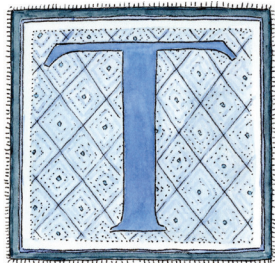


The Past and Future of Black–Jewish Relations



TO COMMEMORATE the first day of Black History Month this year, 170 Hollywood industry leaders announced the formation of the Black-Jewish Entertainment Alliance, aiming to “bring our two communities together in solidarity” against racism and antisemitism. This initiative harked back to the era when black and Jewish groups coalesced with labor, churches, and liberals to win passage of countervailing legislation against Jim Crow and to effectuate less-tangible changes in our culture, anathematizing overt bigotry.

Today, sadly, bigotry appears to be rising again in certain quarters, even while the dominant culture seems ever more alert against it. Former President Trump vehemently denied accusations of racism, but the “populist” wave he rode carried along extremists who reveled in flouting intergroup taboos. For example, on QResearch, the website where the QAnon movement’s multitudinous online conversations are compiled, the search utility yields 47,000 hits for the “n word” and 37,000 for the equivalent “k word” aimed at Jews. The harm is not limited to insult. Words that wound may be fol-

lowed by terrible acts, as the massacres at a church in Charleston and a synagogue in Pittsburgh reminded us so chillingly.

Clearly, Jewish and black Americans share a bedrock interest in combating the extremists and their acceptance in respectable politics. But whether this alliance can have any larger agenda is uncertain, given the disparate experiences of the two groups. In America, Jews endured prejudice, discrimination, and even lynching, but the abuses heaped upon blacks through centuries of slavery and then Jim Crow laws were immeasurably more grievous. And while Jews have largely prospered despite adversity in America, black Americans still occupy disproportionate space on the lower rungs of the socioeconomic ladder.

Even with a limited agenda, renewing the black-Jewish alliance entails recalling something of the history of relations between the two groups, including both high and low moments, and also considering what each can do today to make relations as mutually beneficial as possible.



In its heyday, the black-Jewish alliance jelled in the fight for civil rights, which had been denied so long and so flagrantly. While anti-discrimination laws also applied to Jews and other minorities, some of the most critical measures, like the Voting Rights Act of 1965, scarcely affected Jews directly. Yet Jews rallied around them, less out of self-interest than a sense of justice and identification with the downtrodden. Of course, there were Jews who shared in anti-black prejudice, but the prevailing spirit of the Jewish community then was to view the black cause as its own.

The NAACP, the preeminent American civil rights organization, was founded in 1909 by several black leaders, most notably W.E.B. Du Bois, and a larger number of liberal whites, a disproportionate share of whom were Jews. One of those Jews, Joel Spingarn, “formulated much of the strategy that fostered much of the

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organization's growth" in its first years, according to the account on the NAACP's website. Spingarn became the group's president in 1929 and a decade later was succeeded in that role by his younger brother, Arthur, who served until 1966, when he was in turn succeeded by yet another Jew, Kivie Kaplan, who held the post until his death in 1975. Jews were also important officers, staff, and funders of the National Urban League and the Congress of Racial Equality, the other two oldest of the "big five" black organizations that led the civil rights movement in its heyday.

That era was touched off by the Supreme Court's landmark *Brown v. Board of Education* (1954) ruling striking down the concept of "separate but equal." Its ruling rested largely on research by black sociologist Kenneth Clark that had been commissioned by the American Jewish Committee. As the movement gained momentum, its lobbying was coordinated by an umbrella group, the Leadership Conference on Civil Rights, whose offices could be found in the headquarters of the Religious Action Center of Reform Judaism, and whose operations were led by a director, Arnold Aronson, who was seconded from his role as program director of the National Jewish Community Relations Advisory Council.

When organized labor cracked down on discrimination in its ranks and threw its considerable weight behind the push for anti-discrimination legislation, the AFL-CIO created a standing Civil Rights Committee and a civil rights department in its headquarters. Charles S. Zimmerman, a Jewish vice president of the International Ladies Garment Workers Union, chaired the former; Donald S. Slaiman of the Jewish Labor Committee led the latter.

The heartbeat of the civil rights movement was the courage of Southern black activists, leaders, and protesters, who faced brutality, prison, and death to challenge Jim Crow. But many whites came south to support them; again, Jews disproportionately among them. This rallying culminated in the Mississippi Freedom Summer of 1964, a voter-registration project for students dreamed up and organized by the activist and Jew, Allard Lowenstein. Many of the volunteers were Jewish; former congressman Barney Frank, who was one of them, claims that most were. And, tragically, it produced three martyrs, murdered by the KKK: civil rights workers James Chaney, who was black, and Michael Schwerner and Andrew Goodman, who were Jewish.

Jews served as influential advisers to civil rights leaders. When the FBI notoriously put Martin Luther King Jr. under surveillance, it was in part worried about the influence of Stanley Levison, King's close adviser and sometimes ghostwriter, who had been a Communist. When the civil rights movement gave way to more radical black protest, Jews continued to be found in key supporting roles, even in groups that were not friendly to Jews. Tom Wolfe's famous account of "radical chic" depicted a fundraiser for the Black Panthers in the luxurious Manhattan apartment of Leonard Bernstein. David Horowitz, then the co-editor of *Ramparts*, organized the Panthers' school in its home base of Oakland, and his liaison to Panther boss and co-founder, Huey Newton, was Hollywood producer Bert Schneider, who functioned as a kind of elevated factotum to Newton.

One could go on; the list of Jews who devoted themselves to black causes is all but inexhaustible.

To endure for the long term, however, an alliance must be a two-way street. Through the other end of the telescope, one spies less in the way of black Americans who have embraced Jewish concerns. King was an eloquent defender of Israel, characterizing it as "one of the great outposts of democracy in the world, and a marvelous example of what can be done, how desert land almost can be

transformed into an oasis of brotherhood and democracy.” Bayard Rustin and his mentor, A. Philip Randolph, organized Black Americans in Support of Israel Committee, to which NAACP executive director Roy Wilkins lent his name, along with some political officials. Rustin and Randolph were also outspoken in denouncing antisemitism, as have been a handful of other public figures, such as Henry Louis Gates Jr., head of Harvard’s Hutchins Center for African & African American Research, and, more recently, Kareem Abdul-Jabbar, the basketball legend turned author. No doubt, there have been more in this vein, but alas, too few prominent examples come to mind.

Easier to recall is a long record of public effusions hostile to Jews from black leaders—politicians, activists, musicians, sports stars. Anti-black racism is far from unknown among Jews, but it has almost never emanated from prominent voices. In contrast, some of the most celebrated black figures have unapologetically vented anti-Jewish sentiments.

Malcolm X, for example, often expressed jaundiced thoughts about Jews, including after he broke with the Nation of Islam and moderated his stance on other matters, as his biographer Manning Marable records. “The exploiters of blacks are the Jews,” Malcolm once said, adding coyly, “This does not say that we are anti-Semitic. We are simply against exploitation.” When he met with representatives of the Ku Klux Klan seeking to collaborate toward the goal of racial separation, he sought common ground in shared bigotry, telling the Klansmen that “the Jew is behind the integration movement.”

Malcolm looms much larger posthumously than he did during his lifetime, when he was little more than a sideshow. A more central figure for a time was Stokely Carmichael, a leader of the Student Nonviolent Coordinating Committee (SNCC) who first coined the phrase “black power” as an alternate slogan to the civil rights movement’s mantra “freedom now.” Carmichael changed his name to Kwame Ture and emigrated to Guinea, from where

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he made repeated speaking trips back to the United States to expound Jew-hatred. “The only good Zionist is a dead Zionist,” he said, as Murray Friedman recounts in *What Went Wrong: The Creation and Collapse of the Black-Jewish Alliance*. Ture added: “We must take a lesson from Hitler.”

For a spell in the 1980s, Rev. Jesse Jackson emerged as the preeminent black spokesman. His campaign for president was damaged when a black reporter for the *Washington Post* revealed that, in a recorded interview, Jackson had referred to Jews as “Hymies” and called New York City “Hymietown.” Eventually, Jackson was superseded by Rev. Al Sharpton, who had a history of Jew-baiting. When, in 1991, City College professor Leonard Jeffries’s antisemitic teachings evoked protests, Sharpton intervened: “If the Jews want to get it on, tell them to pin their yarmulkes back and come over to my house.” Days later, after a seven-year-old black boy was accidentally run over by a Hasidic driver, triggering anti-Jewish riots in Crown Heights during which one young Hasid was stabbed to death, Sharpton egged on the rioters: “If you offend one of these little ones, you got to pay for it. No compromise, no meetings, no coffee klatch, no skinnin’ and grinnin’.” Nearly three decades later, now a respectable public figure, Sharpton confessed with self-serving understatement that he could have “done more to heal rather than harm.”

All of these examples pale in comparison to the record of Louis Farrakhan, whom the Anti-Defamation League (ADL) has called “the leading anti-Semite in America.” His assaults on Jews as “termites,” his description of Judaism as a “gutter religion,” his declaration that Hitler was a “great man” (later modified to “wickedly great”) have been widely reported. His Nation of Islam has distributed the notorious fabrication *The Protocols of the Elders of Zion*, as well as a tract of its own, *The Secret Relationship Between Blacks and Jews*, which Henry Louis Gates Jr. condemned as “the bible of the new anti-Semitism.”

Farrakhan might be dismissed as a marginal figure, which in some sense he is. But over and over again, he demonstrates remarkable influence in black America. In 1984, when Jesse Jackson finished third in the Democratic presidential nomination, 65 percent of his delegates told pollsters that they held a favorable view of Farrakhan. A decade later, when Farrakhan called for a “Million Man March” in Washington, it drew 400,000 participants (as estimated by D.C. authorities—others put the numbers higher), despite having no clear program, goals, or mainstream organizational partners. The crowd included many celebrities—among them, a young Barack Obama.

In 1993, Kweisi Mfume, then the chairman of the Congressional Black Caucus, announced a “sacred covenant” between the CBC and Farrakhan’s Nation of Islam. At a public event consecrating this marriage, Farrakhan apologized for having attacked various black leaders, but as black columnist Clarence Page observed, “notably missing from Mr. Farrakhan’s apologies was one for the Jews.” A few months later, Farrakhan’s spokesman and aide, Khalid Abdul Muhammad, gave a speech in which he said, “Everybody always talk about Hitler exterminating six million Jews....But don’t nobody ever ask what they do to Hitler....They went in there, in Germany, the way they do everywhere they go, and...undermined the very fabric of the society.” Farrakhan publicly rebuked Muhammad for being “mean-spirited,” despite characterizing what he’d said as

“truths.” This was not enough to assuage the CBC, which repudiated its alliance with Farrakhan, although amid the publicity all this caused, members acknowledged that the group had held three previously unreported meetings with him.

The unpublicized meetings seem not to have ended with the Khalid Muhammad fiasco. At one, in 2005, a young Senator Barack Obama posed for a photograph with Farrakhan, but a CBC staff member called the Nation of Islam photographer immediately afterward, appealing to him to withhold the shot, which he did. When the photograph was finally published in 2018, the photographer admitted to fearing that its release would have compromised Obama’s already-known presidential ambitions.

Despite—or perhaps because of—his offensiveness, Farrakhan retains his sway today.

In 2018, Tamika Mallory, co-president of the Women’s March, participated in the Nation of Islam’s annual gathering, where Farrakhan delivered himself of the thought, “Satanic Jew...your time is up.” Mallory described Farrakhan as the “greatest of all time” (“the GOAT”) and later said that “white Jews, as white people, uphold white supremacy.” When this led to calls for her removal from leadership of the organization, several dozen black figures signed a petition declaring “unwavering support” for her, including Kristen Clarke, who has been nominated by President Biden to head the Justice Department’s Civil Rights Division.

Most recently, over the course of a couple of days in the summer of 2020, NFL star DeSean Jackson expressed admiration for Farrakhan on social media, also sharing a quote (wrongly) attributed to Hitler, claiming that “white Jews” know that black people are the real “Children of Israel” and will “blackmail” and “extort” America to keep this hidden so they can continue to pursue “their plan for world domination.”

Jackson soon took down the posts and apologized for “any hurt” he had caused, but the next day Stephen Jackson (no relation), a former NBA player turned social activist, jumped in, arguing that

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DeSean Jackson's original posts had been "speaking the truth." He added that the Jews "control all the banks" and called himself "a fan of Minister Farrakhan," adding, "I love the Minister."

What accounts for the frequency—and unashamed boldness—of these expressions, or the comparatively greater currency of antisemitism among black Americans? (When the ADL surveyed such attitudes in 2016, it found that 23 percent of black respondents harbored antisemitic attitudes—low, but more than twice the percentage among whites [10 percent].) The question is not a new one. James Baldwin wrote a piece in 1967 titled "Negroes Are Anti-Semitic Because They're Anti-White," which appears to explain nothing. But on second thought, perhaps there is something to this. Whites are so numerous and powerful that rage against them draws little blood, but a small subgroup can be treated as a stand-in for the whole — one that is gratifyingly easier to wound, which Jews certainly are.

And the obvious success of Jews invites envy from various quarters. Even as they climbed the socioeconomic ladder in the post-war period, Jews were disproportionately visible and in roles easy to resent: storekeepers in black neighborhoods, school teachers, welfare workers, and landlords.

Whatever the cause, concerted efforts by black Americans to

combat antisemitism in their own community must be a cornerstone of the black-Jewish alliance.

Sad to say, there is one other sense in which Jews feel that black Americans have not been the close friends Jews wish they were; that is in respect to Israel. The most prominent black advocacy group in the last decade has been the Movement for Black Lives. When it emerged, it issued a platform that called for ending U.S. aid to the "apartheid state" of Israel, which it said engaged in "genocide" against the Palestinian people. This and other foreign-policy planks of the movement are no longer evident on the Internet, but neither was there any public repudiation of this stand.

In the more important (and moderate) venue of the U.S. Congress, most black members have shared in that body's consistent support for Israel, but not uniformly. The House's most florid anti-Israel voice is that of Congresswoman Ilhan Omar, originally of Somalia, who declared that Israel "hypnotized the world," and she compared boycotting Israel to boycotting Nazi Germany. Across the Capitol, Georgia's newly elected black U.S. senator, Raphael Warnock, took some pains in his recent campaign to explain away a 2018 speech, captured on video, showing him delivering an impassioned sermon accusing Israel in effect of genocide and presenting a purely fictitious scene:

Young Palestinian sisters and brothers, who are struggling for their very lives, struggling for water and struggling for their human dignity, stood up in a nonviolent protest, saying, "If we're going to die, we're going to die struggling." ...We saw the government of Israel shoot down unarmed Palestinian sisters and brothers like birds of prey.

In bills of special importance to Israel, the members of the Congressional Black Caucus on the whole adopt pro-Israel stances, but in somewhat smaller proportion than their white colleagues. For example, when the House voted overwhelmingly in July 2019 to

put itself on record against the anti-Israel BDS (boycott, divest, sanction) campaign, only 17 members dissented, of whom six were from the CBC. Of the 44 co-sponsors of a bill to sanction those providing material support to Palestinian terror groups, none was from the CBC. Of the bill in the last Congress authorizing military aid to Israel and other forms of cooperation, two-thirds of House members signed on as co-sponsors, including 61 percent of Democrats, but only 44 percent of CBC members.

There is little doubt that in the face of energized extremists, black and Jewish Americans will be working together or in tandem to combat overt bigotry. But if this alliance is to be as strong as possible, what can each side do for the benefit of the other?

With anti-discrimination laws long since enacted, black interests have centered on programs to facilitate economic empowerment. Jews have been supportive of these, out of liberal conviction more than self-interest. Some 50 years ago, the essayist Milton Himmelfarb quipped that Jews “earn like Episcopalians and vote like Puerto Ricans.” What’s changed since then is that Jewish earning has surpassed that of Episcopalians, while Puerto Ricans seem to be voting more conservatively than Jews. Although Latinos as a whole are often twinned with blacks in political commentary, in 2020 as in other years, it appears that Jews joined blacks in supporting the Democrats in greater proportion than Latinos, despite American Jews’ attachment to Israel, where Trump was overwhelmingly preferred.

There are two key areas in which Jews must look to black leaders for support. One is in denouncing antisemitism, especially when voiced by prominent black figures such as Farrakhan. Sometimes, black leaders have complained about Jewish pressure to condemn black antisemites. But if a Jewish leader made an openly disparaging comment about black people, Jewish organizations and

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opinion leaders would rush to castigate the offender before anyone could ask them to do so. To Jewish ears, unprompted rebukes of antisemitism like those of Henry Louis Gates Jr. and Kareem Abdul-Jabbar have been welcomed like water in the desert.

The second area is Israel. Today’s black leaders could be vocal in support of Israel, as were King, Rustin, and Randolph. Black members of Congress could easily be in the fore of legislative support for the Jewish state.

These two issues of Jewish concern intersect on the college campus. At many schools, student activists have formed “intersectional” coalitions, which have welcomed anti-Israel groups that have steered entire student governing bodies toward anti-Israel positions, sometimes tinged by outright antisemitism and a vehemence that has intimidated Jewish students. Were black students to resist the inclusion of Israel-bashing in the progressive agenda of their activism, it would send a powerful message.

Beyond these commonsense realms in which black and Jewish Americans can lend support to each other, there are two ideas of recent provenance that could strain relations further and that must invite dialogue. One is “antiracism”; the other is The 1619 Project.

The most noted black thinker in the current moment would seem to be Ibram X. Kendi, a leader of his “antiracism” movement.

The essence of “antiracism,” says Kendi, is “equity between racial groups,” a goal to be pursued by means of “antiracist discrimination.” In other words, group rights should be prioritized over individual rights, and the cumulative attainments of groups over individual opportunity and achievement.

This would be materially deleterious to Jews. In 2016, Pew published data on income distribution within each religious group in America: 44 percent of Jews had family incomes above \$100,000, a higher percentage than any other faith; for all Americans combined, only 19 percent reached this level. Jews also ranked near the top in education, with 59 percent having achieved a college degree, compared with a national average of 27 percent. Jews have mostly put aside their self-interests as affluent taxpayers in supporting liberal policies, but to abandon the bedrock value of equal treatment of individuals would threaten everything that Jews have achieved in America.

It is not only in a material sense that most Jews would find Kendi’s prescription repugnant. It also flies in the face of the liberal ideals that made Jews champions of civil rights. A central idea of the Hebrew Bible is that each person is created in the image of God. This core belief in the inherent dignity of each individual has infused Jewish thought and culture, embraced by both those who hold the Bible close and those who do not. It is a principle that lies at the root of the very idea of “rights.” It is hard to think of a tenet held dearer by Jews.

The 1619 Project of the *New York Times*, awarded the Pulitzer prize and accompanied by a curriculum used by many of our nation’s schools, argues that American history should be reframed with the understanding that “slavery—and the anti-black racism it required” underlie “nearly everything that has truly made America exceptional.” Dismissing the contributions of others to the struggles for emancipation and civil rights, it argues that “for the most part, black Americans fought back alone.”

The latter assertion is bound to be taken by Jews as erasing

the history of Jewish contributions to the civil rights movement, of which Jews are rightfully proud. But more important is the broader assertion that America is an essentially malign country eternally rooted in slavery and racism. To Jews—despite painful memories of discriminatory quotas and lassitude during the Holocaust—America has been a country of liberation, the place where they received more acceptance than anywhere else in the 2,000 years of the Diaspora; and, to boot, it is a global power that helped to defeat Nazism, bring down Soviet Communism, and protect Israel. The creed of American Jewry includes great love of America. If, as The 1619 Project implies, the creed of black America is to see this country as rooted in evil, then the gap between the two groups will yawn wider than ever before.

This would be a sad development. Despite differences of history and circumstance, black and Jewish Americans have been productive partners in advancing programs of social welfare, dating back at least to the New Deal. And, notwithstanding 1619’s claims to the contrary, they were partners in the glorious victories of the civil rights movement, one of the proudest chapters in American history. Also, although it is not of their own doing, they are inseparably joined as targets of extreme-right hate groups. Thus, while black and Jewish Americans should face their differences frankly, they should all the while keep in mind the things, good and bad, that bring them together. *