (Ph.D. dissertation, University of New Mexico, 1973); Robert G. Weisbord and Arthur Stein, *Bittersweet Encounter: The Afro-American and the American* (New York, 1964).

Rather than seeing contemporary tensions in black-Jewish relations as exceptional, therefore, it is more accurate to see them as recurring manifestations of the basic tension between integrationist civil rights activity and ever-present group-interest politics. Particularly during the years since 1966, black and Jewish civil rights advocates have often been compelled to defend their activities against the charge that they are not serving the interests of their own groups. Some Jewish civil rights leaders found it increasingly difficult to support black militancy as it moved beyond the ideological boundaries of earlier civil rights efforts. As Nathan Glazer wrote: "Intending in 1964 to create a color-blind America, we discovered to our surprise in the 1970s that we were creating an increasingly color-conscious society." Glazer, like other Jews, questioned whether the movement for assimilation had become "something different—cultural pluralism, rights distributed by group, group consciousness maintained and enhanced?"* For neoconservative Jews, a civil rights movement had been supplanted by another movement which was unworthy of Jewish support, because it pursued black rather than Jewish interests. For black militants, these changes meant that the civil rights movement had evolved into a liberation movement that was more worthy of black support.

Jewish support for black advancement efforts declined after 1967 not only because blacks moved toward racial separatism but also because Jews moved toward increasingly group consciousness after the 1967 Arab-Israeli war. As a narrowly conceived movement against racial discrimination and bigotry, the civil rights movement had attracted substantial Jewish support, but black power militants correctly charged that that conception of the movement was as much a Jewish creation as it was a black one. Jews such as Henry Moskowitz and Joel Spingarn shaped the early policies of the NAACP more than did W.E.B. Du Bois, who was the only black officer for

*Nathan Glazer, *Ethnic Dilemmas, 1964-1983* (Cambridge: Harvard University Press, 1983), pp. 1, 5.

many years. During the 1930s and 1940s, Jews spearheaded the national campaign for antidiscrimination legislation. As American Jewish Congress leader Will Maslow once commented, slightly overstating the case, "many of these laws were actually written in the offices of Jewish agencies, by Jewish staff people, introduced by Jewish legislators and pressured into being by Jewish voters. In addition, literally hundreds of court actions were taken by Jewish attorneys on behalf of Negro plaintiffs."*

Black nationalists from the era of Marcus Garvey to the present have sought to displace black civil rights leaders by calling attention to the subordinate role these leaders play in black-Jewish alliances. They also attract black support by exploiting other vulnerabilities of many civil rights leaders—namely their assimilationist outlook, middle-class status, and their unwillingness to alienate nonblack allies. The rise of Malcolm X during the late 1950s demonstrated that a spokesman for a tiny religious group could revive the moribund black nationalist tradition and attract a large following among discontented blacks by being more rhetorically militant than the established national black leaders. During his years as a minister of Elijah Muhammad's Nation of Islam, Malcolm X perfected the art of expressing the anger and frustration felt by many blacks who watched civil rights protesters using nonviolent tactics against brutal white segregationists. Without ever engaging in militant political action, Malcolm convinced many blacks that he was nevertheless more militant than civil rights leaders through a mixture of antiwhite rhetoric, fervent affirmation of racial pride, and sardonic criticisms of the nonviolent tactics. During his period as a minister of the Nation of Islam, Malcolm made criticisms of the racial loyalty of the established black leaders that set a model for the black nationalists who came later.

Despite the efforts of the early Malcolm X and these

*Quoted in Lenora E. Berson, *The Negroes and the Jews* (New York: Random House, 1971), **The Martin Luther King, Jr Papers Project**

nationalist successors, substantial numbers of blacks and Jews have continued to join forces to oppose bigotry and racial discrimination. They will do this not because they are impelled to do so by the black or Jewish masses, but because black and Jewish civil rights activists perceive that their best chance to gain influence in their respective communities and in national politics is through political activities that makes their assimilationism an asset rather than a liability. Nevertheless it has also remained the case that blacks and Jews who advocate group-interest politics have used the issue of black-Jewish relations to promote their own leadership over that of assimilationist leaders advocating legislation against discrimination and bigotry. The claim of black power militants that the established black leadership group was insufficiently loyal to black interests parallels the insistence of Jewish neoconservatives that liberal or leftist Jews are victims of self-hatred and even purveyors of Jewish anti-Semitism.*

Ironically, despite claims by blacks that Jews abandoned the civil rights struggle and by Jews that blacks betrayed the struggle, I would suggest that, with the exception of a brief period in the early 1960s, active black and Jewish support for civil rights efforts has remained basically stable during the period since the New Deal. Such support remains an activity of culturally marginal, racially tolerant individuals. Despite claims of rising black anti-Semitism or Jewish racism, such individuals have consistently maintained close relationships and worked toward common goals.

Nevertheless, the political ties between African-Americans and Jews will remain unstable because they do not reflect the full range of political orientations within each community. It is unlikely that blacks and Jews who support common progressive political goals will ever again gain the political influence they once had, given the rise of competing leaders who challenge the group loyalty of those who join extragroup coalitions.

*See quotes by Norman Podhoretz and Nathan Glazer in *Prospect*, March 1, 1971, p. 58.

tions. The history of black-Jewish relations suggests that the two groups will remain the most dependable sources of support for social change in the United States even as they remain divided, internally and with one another, over the future direction of those efforts.