

An interview with

LORD JOHN MANN & DARIUS JONES

Finding Allies in the Fight



IN EVERY GENERATION, *there are those who, though not themselves Jewish, are moved to devote a considerable portion of their energies to fighting antisemitism. SAPIR Managing Editor Saul Rosenberg sat down with two of them, one American and one British, to understand what motivates them to do this work. Lord John Mann is a British politician who serves as an adviser to the government on antisemitism, sitting as a member of the House of Lords. Darius Jones is the founder and president of the National Black Empowerment Council, an organization supporting leadership collaborations that can close the wealth, influence, and achievement gaps between African Americans and other groups.*

Saul Rosenberg: I'd like to start by asking each of you how you came to feel that antisemitism ought not merely to be fought but that you should join that fight yourselves. Can we start with you, John?

Lord John Mann: It's the definition of political leadership. I was an elected national politician for nearly 20 years. I've worked for lots of prime ministers. For people in my line, it should be taken as automatic that you do your little bit to combat any form of discrimination — and therefore you do your little bit to combat antisemitism.

Rosenberg: I'd like to push you a little on that if I may. There are so many prejudices one can fight. What led you to dedicate so much time and energy to fighting this prejudice?

Mann: Well, the Jewish community asked me and have kept asking me. Obviously, the fact that I'm not Jewish has certain advantages. I'm not a — I suppose the term is Judeophile. It's simply that my family was brought up near and amongst Jewish people. And I can speak. And when I spoke, I said what I thought, and it went down very well with young Jewish people. Then they asked me to take on a bigger role 20 years ago, and I've just carried on doing it.

I don't worry about how you identify as being Jewish. I don't care if you are Liberal, Reform, Orthodox, Ultra-Orthodox. I don't care if you go to synagogue or not, keep kosher or not. I don't care if you are Zionist, anti-Zionist, or somewhere ambivalently in the middle. It's not my prerogative to care. My role is to advise our government that, however you choose to identify, you can be yourself with no negatives. That's my remit. I look at what the obstacles to that are — the individuals, the structures, the systems. I spend a lot of time on structural antisemitism and how to deal with it. People sometimes call this education. It's much more

than that. What systems are needed to combat antisemitism? And clearly, people think that's very useful. It's not intellectual theorizing. It's what should be done to combat antisemitism, what works, what doesn't work — strategy, if you like.

Rosenberg: Darius, there's also a relevant stream in your history and career — could you discuss the path that led to your being a voice in your community against antisemitism?

Darius Jones: I was put on this path by my parents, both of whom were very involved in the civil rights movement — including the famous Freedom Rides, when delegations went into Mississippi and faced fierce, often dire resistance trying to register African Americans to vote. History teaches us many powerful lessons. But one thing my mother and father made sure I understood was that the movement was successful, obviously because of a tremendous amount of work done by the black community, but also because there were people of conscience from other communities who got involved in our struggle in decisive ways. My mother always said that chief among those allies were our Jewish brothers and sisters who contributed time, talent, treasure, and even made the ultimate sacrifice so African Americans could have freedom and self-determination in this country. I was awed and inspired to learn of a group so selflessly motivated by high principles.

If you think about the 400-year sojourn of African Americans in the United States, there have not been many stepping up to ally with us. But if you had to identify a group consistently willing to step into the breach and lock arms with African Americans, it has always been the Jewish community. As a black man, I cannot overstate the existential impact this alliance has had upon black lives over the decades. So when I heard some of the challenges around

antisemitism and around anti-Zionism, I wanted to mobilize a similar vanguard within the black community — leaders, people of conscience — who would join an effort to stand in solidarity with our brothers and sisters in the Jewish community.

Rosenberg: How did you go about that?

Jones: I traveled to Israel in 2009 with the American Israel Education Foundation and came to understand the enduring, existential challenges Israel faces. People who have not travelled to the region cannot even begin to appreciate the complicated dynamics. After processing everything I learned from the perspectives of the Israelis and the Palestinians, I had a personal revelation that changed my life. There I was at week's end, awed by the panoramic view from an overlook above the Old City, saying to myself: This is one of the most phenomenal examples of peoplehood and collective self-determination I've ever seen. Herzl said, "If you will it, it is no dream." Israel is a towering testament to the power of intention and an indomitable human spirit. Such narratives can be universal in their application. At that moment, I decided that if I could be part of an effort to identify like-minded black leaders and bring them to Israel so they could have a similarly moving experience — that would be something I'd be willing to dedicate my life to.

For the 10 years I was at AIPAC, I identified dynamic, emerging black leaders. I took them to Israel, where they had my same experience, then came back to the United States and continued to lead on black issues, but also became involved in advancing the U.S.-Israel relationship and leaning into the black-Jewish relationship. When I created the National Black Empowerment Council (NBEC), I decided to double down on that model. I felt like the circumstances in our nation called for that. As social, cultural, and

political polarization continues to fray the fabric of our nation, we must create a community of people of conscience and consequence, who can push back against antisemitism, racism, and all forms of injustice we see emerging in the world.

Rosenberg: It seems to me you both belong to communities that feel at least sometimes that antisemitism is different, that it's not racism, and therefore that it's less important. John, you are on record as describing antisemitism as the worst of the racisms. Can you talk a little bit about what it's like in your community to be saying, "No, antisemitism isn't so different from racism"?

Mann: I represented an all-white working-class community. I've had to challenge all sorts of racisms very directly—sometimes very brutally—to protect people and to try and change attitudes. I don't just deal with antisemitism, but antisemitism mutates in different forms. That's what makes it different. Anti-black racism can be very insidious, very disguised and hidden, so that's a challenge. But it's a little easier to get started. With antisemitism, you have two problems. First, you have the problem of [opposition to] Israel, so you have a political dimension to overcome. Secondly, there's the fact that Jews often don't look different.

I do a lot of training sessions for football teams. I get two people to stand up at the front and I ask which one is white, and they look identical. I deconstruct that. I explain that one of them is Jewish and that there are a lot of people who don't regard them as white—you use the Nazis as the simplest example to demonstrate that. But that's a complexity. I show them a picture of a football crowd, 50,000 people, and I say, "Spot the Jew." And of course, nobody, including me, has a clue who's Jewish there. Yet if you see a 10-year-old black child in front of you listening to racist remarks,

you can see there's a problem affecting somebody, because you can see the person it's impacting. If it's a 10-year-old Jewish child, you can't see that, even though the racism may be just as vitriolic. And just experiencing that has had a transformative impact in people's thinking through the issue and how they train the stewards and the staff in how they deal with racism inside a football stadium. And I find awareness makes it more likely that the same people will better equip themselves to deal with the anti-black racism. They are thinking: What is the impact on that child? What are we doing to make sure the negatives turn to a positive? Where are our role models? How do we portray our role models? Suddenly you're into a very different, more positive, more engaging, more useful dialogue.

Rosenberg: As a white Jewish guy, I am perceived much more as white than I'm perceived as Jewish. I heard that on TV when Whoopi Goldberg dismissed the Holocaust as not a racist event. Darius, you seem to be taking on antisemitism specifically as a leader in the black community, which has been in the news recently because of controversial statements from black celebrities like Kanye West and Kyrie Irving, as well as revived tensions in black-Jewish neighborhoods of New York City. What's your perspective on that, and what's it like trying to fight against it?

Jones: There is a tremendous amount of confusion in the African-American community as to whether the Jewish people are a race, a religion, an ethnicity, a culture. But one thing is certain to most in the black community: A tremendous amount of hatred has been targeted at Jews, at a level commensurate with our own historical experience—creating empathy and kinship. I've never heard a white supremacist come out and say, "I love black people, but I can't stand Jews," or "I love Jews, but I can't stand black people."

Our adversaries draw no distinction. To them, we're a package deal, and neither group can leave this land fast enough.

Inaction in my community on antisemitism often stems from the fact that many people perceive Jews through tropes anchored in an exaggerated sense of privilege and power, and as a group eminently capable of fighting its own battles—a power black people don't necessarily feel we can manifest as easily. The perception of power *is* power. But such subjectivity can cut both ways: It can keep enemies at bay; sadly, it occasionally does the same with allies. People often see antisemitic hate speech and derision but are convinced of the Jewish community's ability to address it. And because, for the average African American, safety and survival are such essential concerns, there are too few people who can both see and say that that's not true. Better relationships at the leadership level are an important first step.

Rosenberg: What would you say to an ultra-Orthodox Jew in Brooklyn who said, “Of course, there's a risk that a white supremacist will appear in my synagogue with an AR-15, but I worry more about the black people on the street, some of whom are beating up some of my co-religionists. I worry for my children because of that community, because the white supremacists are not threatening me here in Brooklyn.

Jones: You are absolutely right. The situation is as unacceptable as it is egregious. On the assertion of antisemitism as the main criminal motive, however, we must be able to reach that conclusion with a high degree of certainty. I am not saying that to diminish your premise in any way, because the violence that has been visited specifically upon the Orthodox community in that area is a very real problem. No one deserves to live in fear, and we must have a zero-tolerance policy for violent crime, especially when motivated by hatred of a particular

group. Looking into some of these incidents, I have learned that a few of these assailants were in the throes of protracted periods of vagrancy due to untreated mental deficiencies. On account of their severe impairment, these could have been crimes of desperation, opportunity, or the result of a psychotic episode. I know each attack is different, and antisemitism was definitely a factor in too many cases. I just want to be clear what we are dealing with, so the police, mental health professionals, and the black community can all take informed action to end this crisis.

I've done a lot of work helping African Americans bridge divides with the Jewish community. Without exception, the black people I talk to harbor no ill will or aggressive intent whatsoever toward the Jewish community. I think the biggest problem here is that we have 6 million Jews and 47 million black people who often live in the same cities but don't engage with one another. That creates a space where Kanye West can make these egregiously antisemitic statements, and there aren't enough black people with the lived experience to contradict him. Again, only better relationships can address these issues.

Rosenberg: John, what would you say to a version of that question that might run like this: When I was growing up in London, when I walked down Cricklewood Broadway on a Saturday night, I was worried about skinheads whom you would probably put on the Right of the political spectrum. And when I look at England now, it seems to me that for the first time in my life, there's a bigger problem on the Left. And the Left is obviously so much your philosophical home, if you will. How did we get here?

Mann: Well, those issues on the Left have always been there. They are not new. They have resurrected themselves.

But it's a different kind of problem. It's not a problem of violence,

it's not a problem of murder or attempted murder. It's a negativity. I call it the intimidation of silence because that's what we observe the most, and that's very, very difficult. You see that in universities, for example, where Jewish students will get negativity by simply being themselves, being Jewish. We are tackling that head-on. I've changed the narrative entirely, with success, away from people looking for violence to people looking for negativity, which is different. If you look under the surface, if in a university there was, say, a black Evangelical student church set up, they would experience the same thing because they are different, and that would be seen as a negative. But it wouldn't manifest in violence, rarely in abuse. It would be in terms of ostracism and disdain. It would be about issues. In that instance it might be a debate on abortion — in the same way that, with Jewish students, it'd be a debate on the Middle East.

The Jewish community and its leadership in the Western world have been too comfortable in their security and in doing well. That's led to a huge complacency. Certainly, people 10 years ago were telling me there is no antisemitism in the country. My response to that was, "You and I move in different circles." I was with a Jewish businessman in my own city, quite young, very successful, telling me he'd never seen any antisemitism in his life. I mentioned a golf club — and when he last played there, the other golfers put down their clubs and walked away from him the moment they learned he was Jewish. And yet he was saying he'd never experienced any antisemitism. That golf-club antisemitism is so strong, and it doesn't matter how successful you are, it is there. And it seems to me it's exactly the same with the black community. You may be the most successful musician or sports star or in any walk of life, but will you be allowed to play in the golf club? Will you be welcomed into the golf club? Where else won't you be welcomed?

One of my big criticisms of Jewish communal organizations is

that they haven't built the alliances with other communities. The black community is probably the easiest to do it with in Europe and the United States, but they haven't treated it as a priority to anything like the extent they should. That's why the work I'm doing in sport is so interesting, because suddenly those alliances are blooming again. We're building or rebuilding an effective alliance between communities where, because they're minorities, because there's a difference, people are choosing to use that difference as a weakness to try and exploit through abuse and racism.

Rosenberg: When I was growing up, my father went every week to the local Council of Christians and Jews. I do not do anything like that. So I want to ask you both, what should Jews do that we aren't doing? Darius?

Jones: Many times, well-meaning leaders from the Jewish community reach out without really knowing who the credible and responsible players are in the African-American community. You engage with people you have read about or seen on television, and there's too much focus on those leaders. Often, those leaders tend not to be the most effective partners for such a mission.

Reconstructing a modern black-Jewish alliance requires assembling a strong team. NBEC is launching an effort we call the Convergence Initiative. It is all about getting the band back together, as they say. We have established partnerships with and received support from the Jewish community. Uniquely though, Convergence is an African-American-conceived and -led initiative to bring the best and brightest from our community into a formidable alliance with a similar contingent of leaders from the Jewish community. Every member of NBEC has traveled to Israel and is committed to strengthening the black-Jewish relationship, so we are able to engage at a more advanced level,

enabling connection and action much more quickly. We'll be focusing our efforts on continually taking delegations of influential black leaders to Israel. Adding to our ranks in this fashion allows NBEC to keep expanding a leadership network that brings innovative approaches to the challenges faced by the black community and recruits individuals who are uniquely prepared to join with the Jewish people in combating hate and making our world a better place.

Rosenberg: John, I'll give you the last word.

Mann: In terms of those alliances, we are quite a distance behind the United States from what I have observed and from what I have just heard. This notion of developing leadership, that's absolutely where I'm coming from. In the U.K political world, which is a small world, we've achieved this cross-party. We've done that very well, probably better than any other country. In student leadership, we've been very successful. People need to ask, "What are the outcomes?" Quantify the outcomes. Because the outcomes have to be real rather than superficial. There's not enough asking, "Why is this working? What is working? How is it working?" And also, "What's *not* working?" Not enough people come to me and say, "Tell me what the failures are in everything you're doing and everything you see everyone else do." Everyone can cover up their failures and just highlight the odd success, but that's not progress and it's certainly not leadership. That's what I'd like the community leaders and the philanthropists to do—I'd like philanthropists coming and saying, not, "Look, here's some money to do this." I'd like them to say, "Tell me what you're doing wrong, tell me what you're doing right, tell me how I can help." *