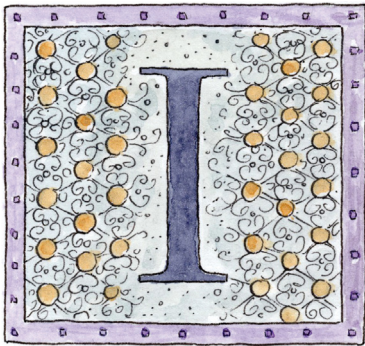


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Black Radicalism

Antisemitism runs deeper in the black radical tradition than many realize



IF I HAD ONLY a glancing knowledge of American history, I would never guess that black Americans and Jewish Americans had ever clashed. After all, both groups understand what it's like to be a despised minority, both groups have been reliable Democrat voters for the better part of the past century, and both groups share the same historical enemy: the far Right. One need not be crazy to look at the photos of Martin Luther King Jr. walking shoulder to shoulder with Abraham Joshua Heschel during the civil rights movement and wonder how the relationship between these two groups could be anything other than a love-fest.

The reality of black-Jewish relations, however, has fallen short of that ideal. At the center of that failure is the troubling phenomenon of black antisemitism. The reflexive support given to Hamas by Black Lives Matter's Chicago chapter, which on October 10 tweeted a picture

of a paraglider with the caption “I Stand with Palestine,” is only one of the latest examples. To understand the roots of black antisemitism, we must go back much further—before the realities of war brought the West Bank and Gaza under Israeli control in June 1967.

In April 1967, as Israel anxiously prepared for war with its Arab neighbors, James Baldwin published an essay in the *New York Times* under the title “Negroes Are Anti-Semitic Because They’re Anti-White.” The headline advanced a heavily oversimplified version of Baldwin’s thesis, but it nevertheless captured something true. Leaving aside the question of whether Jews are in fact white (the Nazis certainly didn’t think so, and there are many unambiguously non-white Jews—for instance, Mizrahi and Ethiopian Jews), it is nevertheless true that black Americans see Jews as white. And to the extent that there is a deep well of anti-white sentiment in the black community, that sentiment gets grafted onto Jews.



But there is much more to black antisemitism than that. In his essay, Baldwin pointed out that during his youth in Harlem, he mostly encountered Jews in roles of power and authority relative to him: his landlord, his grocer, his butcher, etc. As a result, Baldwin claimed, one source of black antisemitism was the natural friction that results when one ethnic group operates the lion’s share of businesses in an area mostly populated by a different group. In other words, it wasn’t because Jews were Jewish: *Any* group overrepresented among landlords and shopkeepers would have been hated. One can look, for instance, at the targeting of Korean-owned stores in inner-city race riots to find support for this theory.

That said, Baldwin’s point explains less than it appears to. For one thing, black-Jewish tensions in Harlem were a local and temporary

reality. They therefore cannot explain what has become a national and long-lasting phenomenon. Jews may have been landlords in Harlem during the early and mid-20th century — Harlem was, after all, a Jewish (and Italian) neighborhood long before blacks arrived — but blacks have resented Jews all across the nation, long past the time when Jews owned many buildings and businesses in Harlem. When I lived in Hamilton Heights and Harlem between 2016 and 2020, my landlord was Dominican, and all the delis were run by Yemenis.

One underappreciated source of black antisemitism omitted in Baldwin's essay is the Nation of Islam (NOI). NOI is a syncretic blend of Islam, black nationalism, and a sort of copy-paste of the Jewish story, but with black Americans swapped in for Jews as the “chosen people” — an aspect NOI shares with the Black Hebrew Israelites. As Elijah Muhammad put it in his book *Message to the Black Man in America*: “A Savior is born, not to save the Jews but to save the poor Negro.”

Though NOI's founding scriptures contained more white-hatred than Jew-hatred, it did not take long for Jew-hatred to become central to NOI. In 1960, the great civil rights leader Bayard Rustin pressed Malcolm X, then a spokesperson for the NOI, on allegations that Elijah Muhammad had singled out Jews as “exploiters.” In one of the least convincing defenses ever made, Malcolm replied:

I don't think you can find an article where he has ever pointed out the Jew as an exploiter of the black man. He speaks of the exploiter. Period. He doesn't break it down in terms of Frenchmen or Englishmen or a Jew or a German. He speaks of the exploiter *and sometimes the man who is the most guilty of exploitation will think you are pointing the finger at him.* [Emphasis added.]

Any doubt about NOI's antisemitism was put to rest when Louis Farrakhan assumed leadership of the organization in 1981. Farrakhan

called Hitler “a very great man” and Judaism “a gutter religion.” He holds Jews responsible for funding both the American slave trade and the Holocaust. “Jews have been so bad at politics they lost half their population in the Holocaust,” Farrakhan said. “They thought they could trust in Hitler, and they helped him get the Third Reich on the road.”

Though Farrakhan has appropriately been deeply criticized by organizations such as the Anti-Defamation League and the Southern Poverty Law Center, he has not been canceled to the extent that he should be — and certainly not to the extent he would be if he were a white person with the same views. For instance, three of the co-chairs of the 2018 Women’s March — Linda Sarsour, Carmen Perez, and Tamika Mallory — had ties to Farrakhan, despite his regressive views on the role of women in society. Indeed, the *New York Times* reported that NOI members were involved in providing security for some of the marches. As a result, the Women’s March refused to dissociate itself from Farrakhan for almost a year, until a particularly fiery Farrakhan speech denouncing the “satanic Jews” finally elicited a mealy-mouthed Facebook post.

While NOI’s official membership has never constituted a large part of the black community, its influence has far outstripped its official numbers because of its popularity with rappers. NOI’s and specifically Farrakhan’s teachings formed the waters in which rappers of a certain generation, from Jay-Z and Snoop Dogg to Ice Cube and of course Ye (formerly Kanye West), swam. As a result, the antisemitism inherent in NOI has found a bullhorn in hip-hop lyrics and hip-hop culture more broadly.

But the true source of black antisemitism lies deeper than ethnic tensions in Harlem or the influence of NOI. At bottom, black antisemitism has to do with the story that black Americans tell ourselves about who we are. Every ethnic group has a dominant story — a story as sacred to its members as any religious catechism. The dominant

black American story runs as follows: We are the only Americans who came here not by choice, but in chains. And though the country has moved past slavery, legalized white supremacy, and open discrimination, we remain a disproportionately poor and downtrodden people as a result of our past oppression. But for that history of oppression, we would be thriving.

A typical challenge to this story is the “model minority” argument: namely, the fact that many immigrant groups have arrived on America’s shores penniless and despised but have nonetheless risen up the ladder within a few generations. Why, then, can’t black Americans do the same? The typical response is that those groups were not trailing centuries of brutal discrimination and therefore did not have to climb as steep a hill. And with most groups—say, the Italians and the Irish—this response seems convincing enough.

But then there is the troubling case of Jewish Americans. The trials and tribulations of the Jewish people are so numerous, so well documented, and so undeniable that this response rings somewhat hollow. Jews have indeed had to climb the steepest of hills. But to acknowledge Jewish success in the face of that history, and to do so without resorting to odious conspiracy theories, would require a reconsideration of the black American story. In other words, Jewish Americans are proof that it is possible to succeed economically even when history has thrown every possible obstacle in your way. So, more than any other “model minority,” Jewish Americans, thanks to their success, present a serious challenge to the story that black Americans tell ourselves—a challenge that is not so easily rebutted.



In a sense, the particular *way* in which a black individual might arrive at antisemitism is secondary. Ultimately, they all draw energy from

the same source: a desire to preserve the black American story in its current form, and a knee-jerk rejection of any perceived challenge to it. Given a choice between rewriting our own story and rewriting the Jewish story, many black Americans choose the latter, by downplaying or simply denying Jewish history. A recent YouGov/Economist poll asked Americans whether the Holocaust was a myth. Eighty-two percent of whites and 71 percent of Hispanics said no. Sadly, only 55 percent of blacks said the same.

Somewhat less abhorrent than Holocaust denial has been the falsehood, popular among black Americans, that Jews must have arrived in America with money to begin with. In his final book, *Where Do We Go from Here?*, Martin Luther King Jr. lamented the fact that “Negroes nurture a persisting myth that the Jews of America attained social mobility and status solely because they had money,” and that this myth “encourages anti-Semitism.” The truth of the matter, he offered, was that “Jews progressed because they possessed a tradition of education combined with social and political action.”

As in so many areas, King sketched a healthier path forward. Ultimately, he advised: “Without overlooking the towering differences between the Negro and Jewish experiences, the lesson of Jewish mass involvement in social and political action and education is worthy of *emulation*” (emphasis added).

In 2023, it would be heretical to suggest that black Americans should in any way emulate Jewish Americans. But when you live in crazy times, perhaps common sense comes across as heresy. *