

Enchantment and the Black-Jewish Divide



HAVE ALWAYS had one foot in—and one out—of the worlds of black America and Ashkenazi-Jewish America.

I grew up Christian while observing many Jewish customs. I was raised to keep the holy days of the Torah and to shun mainstream Christian traditions such as

Christmas and Easter. At the same time, as a black American, I carry a historical memory of slavery and Jim Crow and the freedom struggles that emerged in response. My education included the poetry of the Harlem Renaissance and the inspiration of Martin Luther King Jr., who believed in waging spiritual warfare against racism and hatred. Like Am Yisrael, Dr. King believed in building “The Beloved Community,” a society based on justice, equality, and love of one’s fellow human being.

Blacks and Jews have both made vast contributions to this country. At times, those contributions have cross-pollinated—from the civil-rights movement to uniquely American art forms such as jazz, dance, film, and comedy, to politics, academia, and business—in ways

that have made us all freer, better, more creative, and more empathic. But the two communities have also developed their own responses to their respective traumas and persecution. Those responses have shaped, and also misshaped, the relationship between the communities in ways that have harmed us all.

It should matter deeply that we heal this breach, not only for the benefit of blacks and Jews, but also for the civic and moral health of the United States. To do so, we first have to understand the moral and psychological roots of our responses to our traumas. Only then we can start thinking constructively about how to move forward together.



In 1931, Earl Little, a Baptist preacher and organizer for Marcus Garvey’s Universal Negro Improvement Association, was run over and killed by a streetcar in Lansing, Michigan. Many in the black community believed that this was no accident, but rather the work of a white-supremacist group called the Black Legion. Black Legion members had frequently harassed the Little family and had burned down their home two years earlier. Earl’s son, Malcolm, later described the terror of that experience:

I remember being suddenly snatched awake into a frightening confusion of pistol shots and shouting and smoke and flames. My father had shouted and shot at the two white men who had set the fire and were running away. Our home was burning down around us.

This origin story is instructive. While most of us know about the man that Malcolm X became—leader in the Nation of Islam, railer against “the white man’s America,” and advocate for black separatism—we know less about the conditions that produced the attitudes that Malcolm X acquired.

Both he and Elijah Muhammad, the founder of the Nation of Islam, grew up as the sons of preachers who, in traditional Protestant fashion, preached their own messianic vision of a coming apocalyptic hellfire in which all would be damned unless they found salvation. But Muhammad and Malcolm were already living in a kind of hell, one in which brutal lynchings of black Americans occurred regularly before their own eyes; in which their terrorizers all shared the same pale skin; in which salvation was a matter of survival in this world, not the world to come.

It's easy to see how some people who were hated, beaten, and bloodied for their dark skin would be motivated to proclaim that the very thing that made them hated by others was what made them beloved by God. It's also easy to see how those same people would view all others who claimed to be God's chosen people as usurpers, a threat to a hard-fought sense of purpose and belonging in an unforgiving world.

The roots of the Nation of Islam's relentless demonization of Jews come from various sources, many of them religious. But the *psychological* attraction of that antisemitism—the reason the Nation has had such success in attracting both converts and admirers—derives at least partly from a sense of competition for chosenness. Not for nothing does Louis Farrakhan constantly accuse Jews of being imposters.



In many ways, Meir Kahane's Jewish Defense League was a mirror of the Nation of Islam in the Jewish world. In his *Memoirs of a Jewish Extremist*, Yossi Klein Halevi, who had been a member of the JDL in his youth, recalls growing up in Borough Park, Brooklyn, as the son of a Holocaust survivor. Halevi felt the full emotional weight of the Jewish people's historical defenselessness. Like Malcolm X, Halevi believed he was a member of the “most hated of peoples.” For Halevi, joining the JDL was a way of marrying

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vulnerability to fury in the service of radical liberation. Kahane's fanatical concern for the welfare of his fellow Jews bled easily into a more generalized racism against blacks and Arabs, as well as into angry contempt for liberal Jews who simply didn't agree with his ideology and methods—people Kahane denounced as fake Jews.

In time, Halevi cut his ties with the group. (Malcolm X also eventually cut ties with The Nation after realizing it no longer aligned with his evolving beliefs.) He came to understand the temptation that supremacist tendencies could present to any ill-treated community, a temporary relief against the tortured feeling of existential inadequacy. And he came to appreciate the ease with which fanatics could slide into the kind of behavior they condemn in their enemies. They stereotype in response to being stereotyped, hate in response to being hated, terrorize in response to being terrorized.

“We too were being transformed into freaks,” Halevi recalled, “ghettoized and demonized, until we turned grotesque with rage.”

In the end, extremist groups like the Nation of Islam or the JDL invariably fall into a co-dependent relationship with their opponents—at once violently hostile and also mimetic. James Baldwin's observation that “the oppressor and the oppressed depend upon each other” rings true here. Instead of offering liberation, these groups create a closed and oppressive system defined entirely by

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their relationship with those whom they denounce as oppressors. To break with that destructive pattern, they would have to renounce their very reason for being, which helps explain why they have been able to persist for so long while failing to achieve the kind of spiritual transcendence that's required for actual liberation.



The Nation of Islam and the JDL are, of course, at the fringes of their respective communities. So why do I discuss them?

First, because the *impulses* the groups represent are more widespread than the groups themselves. Second, because the two groups (or at least those who might still gravitate toward their messages) stand at the pointed ends of their communities' most destructive emotions, which need to be reckoned with. And third, because they offer a view into the psychology of damaged relationships—of pain turned into anger, anger into bigotry, and bigotry into politics.

How do we overcome all of this—what's my “moonshot” approach for building a different relationship between racial and ethnic groups?

First, while it is definitely an anti-racist moonshot, it is not the

same as the current popular wave of what John McWhorter, of Columbia University, calls “third wave anti-racism” and even “neo-racism,” which, he argues,

teaches that racism is baked into the structure of society, so whites' “complicity” in living within it constitutes racism itself, while for black people, grappling with the racism surrounding them is the totality of experience and must condition exquisite sensitivity toward them, including a suspension of standards of achievement and conduct.

This form of anti-racism may sound like an antidote to racism, but it is in many ways simply a replica of it. Far from being an extension of the legacy of historic civil-rights leaders such as Frederick Douglass, Dr. King, or Rabbi Abraham Joshua Heschel, this version of anti-racism often has more in common with the Nation of Islam, or, for that matter, the JDL.

Instead of doing away with caricature and stereotyping based on skin color, this form of anti-racism actually *incentivizes* people to caricature and stereotype. Instead of *overcoming* historic racism and its social and intellectual underpinnings, many of today's anti-racist efforts simply invert the original white-supremacist doctrine: Just as the classic white supremacists said that to be black was to be inferior and to be white superior, this anti-racism equates blackness with goodness and whiteness with evil.

The result is predictable: Telling people they are defined by the color of their skin, indicted by immutable characteristics, can only breed frustration, paranoia, and resentment. Such a worldview of scarcity—a zero-sum, us-versus-them mentality—only perpetuates racial power struggles. It's one of the reasons race relations in the United States seem to have gotten worse, not better, in the era of “anti-racism.”

This is not the direction society needs to go. Luckily, there is an alternative.

For years, I have been at work on what I call the “Theory of Enchantment.” The word “enchantment” suggests magic, and in some sense that is exactly what I mean by it: the enchantment of seeing a world filled with everyday people whose gifts—at first hidden from others, or even from themselves—can redeem, heal, and save us.

But enchantment, more basically, is about human psychology: about what we fear or love; about how we *choose* to see the world; about the nature of our relationships with others; about the nature of our relationship with ourselves. The concept of enchantment matters in everything from marketing and branding to art and real estate to courtship and marriage. And it matters in terms of how we change our perceptions of others, both individually and as groups.

The concept of enchantment begins with Walt Whitman’s assertion that human beings “contain multitudes.” None of us are reducible to a single thing, belief, or identity, whether racial, ethnic, or religious. Whitman wrote in the first person—“I am large, I contain multitudes”—and knowing this about ourselves means acknowledging it in others. To see all human beings as complex creatures—irreducible to skin tone or background, capable of evil *and* good—is the first way of checking our own prejudices and the stereotyping of others.

Where many of today’s anti-racists are more often interested in appearances than in possibilities, in counting up what a person or an organization lacks (namely, participation by minorities), enchantment asks us to imagine, and work toward, what we and our institutions *can become*. Where zero-sum-game anti-racism marinates in division, resentment, and mutual recrimination, literally dividing people into race-based “affinity groups,” enchantment asks people to take deeper notice of one another, not just in terms of what confounds or confronts us, but also in what delights and dazzles us. Enchantment is an experience of wonder with a thing we didn’t know before. It starts with curiosity, rather than recrimination. It delights in our shared humanity, as well as in the differences that make human beings and human societies so fascinating.

Enchantment is a form of anti-racism that entails mindfulness practices, requiring regular repetition and application if we want it to become part of a new way of life. It’s a way of discovering how to be in better relationships. And it’s something that black and Jewish communities can find ways to practice together.

All of this might sound like proverbial psychobabble. But the direct, concrete challenge we face in improving race relations in this country, including between blacks and Jews, has its roots in psychology. To wit: How do we go from being threatened by each other’s diversity to delighting in that diversity, knowing that it is nothing more than a reflection of our own? How, more specifically, do we reclaim the understanding that the black freedom struggle, from Douglass to Dr. King to my own generation, and the Jewish freedom struggle, from Moses to Ben-Gurion to my Jewish friends and colleagues, are in many ways the same struggle, the same story?

We do so by re-enchanting ourselves with one another, by delighting in difference, by looking for complexity where it might be easy to see simplicity.

Imagine individuals from each community doing so as personal friends or professional colleagues, in book clubs, reading circles, activity groups, or Shabbat dinners. Imagine Birthright-like trips for teenage black Americans to Israel, or March of the Living-like trips to Auschwitz. Imagine Freedom Summer-like trips for students in Jewish day schools to the American South, tracing the story of civil rights from Atlanta to Birmingham to my hometown of New Orleans—with plenty of detours for great music and food.

The greatest American moonshot of the past 100 years wasn’t John F. Kennedy’s idea of landing a man on the moon. It was Dr. King’s idea of fundamentally transforming national consciousness across lines of color. The current moment calls on us to do this work again, beginning by repairing the wounded but necessary friendship between blacks and Jews. *