

Liberalism and the Common Calling of Blacks and Jews



AS A WAVE OF anti-Jewish violence tore through New York in December 2019, Christian clergy across Boston gathered to compose a powerful statement, asserting their shared responsibility to combat antisemitism. Ministers of all races and denominations drafted the statement collaboratively, inviting a handful of their closest Jewish partners to provide feedback to ensure that the language they chose and the message they conveyed would meaningfully address the Jewish community's fears, rather than merely serving as a palliative for their own feelings.

A fascinating dynamic emerged: As the ministers quickly chose George Washington's letter to the Hebrew Congregation of Newport as the most fitting text for the moment, some of the Black ministers expressed discomfort. A text that American Jews see as a foundational promise of our equality—the pledge of the first president that our government would give “to bigotry no sanction, to

persecution no assistance”—rang false to them. For these people of faith, partners in so many Boston struggles, these were, simply put, the words of a slave owner.

Still, every Black minister who was part of the project signed this letter decrying violence against Jews, quoting Washington's words and declaring that in the face of rising violent antisemitism, “silence is both sanction and assistance.” This action on the part of these Black ministers was not a dismissal of facts important to them regarding the Founding Father. Rather, in a moment of crisis for the Jewish community, they resolved to demonstrate their unconditional solidarity: to prioritize building bridges, transcending tensions, and meeting the moment with the language their Jewish neighbors needed to hear.

Building bridges between any communities—across race, nationality, religion, or any other identity—always entails challenge. There are differences in worldview, theology, values, and lived experience. Things that we say and that we believe can hurt and even harm others. Inherent in any such relationship is the ability to authentically understand those experiences through our partners' perspective, even if it is different from our own. Weaving trust requires appreciating complexity and navigating the tension between our narratives and those of others, while remaining clear about what we believe we are called to do in any given moment. Authentic and trusting relationships can be built on the foundations that bind two communities together, even as we acknowledge the complexities, including the conflicts and differences that separate us.

As a Jewish professional working in intergroup relations, striving (and not always succeeding) to act in deep and authentic solidarity with other groups, I've had the opportunity to learn critical lessons about the exceptionally complicated “Black–Jewish relationship.” Few communal relationships suffer from so much oversimplification, whether from those who overly romanticize our similarities or from those who focus too heavily on our disagreements and conflicts. To move forward, we need to build

honest, clear-eyed relationships, acknowledging the many kinds of diversity within both communities, and engaging with a wide variety of Black leaders in order to understand their experiences and interests. Neither community is a monolith.

To observe the Black community as it is, and not as we imagine it to be, is to experience a community that is at least as complex and diverse as the American Jewry. The Black community is Christian, Muslim, and Jewish, often centered around strong anchors of faith, while also including people of no faith. There are gender, class, and generational gaps in worldviews and attitudes about social change. It is a community that includes recent immigrants, alongside those whose ancestors have been part of this nation's story for centuries. Working in partnership with many different Black leaders, I've seen the same kinds of tensions, divisions, and vigorous debates about self-interest, values, and strategies that animate Jewish communal conversations.

This does not mean being naïve. Some of the Black leaders who have emerged in contemporary social justice movements have given voice to antisemitic notions, both classical and contemporary, and we need to ensure that these figures are not normalized or mainstreamed. We must also be honest about those who ignore or minimize Jewish vulnerability and concerns about antisemitism in a way that would be unthinkable regarding other bigotries.

Still, in some Jewish quarters, it has become common to stop there—to rely on one-sided tropes that seek to absolve us of responsibility to keep investing in building strong, meaningful, and diverse relationships. In viewing the relationship as transactional, tallying up which “side” has benefited or hurt the other more, we miss the true diversity of viewpoints and motivations among the many figures engaged in these relationships every day.

So, for example, while we talk about the ways that the civil rights alliance between Black Americans and Jews became strained in the 1970s, we must also remember groups such as Black Americans in Support of Israel Committee (BASIC), which was founded

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as members of the United Nations pushed for condemnations of Israel that would result in the UN's heinous “Zionism = Racism” declaration in the fall of 1975. Hundreds of the most powerful and prominent Black civil rights leaders came together to say: We know what racism looks like, and Zionism isn't it. They leveraged their moral authority on behalf of their Jewish neighbors. As BASIC's chairman, A. Philip Randolph, told the *New York Times*, “Jewish Americans supported us, marched with us and died for the cause of racial freedom. Black people cannot turn their backs on a friend.”

Similarly, today, although it is right for us to focus on antisemitic comments by media darlings like Marc Lamont Hill regarding Israel, I suggest that we also pay close attention to the far more numerous Black leaders who consistently stand up for the U.S.–Israel relationship, and whose work changes the situation on the ground. Take Deval Patrick: During his two terms as governor, Patrick made establishing strong economic ties between Massachusetts and Israel a central agenda item of his administration, leading two trade missions, consistently showing up at solidarity rallies, sharing a stage with Jewish leaders in 2012 as thousands rallied when Israel was under fire. He spoke from the mainstage of AIPAC in 2019, at a time when many other progressives were being pressured to stay away.

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It is also necessary and right for us to be concerned about hateful figures such as Louis Farrakhan—we have a clear self-interest in not allowing the mainstreaming of antisemitism and other bigotries. But we also must not ignore the day-to-day reality of community-relations work in cities across America, the persistent solidarity Black leaders demonstrate with Jewish communities, the ongoing and mutual willingness to learn and grow together. After every Charlottesville, Pittsburgh, or Poway, among the first calls our Jewish Community Relations Council received were from Black and Brown Christian and Muslim religious leaders, who then publicly stood with us at rallies and protests. The leadership of our local Black Ministerial Alliance was the first to throw its weight behind the Jewish nonprofit security agenda with the Massachusetts state government, and the first to push back when a government official scheduled a meeting on the Jewish Sabbath.

To be invested in the relationship between and among communities is to recognize and accept *all* of these truths. We must have candid and challenging conversations about the tensions that some exploit as wedges to divide us. We must reflect honestly together about doing more to marginalize antisemitic and racist voices. And we must also hear, in loving feedback, that the Jewish community doesn't own the moral high ground, either, that Jews

don't always do all we can to marginalize those of our own leaders who say bigoted, hateful things about other communities.

When we continue to stay in difficult conversations and build complex and authentic relationships, we're able, for example, to push back when we hear rhetoric regarding Israel that we believe is unfair or inaccurate. This is also where we can engage with the idea that perhaps some of the challenges we now experience in garnering Black support for Israel are exacerbated by unhelpful and unproductive actions and statements by some of Israel's leaders.

When we reject simplistic, transactional thinking, we can also embrace a more expansive and enlightened understanding of Jewish self-interest that can go much deeper and further than the classical approach to Jewish "defense," on two levels.

First, we must set aside the notion that Jewish self-defense does not also include working for Black civil rights and against racism. While we might once have viewed ourselves as parallel minority groups in America who needed to join forces, we now understand that the increasing diversity of American Jewry means that our fates are literally intertwined. To stand up against racism is to stand up for members of our own family: Jewish self-interest includes the interests of Black Jews.

Second, we need to understand that articulating our self-interest as Jews means embracing those aspects of the American project that have made this country a place where Jews (and so many others) have thrived more than they have anywhere else in Western civilization. In these fractured times, our nation is increasingly challenged by a crisis of polarization. Some who are dissatisfied with the values and priorities of the American liberal project are seeking to tear down and delegitimize the very fabric of centuries-old institutions, rather than engage in substantive debate.

We are seeing the impact of these efforts in a decline in trust in institutions, democracy, and in facts and information. We are seeing this decline in the amplification of conspiracy theories and in the growing instability of our political systems.

It is profoundly within the Jewish self-interest to defend the American liberal project: the promise to each new generation of Americans that, if we work hard and play by the rules, we can ensure a strong future for our children. But engaging openly and honestly with the Black experience in America means also recognizing that this promise, so central to the American Jewish story, has been far from realized for many of our fellow Americans. By engaging in the work of racial justice, we work to make the American project a reality for all.

More broadly, we need to shift the conversation from self-interest to “shared interests.” In addition to a shared interest in the liberal project, Jewish Americans and Black Americans have a shared interest in combating the frightening revival of a white-supremacist movement. This hateful ideology and its increasingly violent expression threatens all Jewish and Black communities. While there may be other issues on which we do not have a shared agenda or interests, we simply must work together on this.

America is, and has always been, imperfect. Patriotic liberalism requires an acknowledgment of imperfection and the resolve to continually work toward a more perfect union. It requires us to partner with our neighbors to denounce and reject the radicalism on both sides that threatens our union. If we gauge the state of the Black–Jewish partnership only by the words and actions of our most radical elements—on both sides—then we cede the common space where reasonable, good people are working every day, making common cause when we can and respectfully going our separate ways when we cannot.

The Jewish obligation to support Black aspirations to end American racism must not be premised on Black leaders being good allies to Jews on our particularistic self-interests at all times. It must be grounded, always, in our commitment to the fulfillment of the promise of America for all Americans. We must feel the urgent need to tackle racism in this country as Americans and as Jews—regardless of the state of Black–Jewish relations. This is

what’s best for America, what’s best for all Americans, and that should be the starting point of our efforts.

If President Washington’s promise still means something to American Jews, then we must strengthen the Jewish partnership with the Black community to fight against racism in all its forms, to create justice for all Americans—especially for those whose experience has not infused Washington’s words with the same hope and meaning. To do otherwise is to settle for a future in which the collective American project has been compromised and the aspirations of the Founders diminished. That would be a tragedy. *