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Blacks and Jews in America: History, Myths, and Realities

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- *Black-Jewish relations, while not a paramount concern for most American Jews in 2006, are a useful vehicle for exploring intergroup conflict. The history of Jewish involvement in the American civil rights movement is highly instructive in this regard.*

- *Black anti-Semitism needs to be analyzed both regarding the available data on the phenomenon and the question of whether black leaders' failure to repudiate anti-Semitism constitutes evidence of the prejudice in itself.*

- *Notwithstanding problems, it is worthwhile for Jews to maintain a coalitional relationship with the black community on social-justice and other issues.*

Why, in 2006, are we interested in blacks and Jews in America? It seems an odd topic to be discussing at this time. The tensions between blacks and Jews, arising out of numerous flashpoints from the 1950s through the 1990s - Ocean Hill-Brownsville, the Crown Heights riots,[1] the anti-Jewish statements of Nation of Islam leader Louis Farrakhan, reports of black anti-Semitism - are a thing of the past for most American Jews and for American Jewish groups. But this arena is worth revisiting for two reasons. First, black-Jewish relations are a vehicle for better understanding the dynamics of intergroup relations in general. Second, certain myths about black-Jewish relations in America need to be explored.

The history of the black-Jewish encounter in America over the past six decades sheds light on the American Jewish experience in itself. As American Jews over the past two years celebrated 350 years of their communal life in America, the topic of black-Jewish relations represents an arena of change in a significant Jewish community.

Classic coalitional relationships tend to be frowned upon these days. Relationships between American Jews and Protestant denominations have long been troubled by differences over the Middle East, particularly the issue of divestiture in recent years. The Vatican, for its part, periodically foists unpleasant surprises on the Jewish community, even as Catholics and Jews celebrate forty years since Nostra Aetate, the document that generated a change in their relationship.[2] As for the blacks, what remains to be said about the "broken alliance" forty years after the great legislative victories of the civil rights movement, as conflicts over affirmative action and redistricting, and anxiety over black anti-Semitism, continue even fifteen years after Crown Heights?

In fact, there is much to say. The divergence of black and Jewish agendas, the resultant conflicts, and even the phenomenon of black anti-Semitism have a nuanced history on both sides.

Black-Jewish relations typify the tensions and paradoxes, wishes, fulfillments, and betrayals of ethnic groups. It is a relationship that is multilayered and highly textured. Much of what has passed for analysis in this area is actually editorializing in academic garb,

conventional wisdom repeated often enough that it is believed, or simply misrepresentation.

Not surprisingly for a country based on the principles of pluralism, America is in the midst of a period of intergroup conflict in general. Indeed, some years ago the National Opinion Research Center's General Social Survey included a fictitious group - the "Wissians" - in the list of fifty-six ethnic groups on which data was collected. This research found that significant numbers of Americans hate the "Wissians."

Jews in the Civil Rights Movement

How did the organized Jewish community become involved in the civil rights movement? As of the 1940s, it was not apparent that American Jews would make common cause with blacks. Indeed, this involvement exemplifies how the Jewish community makes a particular issue a priority for action.

Contrary to conventional wisdom, the beginnings of the Jewish involvement in civil rights - specifically, in fair employment practices legislation - came not in the 1950s but a decade earlier, after President Franklin D. Roosevelt issued Executive Order 8802.[3] Roosevelt thereby sought to avert a march on Washington threatened by union leader and civil rights activist A. Philip Randolph, who saw the expanding industrial base as a means to alleviate discrimination against black employment. Executive Order 8802 outlawed discrimination in defense industries (later expanded to include all federal contractors) and created the Fair Employment Practices Committee (FEPC) to oversee enforcement.

Beset with serious employment discrimination against their own community, Jewish leaders saw their opportunity and in turn created the Coordinating Committee of Jewish Organizations Concerned with Discrimination in the War Industries. This body, with its cumbersome name, was incorporated in 1944 in the newly formed National Community Relations Advisory Council (NCRAC).[4] Toward the end of the war, as conservatives threatened to abolish the FEPC - the one agency that gave teeth

to Executive Order 8802 - Jewish groups became involved with the National Council for a Permanent FEPC, created by Randolph in 1943. It was this coalition that marked the beginning of what became known as the civil rights movement.

Jewish groups hardly expressed unanimous support in the 1940s for making common cause with blacks. At an early NCRAC plenary session, in a forum on "Relations with Negroes," a vigorous debate took place on the wisdom of coalition-building with blacks. Rabbi Stephen S. Wise, an American Jewish Congress and NAACP (National Association for the Advancement of Colored People) leader, argued for continued involvement based on Jewish self-interest. His rationale, a rearticulation of the original reasons for Jewish involvement in the civil rights struggle, is key to understanding Jewish engagement in this area.

Jews were not involved in civil rights because they were liberals - which they were - or because it was the right thing to do - which it was. What motivated Jews, rather, was Jewish self-interest. Wise and other Jewish leaders understood that the struggle for minority rights strengthened the fiber of society and benefited all minorities, especially (at the time) Jews. The 1940s were a period of high anti-Semitism in America, when institutional discrimination against Jews in employment, education, and housing was still significant. Jewish reluctance to take the lead in the struggle reflected the fact that the Jewish community was insecure and defensive, and did not relish visibility. Courageous and far-sighted leaders such as Wise, however, realized that this timidity needed to be overcome, and eventually it was.[5]

The genesis of Jewish involvement in civil rights exemplifies a central principle of American Jewish life: Jews become involved in issues to the extent that they implicate Jewish security; communal self-interest is primary. Again, Wise and other leaders correctly defined civil rights as an issue at the core of Jewish security.[6]

On the local level blacks were seen as natural allies in the battle for civil rights. The strategy of using law and social action, spearheaded by the American Jewish Congress and viewed as radical by an insecure Jewish community, emerged in the fight against discrimination. This approach was embraced by local

Jewish community relations councils (JCRACs) and by the NAACP. The first instances of civil rights legislation, namely, local and state fair housing laws, resulted from activity by local NAACP branches and JCRACs. The movement, then, stemmed from a coalition of Jews and blacks together with a third important actor, the labor unions.

The Question of Black Anti-Semitism

Among the most difficult questions regarding American anti-Semitism is that of black anti-Semitism, which some years ago was arguably the main source of anxiety among Jews. Analysts justified a focus on black anti-Semitism for three reasons.

First, black America was one of the few, and probably the chief, place in the United States where visible and vocal anti-Semitism could yet be observed. Second, it was only in the black community that anti-Semitism of an extremist or "fringe" nature was making a serious bid for communal acceptance in mainstream institutions. This danger was illustrated by the activities of Farrakhan in the political arena, and, fifteen years ago, by City College of New York professor Leonard Jeffries, Jr., in the domain of higher education. What American Jews most feared in these cases - the "mainstreaming" of anti-Semitism, something that has not taken place in this country, whatever problems American Jews may have - did not in fact occur. The fear that African American anti-Semitism might spread from individual racists to infect broad segments of academia, the civil rights movement, and even the political sphere appears to have been unrealistic.

The third consideration was the tradition of American Jewish involvement in the civil rights struggle - the regnant item on the Jewish communal agenda from the early 1950s to the mid-1960s - and the effect of black anti-Semitism on black-Jewish relations.

Very little is known about the nature and extent of anti-Semitism among American blacks.[7] There has never been a comprehensive study of their attitudes toward Jews, an issue complicated by their attitudes toward whites in general. The available data are limited, fragmentary, and mostly old. Until the 1960s, the question of black

views was sidestepped completely; since then, several researchers have only partially filled in the picture,[8] along with a large amount of anecdotal evidence.[9]

The conventional wisdom about black anti-Semitism is, in any case, mostly unfounded. For example, the view that anti-Semitism rises along with educational level in the black community, and that the best-educated blacks are the most anti-Semitic, enjoys popular currency. Indeed, there is a well-documented inverse relationship between educational level and anti-Semitism in all segments of the general society: as socioeconomic conditions in a community, including education, improve, anti-Semitism goes down. The decline in anti-Semitism is generational rather than individual. That is, it is changes in the society that foster a decrease in anti-Semitism, not changes in individual anti-Semites.

There are almost no data, however, showing that the black community is an exception, with anti-Semitism increasing along with education.[10] What can be said, based on what little is known with certitude, is that anti-Semitism drops steeply for both whites and blacks as educational level rises, but less so for blacks. The Anti-Defamation League/Marttila surveys of the 1990s and 2000s, in one of their most important findings, have confirmed this fact.[11] Although blacks do continue to be relatively more anti-Semitic than whites at any given educational level, that is not the same as saying they become more anti-Semitic with higher education and economic status. On the contrary, they become less anti-Semitic, as do other members of the society.

A Failure to Repudiate?

Whatever the reasons, however, the reality is that many blacks are unconstrained in their venting of anti-Semitic sentiment. The black population, which has always lagged well behind the general society on a range of socioeconomic indicators, is the only group in which the level of anti-Jewish sentiment has not dropped - and in some areas of activity may have increased - and in which the taboos against expressing anti-Semitism have eroded. Additionally, blacks are more reluctant to repudiate anti-Semitism in their midst. For many American Jews, this adds up to the

difficult reality of black anti-Semitism.

Another key issue, then, is whether the failure to repudiate anti-Semitic statements constitutes anti-Semitism in itself, or reflects other factors at work.

Indeed, the failure of black leaders to denounce anti-Semitism was at the heart of several episodes. One was the Cokeley affair in 1989. Steven Cokeley, a black aide to then-Chicago mayor Eugene Sawyer, made obscene anti-Semitic (and anti-Christian) statements, including the claim that Jewish doctors were injecting black babies with AIDS. Instead of firing Cokeley immediately when the story broke, Sawyer temporized for five days. Equally disturbing was that the black leadership of Chicago, including even Sawyer's political rivals, did not denounce Cokeley at once. Another such case was the failure of many black leaders to repudiate Farrakhan's anti-Semitism.

The pattern exemplified by the Cokeley affair and the numerous Farrakhan incidents reflects each group's interpretation of its priorities in light of its separate past. Blacks focus on *unity* and *solidarity* - which they indeed learned in part from the Jewish community - and argue that it was black disunity that facilitated slavery and helped prevent black advancement in the century following emancipation. American Jews focus on - perhaps are even obsessed with - *denunciation* and *repudiation*. Jews believe that open repudiation of anti-Semitism and of its practitioners by non-Jews, especially those in leadership positions, is a key component in counteracting anti-Semitism. As a stark example, Jews argue that it was the failure to denounce Hitler's early evils that opened the way to the Holocaust.

It is important for Jews to understand that often when "black anti-Semitism" is invoked, what is involved may not be the overall attitude of the black population but, rather, the dynamics of repudiation (for Jews) and solidarity (for blacks). This may be especially significant in terms of Jewish communal organizations' tactics and strategies. Denunciation and repudiation of anti-Semitism are indeed key elements in counteracting it. Courageous black leaders have repudiated anti-Semitism, and must continue to do so. But Jews should not recklessly scapegoat the broader black population when hard data about it are not

available.

What Caused Crown Heights?

As for the Crown Heights riots, there is no question that a serious anti-Semitic outburst occurred in August 1991; there is no question that an anti-Semitic murder was committed. The accidental killing, by a Chabad motorcade, of a black child led to three days of riots in the Crown Heights section of Brooklyn, culminating in the killing of a young rabbinical student. Observers noted that the riots were inflamed by outside agitators, who incited the largely Caribbean black community.

Analyzing the conditions in Crown Heights that led to these events, however, requires a nuanced approach. The key question is whether or not Crown Heights is *sui generis*: should this incident be extrapolated to the black population in general or to other communities in the country?

The Crown Heights events had more to do with longstanding "tribal rivalries" involving real estate, power, and culture than with a deep-seated anti-Semitism, which indeed may not be present in a black population there that is hardly monolithic. The conditions that caused Crown Heights were unique to Crown Heights, and had little to do with anti-Semitism.

Further - and this goes to the heart of data interpretation - is the question of whether the anti-Semitism of the black street youth yelling "Kill the Jew!" is the same as the anti-Semitism of Louis Farrakhan. Is it the same as that of the white skinhead in the white working-class enclave of Jersey City or of Holocaust deniers? We will not know much about what goes on in neighborhoods like Crown Heights - where "Kill the Jew!" is directed at the most visible manifestation of white power - until serious ethnographic studies are conducted. Most important, it seems clear that the causes and events of Crown Heights will not be replicated elsewhere.[12]

For example, the Williamsburg neighborhood of Brooklyn has many of the same ingredients as did Crown Heights: "tribal" rivalries over land and power, a well-organized and politically-

savvy Hasidic group (in this case, the Satmar Hasidim), a minority group that feels disadvantaged. Although the situation seems potentially explosive, in Williamsburg there are no blacks; there are Hispanics. This underlines the fact that it was not "black anti-Semitism" that caused Crown Heights but rather rivalry, primarily over land, exacerbated by individuals who exploited a tense situation.

The Need to Make Common Cause

Finally, what led to the rupture in black-Jewish relations - and did the "rupture" in fact occur? According to conventional wisdom, it was "black anti-Semitism" that caused the alliance to fray and break. The real story, however, is much more nuanced.

It was the growing success of the civil rights movement that altered the relationship. With the coalition expanding as other groups joined it, the black-Jewish relationship on the national level - less so locally - began to change. The struggle became a movement. As issues became more complex, many blacks were disillusioned and frustrated that their daily lives did not change even as their hopes were stirred by the revolutionary victories of *Brown v. Board of Education* (1954), the Civil Rights Act (1964), the Voting Rights Act (1965), and the Fair Housing Act (1968). Furthermore, with the emergence of the black-power trend, black leaders rejected erstwhile allies, leading to a new perception that the ally was the enemy.

This, of course, is from the Jewish perspective. From the black point of view, as the Jewish agenda changed - Israel and Soviet Jewry becoming new priorities for Jews in the late 1960s - blacks asked, "Where are our allies? They have abandoned us."

That too, however, is not the whole story. The reality is - and always has been - that, whatever the issues on the national level, coalitional relationships and politics continue to thrive in the communities. The relationships are not without their tensions - the black social policy agenda is mostly conservative, the Jewish one remains liberal - but at least there is a coalition partner on many issues.

The question for Jews is a larger one. In the mid-1990s, the "security" agenda declined as a result of three main factors: the diminution of anti-Semitism and the enhancement of American Jews' security; the emergence of the Oslo peace process, whatever its pitfalls; and the end of the Soviet Jewry movement as a political issue rather than a social-service concern of resettlement. In response, the Jewish agenda has turned further inward toward questions of identity and continuity. In many ways, this more focused agenda speaks to critical Jewish needs; a community must not ignore its own survival issues.

The question, however, is whether this means Jews should abandon vigorous activism on broad social issues, as some leading Jewish voices advocate. American Jews need to consider closely the effects of their own behavior on intergroup relations. The American Jewish communal agenda is not restricted to counting up the Jews who have Christmas trees in their homes. No group can escape responsibility for combating all forms of hatred, and for making common cause toward building a more productive society.

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Notes

1. The Ocean Hill-Brownsville turmoil of 1966-1969 involved the takeover of the New York City public school system by parent groups, largely black. The conflict encompassed the union representing the city's largely-Jewish cadre of teachers, the black superintendent and leadership of the Ocean-Hill Brownville school district, which in effect fired Jewish administrators, and the City of New York. With allegations of anti-Semitism and racism on both sides, "Ocean Hill-Brownsville" became a codeword for escalating black-Jewish tensions during the 1960s.

The riots in Crown Heights in August 1991, in the course of which an anti-Semitic murder was committed, are discussed later in this article.

2. See Jerome A. Chanes, "Forty Years after *Nostra Aetate*: Impact on Catholic and Jewish Life in the United States," paper presented at the conference on "*Nostra Aetate*: Origins, Promulgation, and Impact on Jewish-Catholic Relations," Hebrew University of Jerusalem, 1 November 2005.

3. The "civil rights" struggles of the 1930s centered on the question of whether government could force employers to abide by fair employment practice rules.

4. Renamed in 1963 the National Jewish Community Relations Advisory Council (NJCRAC), and today the Jewish Council for Public Affairs (JCPA).

5. It was not, however, until the struggle over AWACs (reconnaissance planes sold to Saudi Arabia) in 1981 that the last vestiges of American Jewish "quietism" were shed. For a discussion of these dynamics, see Jerome A. Chanes, "Who Does What?: Jewish Advocacy and Jewish 'Interest,'" in L. Sandy Maisel and Ira N. Forman, eds., *Jews in American Politics* (Lanham, MD: Rowman & Littlefield, 2001), 117.

6. This explains the history of the Jewish communal agenda in general, and the place of civil rights in this history. Viewing the American Jewish public affairs agenda on a timeline, the Jewish issues that were priorities in different periods - anti-Semitism and discrimination, Israel, Soviet Jewry, church-state separation, and so on - were accurately perceived to be Jewish-security issues. This is a complex matter, because as the Jewish agenda becomes more complicated, the extent of involvement in a broad range of issues is called into question.

7. A dated but worthwhile essay on this issue is Leonard Dinnerstein's "Black Antisemitism," in *Uneasy at Home: Antisemitism and the American Jewish Experience* (New York: Columbia University Press, 1987), 218-254. Dinnerstein provides an overview of the Ocean Hill-Brownsville turmoil and other events of the 1960s and early 1970s, including early manifestations of affirmative action. The polling data cited in the essay, however, are drastically out of date.

8. See periodic surveys conducted by the Marttila Communications Group for the Anti-Defamation League.

9. For a valuable, albeit very dated, review of the data on black anti-Semitism, see Jennifer L. Golub, *What Do We Know about Black Anti-Semitism?* (New York: American Jewish Committee, 1990).

10. The only data supporting this assertion are from Ronald Tadao Tsukashima's study of Los Angeles, "The Social and Psychological Correlates of Anti-Semitism in the Black Community," PhD dissertation, University of California, Los Angeles, 1973.

11. According to the 2005 ADL/Marttila survey, the number of blacks with strong anti-Semitic beliefs remained high - at 36 percent - but overall the pattern over fifteen years showed modest declines in populations in which social and economic conditions improved.

12. An NJCRAC survey of twenty-five communities with significant Jewish and black populations confirms this judgment (telephone interviews conducted by Jerome A. Chanes of the NJCRAC, September 1991, unpublished findings).

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