

FORUM IV

Jews and Emerging Minorities: Jewish-Asian Relations

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"The day before yesterday I kept my store closed all day long," an immigrant wrote. "That was my first day off since I started this business. My son . . . graduated from Princeton University on that day. . . . I can't run this business alone. But I have another son to help through college. . . . I think I can last until both my sons go all the way up to the highest educational degree" (Kim, 1990).

The writer could easily have been a Jewish immigrant from Russia—from the first wave or the most recent wave—describing his willingness to sacrifice for the sake of his children's future. Yet, it was Young Sop Kim, a Korean-American. The priority placed on good education for their children by American Jews and by Asian-Americans is only one similarity upon which relations between the two communities can be built.

Yet, the American Jewish community has not paid a great deal of attention to relations with racial minorities other than the African-American community. Although the special concern with black-Jewish relations is deserved, the general lack of interest, at least until now, in Jewish-Asian relations is detrimental. We have too many common interests and too few explosive flashpoints to let these relations suffer from benign neglect.

There are more than 5,000,000 Asian-Americans in the United States today, and their numbers are growing very rapidly. San Francisco is one-quarter Asian, and its school population is 50% Asian. Asian-Americans make up 10% of the population of California, which is a higher

percentage than African-Americans. Many of our communities in other states have sizeable Asian-American populations as well. The Asian-American community is diverse, made up of Chinese, Japanese, Filipino, Vietnamese, Cambodian, Laotian, and other Asian-Americans.

COMMON EXPERIENCES

The Jewish community and one or more segments of the Asian-American community share these common experiences.

- The American Jewish community has consistently been victimized by stereotypes. Among other images, we are often called "too pushy." Asian-Americans are also consistent victims of stereotypes; they are viewed traditionally as "too passive," among other stereotypes.
- Far more serious, Asian-Americans are today at least as frequently the targets of harassment, discrimination, hate-filled graffiti, and racially motivated violence as are Jews. Indeed, the single most active neo-Nazi group in the United States—WAR-White Aryan Resistance—has, in San Francisco, concentrated most of its hate literature in heavily Asian neighborhoods.
- Just as some anti-Semitism is related to Americans' attitudes toward Israel and a perceived dual loyalty on the part of American Jews, so too is some anti-Asian sentiment connected to Americans' attitudes toward Japan. In particular, a perceived dual loyalty on the part of Japanese-Americans reached hysterical proportions and had grossly unjust consequences during World War II.
- The Jewish community has, while maintaining support for affirmative action,

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protested blatant attempts at "reverse" discrimination against Jews whereby qualified candidates are denied entry because their ethnic group is already "overrepresented." Last year, at the University of California at Berkeley, several Asian groups protested against reverse discrimination, charging that straight-A Asian-American students with very strong extracurricular experience were being denied admission because the university was concerned about the overrepresentation of Asian-Americans.

- Although extreme sensitivity needs to be shown when discussing in the same sentence the experience of 120,000 Japanese-Americans in World War II relocation camps and the fate of European Jews in the concentration and death camps in Europe, there emerges from each community's trauma a special spirit of empathy and shared understanding. It took many years for the survivors of each unique hell to be able to speak about the horrors of their experience, commemorate it, and push for redress. Many Holocaust survivors and Japanese-Americans were able to share publicly their respective experiences only after several decades had passed. The words of one Japanese-American child of internees could easily have been written by the child of a Holocaust survivor. "When we were children, you spoke Japanese in lowered voices between yourselves. Once you uttered secrets which we should not know, were not to be heard by us. When you spoke of some dark secret you would admonish us, 'Don't tell it to anyone else.' It was a suffocated vow of silence" (Oyama, 1990).
- The two communities share the immigrant experience as well: the negative impact of immigration laws; the reception of those coming from the East at New York's Ellis Island and the much more brutal reception of those coming from the West at San Francisco's Angel Island; the acculturation experience; the

sacrifices of the first generation for subsequent generations and as noted earlier the emphasis on education as *the* vehicle for advancement; the sweatshop syndrome; the inability of many immigrant professionals to find work at their level of training; the myth of the model minority whereby our respective community's social problems are too often hidden from view, etc.

OPPORTUNITIES FOR COOPERATION

Given the diversity of the Asian-American community and the many shared values and community experiences between it and the Jewish community, what opportunities exist for cooperation and closer relations?

Implementation of comprehensive hate violence reduction plans: Although this process requires a broader coalition of diverse ethnic and racial groups, American Jews and Asian-American groups should be at the forefront of community attempts to implement comprehensive programs that bring together law enforcement, schools, public officials and agencies, media, and community-based organizations to tackle issues of hate violence, both in terms of prevention and response.

For example, in San Francisco, the coalition responsible for its hate violence reduction program, the Intergroup Clearinghouse, includes, among its several dozen organizations, representation from the Jewish Community Relations Council (JCRC) and Anti-Defamation League, as well as from Chinese for Affirmative Action and the Asian Law Caucus. The Clearinghouse provides a unique opportunity to develop ties with representatives of communities that have not had a long tradition of close working relationships with the Jewish community. Most importantly, it is an early warning system, making it possible to identify and seek to lessen tensions between different ethnic or racial groups before they explode.

Promotion of quality public education:

The values that our respective communities place on a good education and the extent to which upward mobility has been achieved for Jews and Asians through the public education system suggest the importance of working together to confront the enormous problems facing American public education. Today, neither community is mobilized to address these problems to the extent that it should be. Perhaps by our communities joining together we can revitalize the Jewish community's lagging interest in the educational system that has served us so well.

One other area of cooperation regarding the public schools is strengthening church-state separation. Because many Asian-Americans are also non-Christians, they are potential allies in dealing with issues of religious sensitivity, including Christmas pageants and celebrations and a religious presence in graduation ceremonies. The tough questions surrounding affirmative action policies and their perceived impact on academically qualified students in both our communities must also be addressed, though we should not automatically assume that just because both our communities feel affected by affirmative action we will have a common perspective.

Support for each other's efforts to address historical injustices: In San Francisco, a protest vigil held on the day of Kurt Waldheim's inauguration as president of Austria included representation from the Japanese-American and Chinese-American communities. An ultimately successful attempt by the Chinese-American community to erect a "Goddess of Liberty" statue in San Francisco Chinatown's Portsmouth Square as a memorial to those who lost their life in the Tiananmen Square uprising was supported by testimony at public hearings offered by the San Francisco JCRC. The effort by Japanese-Americans to obtain financial redress for the forced relocation during World War II was supported by the organized Jewish community. One day

the Cambodian-American community may come to us, or we to them, to discuss ways to observe the Cambodian genocide in light of our experience commemorating the Holocaust. We need to be responsive to each of our communities' quest for signs of broad-based support when that broad participation does not conflict with principled positions.

Efforts aimed at greater political empowerment: This concern is of increasing importance in the Asian-American community. A good model for cooperation is the work of the JCRC with Hispanic community organizations in which members of each community were identified, recommended, and supported jointly for political appointments. In the next few years there is likely to be a quantum leap in the number of Asian-Americans seeking public office, and we should build relationships now with the leading prospects.

Sharing models for community organization: As a result of recent discussions with a leader of the Chinese-American community, an in-depth meeting will be held to discuss the structure of our respective communities. Among the topics to be covered are the function of umbrella organizations, which do not appear to be prevalent in the Asian-American community, and the methods used to build interest in community affairs. A clear benefit for the Jewish community is increased knowledge of the different groups that comprise the Asian-American community, including those such as the Japanese-American Citizens League and the Organization of Chinese Americans that have mandates similar to JCRCs.

Addressing Japan's relationship to Israel: One area that is particularly important to the Jewish community but which needs to be handled with great sensitivity is Japan's relationship to Israel, its support for the Arab boycott, and the evidence of classical anti-Semitic literature periodically gaining ground in Japan. It is inappropriate for us to assume that Japanese-Americans relate

to Japan in the same way that we relate to Israel just because both communities are vulnerable to the charge of dual loyalty. Although when we have a complaint about an outbreak of anti-Semitism in France we do not go to French-Americans but only to the French government and when we have a concern about the weak Greek response to terrorism we do not try to mobilize the support of the Greek-American community but go directly to the Greek consul general, I often hear expressed the desire, even expectation, that we should approach Japanese-Americans to apply pressure on the Japanese government in areas of concern to us. That expectation arises from our own community's relationship to Israel.

When American Jews have been upset with specific actions of the Israeli government—the “Who is a Jew” controversy and the occupation of the Greek Orthodox hospice are two recent examples—we have not hesitated sharing our deep concern with the Israeli government. It is my observation that Japanese-Americans have not developed the same kind of relationship with Japanese government officials. That may be changing for a variety of reasons. Indeed, it may be that as a result of expanded cooperation between the Japanese-American and Jewish communities—and between Japanese-Americans and the Japanese government—greater opportunity will exist in the future for Japanese-Americans to communicate to Japanese government officials some of our concerns vis-a-vis anti-Semitism and Israel. But we must approach this prospect cautiously, and I believe patiently.

In an effort to increase the sensitivity and knowledge of local Asian-American leaders to Israel, the San Francisco Bay Area JCRCs recently sent a mission there

of non-Jewish community leaders that included the director of a Vietnamese Tutoring Center, a leader of the Filipino community, a Chinese-American appellate court judge, and a Japanese-American county supervisor.

As we expand areas of communication and cooperation with different Asian-American communities, tensions may emerge—we and they are not immune to stereotypes about each other, frustrations about Japan's (and perhaps China's) attitudes toward Israel may arise, and competition for immigration slots may increase. Yet, when one weighs the benefits of increased cooperation against the small possibility of explosive tensions emerging, there is only one clear conclusion. We have everything to gain and little to lose from paying more attention to Jewish-Asian common agendas.

At a time when the American Jewish community needs to broaden public support for its agenda, particularly with respect to maintaining strong American ties to Israel, and when hate violence is on the rise in both communities, greater engagement with the various groups that comprise the Asian-American community—no matter how small or large in your community—is more than good community relations. It is a step toward even more effective advocacy for our respective communities.

REFERENCES

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