



THE AMERICAN JEWISH COMMITTEE

National Affairs

PROGRAM AIDS

IRVING M. LEVINE

Director, National Affairs Department

A Guide to Local Black-Jewish Relations

by

Gary E. Rubin

Deputy Director of National Affairs

In response to the recent heightened national interest in Black-Jewish relations, many AJC chapters have begun or intensified joint efforts with local Black organizations. In many cases, these projects have proven successful, while some others have encountered difficulties. To further the process of forming coalitions and dialogues, AJC's National Affairs Department has produced this Guide which seeks to offer concrete suggestions for programming and to point out potential problems to be avoided.

Black-Jewish relations, like all encounters among different groups, require skill to manage constructively but are very rewarding when handled successfully. This is particularly true now, given the recent tensions and renewed initiatives of coalition building between the two communities. By following a well-conceived plan that takes into account the goals, appropriate actors, methods and outcomes of joint action, chapters can achieve significant results in their communities.

I. Goals

Successful joint efforts need to be clear about their objectives. In many places, confusion about the aims of meetings or actions has led to disillusionment with the process of working together and a weakening of intergroup ties.

At a fundamental level, it is important to distinguish between stages of intercommunal relations. It is first necessary to establish a dialogue, in which groups seek to understand each other's nature and aspirations, before moving on to coalition in which both work for mutual ends. Coalitional action before serious dialogue can lead to misunderstanding, distrust and failed objectives. Groups should not rush into coalition without first establishing an acceptable level of shared knowledge and expectations through dialogue.

There can be many reasons for wanting to pursue dialogues and coalitional actions. Some of the major ones include:

- Mutual understanding: Jews and Blacks form two key communities in many regions; their prominence and coexistence can produce a genuine desire to learn more about each other's needs, values, and objectives.



THE AMERICAN JEWISH COMMITTEE, Institute of Human Relations, 165 East 56 Street, New York, N.Y. 10022

constituents and wield some public power. Many are eager to play a larger role in Black intergroup relations initiatives. In many cases, they depend on support from outside the Black community.

- ° Ministers: The Black church has historically provided secular as well as religious leadership for its community and continues to enjoy much influence today. In many cases, politicians or executives of established Black agencies are ministers, but in some cities the heads of key churches may be the most important local communal figures.
- ° Emerging leaders: Demographically, the Black community is significantly younger than the average for Americans generally, and many of their leaders also tend to be younger. In every field, including politics, the ministry, established agencies, the professions and business, a new generation of prominent Blacks is emerging that often has attitudes and work styles distinct from older leaders and may serve as an alternative target group for intercommunal initiatives.
- ° Women: In some places, groups of Black and Jewish women have established constructive dialogues and coalitional action. Their common concerns as women have given these groups a lead in facilitating communication and mutual understanding.

As in all other communities, Black leaders run the spectrum from pragmatic moderates to hardline radicals. It is possible to find different shades of opinion and philosophy within any of the subgroups listed above. Deciding which individual or organization is most appropriate for joint activities with AJC chapters will require a careful diagnosis of the situation within particular areas.

An appropriate leader from one of the above subgroups, who has credibility in the Black community and interest in outreach, should be approached to cooperate in organizing the dialogue. It will be best to meet with him or her privately before setting up a formal meeting with a larger group. At this preliminary session, goals for the upcoming process should be set and plans developed for convening the group. The Black leader should be responsible for bringing in other Black members and AJC should carry out this function for Jewish participants. The total group should number at least ten but no more than twenty people, equally divided between Blacks and Jews, so that discussion can flow easily. Finally, agreement should be reached at this preliminary meeting that if tense moments arise in the dialogue group, the Jewish leader will undertake to curb any excess among Jewish participants, and the Black leader among Black participants, so that problems do not break down along group lines.

The importance of establishing this understanding at an early private session with the Black leader responsible for the group cannot be overstated. Walking into a larger meeting without adequate preparation can backfire, since things may be said that require a defensive response and no process has been set up to contain tensions that may arise. Preliminary agreements may not guarantee positive results, but they can be instrumental in preventing serious problems from occurring.

- Session III - Problem diagnosis: Having become aware of their personal stake in Black-Jewish relations, group members can then move on to discuss general community issues. This process will be most effective if discussion of issues is not presented in lecture form by one or two leaders but rather arises out of a process in which the entire group participates. To accomplish this, an issues census should be undertaken in which those present list the most important local and national problems facing them and the order of priority in which they think they should be addressed. This will assure that all views are represented. A mutually achieved agenda of public issues will strengthen the environment of sharing established at earlier sessions.
- Session IV - Community diagnosis: Taking the priority issues listed in Session III, the group should then focus on the power structure in their area and the public officials, private and business leaders, and community agencies that can have the greatest impact on them. They should target the most important leaders for joint Black-Jewish initiatives in the near future.
- Session V - Project development: Having diagnosed problems and identified key leaders responsible for them, the group can then move to designate one or two issues to work on as new action initiatives. Activities could include joint approaches to officials or media executives, sponsoring community forums, developing policy proposals, or publicizing mutual concerns. This session should focus on choosing the priority issues and targets of intervention. At this point, new chairpeople may emerge from the group to lead these activities.
- Session VI - Planning workshop: The next session should develop concrete plans for achieving the group's priority goals. In mapping strategies, equal responsibility should be allocated to Blacks and Jews for ongoing activities.

These sessions should not be seen as the totality of the Black-Jewish project, but only as the beginning. As the process continues, new issues will arise, new opportunities will occur for joint action and discussion of concerns will grow deeper. Dialogue will begin to focus on topics of disagreement as well as concurrence. But a base of mutual understanding and a track record of common action will have been established from which to meet future challenges.

IV. Issues

It is important to have an idea at the beginning of the process of the scope of positive and divisive issues that may come up in the course of dialogue and coalition building. While these will vary from one area to another some common concerns can be anticipated.

The issues of anti-Semitism and racism will figure prominently in group discussions. Their manifestations should be jointly condemned whenever they occur.

3. Issues of Conflict

- A. Quotas: While AJC opposes quotas, it supports strong affirmative action remedies. Our position, and the rationale for it, should be clearly explained when the issue comes up.
- B. Israel and South Africa: Another potentially troubling issue is Israeli trade with South Africa, which has recently received a good deal of attention. Much misinformation exists on this topic, but in any case, AJC members should try to focus discussions on what we can do together as American citizens to combat apartheid.
- C. Palestinians: Many Blacks, especially at the younger leadership level, support PLO objectives and underestimate, in the view of the Jewish community, the danger they present to Israel. This issue is likely to come up at a certain point in the dialogue, and AJC members should be prepared to deal with it and document their concerns.

It should be remembered that none of these issues, especially the divisive ones, should be discussed before the group is ready to deal with them. Also, it is important not to create the expectation that the dialogue will produce agreement on every issue. In many cases, the capacity to recognize legitimate differences is a sign of the strength of a relationship.

V. Conclusion

Creating effective dialogues and coalitions is never easy but it can be rewarding. The National Affairs Department stands ready to provide whatever assistance it can to chapters involved in this process. We offer coalition-building workshops which can aid chapter members to prepare for dialogues and cooperative action. Please keep us informed of your efforts.

L001-NAD/lsgn
1/4/85